HISTORYKA. Studia Metodologiczne
T. 46, 2016 PL ISSN 0073-277X
s. 271–280

Piotr Szafruga
Institute of Political Science and International Relations, Jagiellonian University

PLACING HISTORY WITHIN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Abstract

The article deals with the problem of whether history can be treated as a part of the social sciences. It focuses on the relation between the questioned scientific character of history and the philosophical problems regarding the foundation of scientific knowledge in general.

Key words: history, the social sciences, the demarcation problem, theory-ladenness, limits of cognition

Słowa kluczowe: historia, nauki społeczne, problem demarkacji, uteoretyzowanie obserwacji, ograniczenia poznania

The word ‘history’ comes from Greek ἱστορία (historia), meaning inquiry, knowledge acquired by investigation. In the most general notion this part of knowledge may be understood as a discipline that focuses on the record of events affecting humanity. It presents explanations of these events’ causes, based on examination of source materials. Assuming that we can describe the social sciences as a part of science that studies human behaviour in its cultural and social framework, the question of whether history can be considered as belonging to the social sciences is in fact the question of whether history can be considered as the scientific knowledge in general. This, however, leads to at least two important problems in the philosophy of science, which are the dispute between scientific monism and dualism, as well as the problem of demarcation.

The dispute between monism and dualism (naturalism versus anti-naturalism) refers to the question of whether the social sciences should use the same methods as the natural sciences. This issue is based on the general appreciation of the model of scientific knowledge that is present in the latter. This appreciation stems from the precision and testability of this type of knowledge, which have led to the amazing progress that various disciplines

within the natural sciences have achieved in recent centuries. The above situation influences social scientists, who have difficulties in providing tests and predictions as precisely as in the 'hard sciences', leading to what Philip Mirowski described as 'physics envy'.[1] This phrase refers to a tendency in the social sciences to pursue accuracy and the ability to provide predictions that is present in the natural sciences, especially in physics. It is connected with the implementation of the methods and mathematical language of the latter. Some philosophers of science believe that such an approach may cause the social sciences to be 'more' scientific.[2] This tendency can also be observed in the field of history. An example is cliodynamics, which focuses on the mathematical modelling of historical processes. It studies temporally varying processes and searches for causal mechanisms.[3] This approach is based on the epistemic assumption that there are 'laws of history' that can be discovered. Therefore, while history focuses on particular, individual historical events, cliodynamics tend to formulate unifying theories that can be tested using data gathered by disciplines such as history and archaeology. In this sense it tends to imitate the way in which theories are formulated in the natural sciences.

By trying to identify regularities and patterns in historical events, cliodynamics tends to adopt the inductive approach typical of research focusing on natural phenomena. Therefore it may be perceived as a naturalist approach to the science. This approach, however, seems problematic, because the social sciences do not study deterministic or quasi-deterministic elements of external reality, but human beings, who act purposefully. This implies that it is the meaning of human actions that is crucial for understanding social phenomena. The facts of the social sciences are not physical properties of objects, but meanings the acting human attaches to these objects.[4] This, in turn, forms difficulties in reducing research in the social sciences to the field of the natural sciences. Particularly, one of the most significant issues is the mind-brain problem, considering relations between the mental states of the brain and the physical states of the human body.

Regardless which position we tend to prefer in the 'monism versus dualism' discussion, the more important problem, regarding this question, is whether history is scientific knowledge in general. This issue this question touches on is known as the demarcation problem and can be traced back to the attempts of

---

1 Ph. Mirowski, *More Heat Than Light: Economics as Social Physics, Physics as Nature's Economics*, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

2 A. Grobler, *Metodologia Nauk*, Wydawnictwo Aureus, Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków 2006, pp. 222–232.

3 P. Turchin, *War and Peace and War: The Rise and Fall of Empires*, Plume, New York 2007.

4 F.A. Hayek, *The Facts of the Social Sciences*, in: *Individualism and Economic Order*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1948, pp. 57–76 (p. 59).

the Vienna Circle to determine the boundaries of science. Although throughout the twentieth century philosophical disputes focusing on this issue changed the dominant view on what science is, the elements of testing and providing predictions continuously remain the key aspects of scientific method. This approach is also present in currently dominating abductionist perception of science, which is often known as the Inference to the Best Explanation. This means that the process of conducting scientific research rests on systematic testing, observation, and measurement of phenomena. This, in turn, is based on the assumption that, if experiments are carried out with the same conditions, the results can be repeated. Therefore, once testing has been accepted as valid, new knowledge can be accepted as scientific. Such a process, however, does not apply in the case of history. Historical events cannot be repeated, not to mention predictions which, in their essence, are contradictory to the idea of history as focusing on the past. In this sense history departs from the scientific approach. However, at this point, it is important to notice that the problems with testing and providing predictions are not limited to history. They reflect the distinction between the natural and the social sciences in general. In the latter, repetitiveness and testing is much more problematic, whether we accept the naturalistic or anti-naturalistic position.

The issue of testing is connected with the issue of providing predictions. It stems from the fact that both are based on the assumption that the phenomena we observe are guided by laws that can be discovered. In the same way that those laws allow repetition of tests, they also allow a future state of affairs to be predicted. However, providing predictions is not as straightforward in the social sciences. This is due to the qualitative difference between the natural and the social sciences regarding the object of their studies. The latter is indivisibly connected with human beings, to whom we assign subjectivity and who, at the same time, are also conducting a given study. As Karl Popper and Friedrich Hayek have shown, this implies important constraints upon attempts to reduce the acting human to a deterministic automaton reacting to external conditions, whose future states could be anticipated.[5] Human behaviour, and therefore a future state of affairs, depends on the knowledge which acting individuals possess. According to Popper this means that it is impossible to predict future states of our knowledge using rational and scientific methods. This, in turn, implies that we cannot predict the course of human history. This means that, paradoxically, the indeterminism of the human future has its source

[5] K. Popper, *The Myth of the Framework: In Defence of Science and Rationality*, Routledge, London–New York 1996; F.A. Hayek, *Studies in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1967; *idem*, *The Sensory Order. An Inquiry into the Foundation of Theoretical Psychology*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1976.

in rational knowledge: "We are 'free' (or whatever you want to call it), not because we are subject to chance rather than to strict natural laws, but because the progressive rationalisation of the world — the attempt to catch the world in the net of knowledge — has limits, at any moment, in the growth of knowledge itself which, of course, is also a process that belongs to the world."[6] As a result, we have to refute any attempts to build theoretical history, understood as a 'historical social science', that would be similar to the natural sciences. In this sense, there are no cognisable laws of history and, therefore, no theory of historical development which would provide foundations for generating predictions. Hayek, in turn, based his anti-naturalistic reflection on the notion of individual knowledge and limits of cognition. According to this Austrian economist, knowledge is constantly created and discovered by individuals. As a result, it is dispersed among all members of society. Together with the ability of individuals to transmit information between themselves this forms a dynamic system of interactions, the complexity of which precludes gaining enough information to formulate predictions. Additionally, part of the knowledge each actor possesses has a practical and tacit character, which is difficult to articulate.[7] This forms practical limits to explanation, which, however, may be pushed forward by the development of science. Furthermore, regardless of the high complexity of some phenomena to be explained, Hayek pointed out the presence of an 'absolute limit' to cognition and explanation 'which is determined by the nature of the instrument of explanation itself, and which is particularly relevant to any attempt to explain particular mental processes.'[8] As a result, assuming the computable character of the human mind, he suggested that the mind cannot be fully explained by itself. He considered this statement a form of generalisation of the incompleteness theorems formulated by Kurt Gödel.[9] According to Hayek, the classification of any object requires using an apparatus of a higher degree of complexity than the complexity of the classified object. This means that explanation of human cognitive system requires a cognitive system more complex than the former. As a result, the specificity of the explanation of a given phenomenon depends on how closely this phe-

---

[6] K. Popper, *The Open Universe: An Argument for Indeterminism*, ed. by W.W. Bartley, Routledge, London 1988, p. 81; Presenting similar position John Barrow suggests that the limits of cognition are an immanent future of the Universe. As he writes: "Universes that are complex enough to give rise to consciousness impose limits on what can be known about them from within." J.D. Barrow, *Impossibility: The Limits of Science and the Science of Limits* Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998, p. ix.

[7] J. Huerta de Soto, *Socialism, Economic Calculation and Entrepreneurship*, Glos, Cheltenham, UK; MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, Northampton 2010, pp. 22–24.

[8] F.A. Hayek, *The Sensory Order...*, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

[9] S.C. Kleene, *Mathematical Logic*, Dover Publications, Inc., Mineola 2002, p. 250.

nomenon is 'related' to our cognitive apparatus.[10] The higher the dependency between a given phenomenon and the cognitive apparatus itself, the lower the specificity of explanation of this phenomenon is. This implies that the character of explanation differs between various disciplines of science. Particularly, the social sciences present a closer relation to the human being and therefore to his cognitive apparatus than the natural sciences.[11] As a result, explanation in the former is possible only with a higher level of generality than in the later. The above statement translates into problems with providing predictions in the social sciences. This is because predictions are based on detailed knowledge explaining a given phenomenon. However, because the social sciences provide explanations in principle, access to this knowledge is restricted. Additionally, we may notice that the general character of explanation in the social sciences undermines the process of falsification of this explanation and of the theories standing behind it.

The issues presented above show the difficulties with implementation of an understanding of the term 'scientific' typical of the natural sciences when studying social phenomena. In particular, it forms a strong argument against cliodynamics. The mere fact of the presence of patterns and regularities we can observe in history does not mean that there is a 'law of history' behind them that can be discovered by using mathematical tools. The source of social phenomena is the acting human, who cannot be reduced to a fully deterministic automaton. Additionally, it provides an argument for weakening the requirement of testability and predictability in the disciplines of the social sciences. Although this seems to negate the Popperian scientific method, it is quite close to Popper's reflection about the social sciences which the philosopher presented in *The Myth of the Framework*.[12] In the book he argues that the social sciences use explanation *in principle* and not *in detail*, which distinguishes them from the natural sciences. This, in turn, suggests that scientific openness, for which Popper so strongly argues, is not limited to openness to falsification of a hypothesis, but may be understood in more general terms as an openness to different methods of research. In other words, Popper's approach to the social sciences may be seen as connected more with refuting dogmas than with falsification *per se*. It is a continuous process of recognising problems, finding a hypothesis which would answer these problems, followed by a fair and sincere scientific discourse that leads to better results, and to new discoveries. In this sense science is a form of problematic situation

---

[10] M. Gorazda, *Granice Wyjaśnienia Naukowego. Część II*, „Zagadnienia Filozoficzne w Nauce" 52, 2013, pp. 53–106.

[11] F.A. Hayek, *The Sensory Order*..., *op. cit.*

[12] K. Popper, *The Myth of the Framework*..., *op. cit.*.

— it generates problems that scientists try to solve, eventually forming new problems.

The above considerations show that the question of whether history should be treated as a part of the social sciences is strictly connected with the more general problems considered by philosophers of science, namely the distinction between the social and natural sciences. In fact, these are the general discrepancies between the two parts of the science that make attempts to separate history from the social sciences difficult. Although history is about the past, which in general negates forming predictions about the future, it should be noted that in all disciplines of the social sciences there is a problem with providing predictions. The same refers to testing. This means that negating the scientific character of history implies serious doubts regarding the scientific character of the social sciences in general. Using the understanding of the term 'scientific' typical of the natural sciences is not useful, as in the sphere of the social sciences it seems to be the result of 'physics envy'. These reflections undermine arguments referring to testing and predictability, by showing that a lack of precision, so typical for physics, is a weak standpoint when arguing against the scientific character of history. A similar situation takes place when considering the humanistic aspect of history. Contrary to what John Lukacs states, the fact that history is almost never definitive does not imply that it is not a science.[13] Not being definitive is common among the social sciences. Social phenomena are not one-dimensional, but have many aspects. A given situation can be seen, for instance, from the economic, sociological, political or legal point of view, each of which provide a different spectrum of interpretations. It reflects their 'humanistic momentum' understood as the aspect of human nature that is irreducible to the sphere of natural phenomena and which has its source in the mere fact that it is a human who is its object of research in the social sciences. However, the issue of whether to refute or accept this momentum is a strict emanation of the problem of choosing between methodological monism and dualism. As a result, both mentioned issues, that is the formation of predictions and the lack of a definitive character, show how difficult it is to discuss the place of history without referring to the problem of the place of the social sciences itself. In particular, awareness of the differences between studying natural and social phenomena shows how stipulated the notion of boundaries of science are.

Regardless of the above reflections, it should be noticed that the suggestion that scientific knowledge has to be definitive presupposes that there exists an Archimedean point providing an objective perception of a given subject of study. This approach is a form of foundationalism according to which scientific

[13] J. L u k a c s, *The Future of History*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2012.

knowledge should be based on some irrefutable, basic beliefs.[14] It is difficult to defend in the light of development of reflection regarding the growth of knowledge and theory choice. In particular, it lies in contradiction to the fact that any observation always takes place in some theoretical framework which allows interpretation of this observation. This means that any explanation contains some interpretative aspect that cannot be reduced to an objective and permanent framework of rules. According to Richard Bernstein, in any explanation, aside from predictive aspect that refers to testing a questioned theory for a given datum, there is also a hermeneutic dimension.[15] The latter refers to the theory-laden character of any observation, emphasising when confronting theory with data it is also the latter that can be questioned. This highlights the role of the tacit aspect of human judgments regarding choosing a theoretical framework. Thomas Kuhn argued that there is no definitive and precise method of choosing between various paradigms in science. If we accept this standpoint, then the fact that historians present various interpretations of given events does not mean that choice between them is necessarily only a matter of an aesthetic choice. Otherwise, in the same way, following Kuhn's idea of the paradigm shift, we could negate scientific knowledge as such.[16] Therefore, in the same way there is no ultimate solution to the issue of theory choice, it would be an abuse to find interpretations of historical events as unscientific only because of its non-definitive character. Simultaneously, the lack of ultimate and objective rules does not mean that 'anything goes', as Paul Feyerabend suggested. Lack of objectivism does not necessarily lead to relativism.[17] Bernstein argues that scientific knowledge can be defended without being based on explicit rules. Instead, he suggests that rationality in the growth of knowledge is a result of partly tacit judgments that emerge through the process of interactions among members of the scientific community. A similar approach is presented by Immanuel Wallerstien when he writes: "Analysing the 'social domain' of science can throw doubt on the utility of the interpretation. But it cannot *per se* negate its validity. We are not in a situation of majority rule: whatever interpretation is shared by most members (is it living members or members through all of remembered history?) of the community of scholars is truer. Nor are we in a situation of total intellectual anarchy: all interpretations are equally meritorious. Plausibility is a social process, therefore a shifting reality, but

---

[14] In this sense foundationalism is opposed to fallibilism, according to which any component of knowledge is refutable.

[15] R. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1983.

[16] Th.S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1962.

[17] R. Bernstein, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

one based on some interim ground rules.'[18] However, following the notion of human limits of cognition, this does not necessarily mean that these rules are known.

The above considerations highlight the connection between the question of the scientific character of history and the philosophical problems regarding the foundations of scientific knowledge. What is important is that the above considerations regarding the scientific character of history do not refer to any specific feature of this discipline. Instead they show that the issues of testability, predictability and definitive character stem from the general problem of human limits in cognition of social phenomena, therefore making the question of the scientific knowledge of history inseparable from the analogous question about the social sciences. This means that in considering the scientific character of the social sciences there is no need for any separate argumentation in favour of the scientific character of history.

The relation between the social sciences and history is especially interesting in the context of the approach of Ludwig von Mises. This Austrian economist divided the social sciences into two general disciplines — praxeology and history. Praxeology focuses on the human action understood as any purposeful behaviour. It deals with what is necessary in human action. For Mises all statements of praxeology are an effect of the deductive process, based on a priori knowledge. History, in turn, refers to specific situations which took place in the past, trying to understand them. In this sense, contrary to praxeology, it 'refers to what is unique and individual in each event or class of events.'[19] It focuses not on the category of action *per se*, but on the effects of human actions and ideas that guide these actions. Such a distinction means that history cannot prove or contest any theorem in the same way as the natural sciences tend to do it. Quite the contrary, it is praxeology and other sciences that provide the tools used by historians to determine facts, which are then interpreted to provide an explanation of individual aspects of a given event. In this sense, history is based on implicit theoretical presuppositions and the fundamental cognitive value of common sense. As Mises wrote:

> The study of history always presupposes a measure of universally valid knowledge. This knowledge, which constitutes the conceptual tool of the historian, may sometimes seem platitudinous to one who considers it only superficially. But closer examination will more often reveal that it is the necessary consequence of a system of thought that embraces all human action and all social phenomena. For example, in using an expression such as "land hunger",

[18] I. Wallerstein, *History in Search of Science*, „Historyka. Studia Metodologiczne" 42, 2012, pp. 247–259 (p. 256).

[19] L. von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, Ludwig von Mises Institute, Auburn 1998, p. 51.

> "lack of land", or the like, one makes implicit reference to a theory that, if consistently thought through to its conclusion, leads to the law of diminishing returns, or in more general terms, the law of returns.[20]

Although the a priori character of praxeological theories has met with strong criticism, especially from the position of empiricism and positivism, it may also be interpreted in the terms of Irme Lakatos' research programme's hard core.[21] Simultaneously, the above distinction between praxeology and history forms a categorisation of the social sciences that goes across the typical differentiation among various disciplines, such as economics, sociology, or political science. It is based on a distinction between basic categories and particular situations which are conceptualised using these categories. This, however, does not negate using empirical data to formulate theories, but merely shows that is it a praxeology that is, in terms of Lakatos' research programme, the hard core of a given research. This underlines the fact that history, as any empirical data, is theory-laden. This, in turn, means that conducting historical studies is inseparable from other social sciences that provide theories upon which given events can be interpreted. Therefore, if we accept that those theories belong to scientific knowledge, following the notion of science as a highly organised cognitive process, it seems highly justified to assume that history is organised highly enough to be a part of the social sciences. Additionally, it may be noticed, that placing history upon a praxeological foundation means that the explanation of any phenomena must refer to the purposeful behaviour of individuals. In this sense it is linked with Collingwood's hermeneutical approach, according to which history is constituted by human actions. Explanation is possible due to the common logical structure of the human mind, which creates non-relativistic hermeneutics and therefore allows the actions of others to be understood. This means that although individuals possess different knowledge, the decisions they make are based on the same framework of rational choice. The knowledge about this framework, as referring to what necessary in human action, defines praxeology.

---

[20] L. von Mises, *Epistemological Problems of Economics* Ludwig von Mises Institute, Auburn 2003, p. 2.

[21] F. Machlup, *The Problem of Verification in Economics*, "Southern Economic Journal" 22/1, 1955, pp. 1–22; B.J. Caldwell, *Praxeology and Its Critics: An Appraisal*, "History of Political Economy" 16/3, 1984, pp. 363–379; G.J. Zanotti, N. Cachanosky, *Implications of Machlup's Interpretation of Mises's Epistemology*, "Journal of the History of Economic Thought" 37/1, 2015, pp. 111–38.

Summary

The article presents the problem of whether history belongs to the social sciences from the perspective of the philosophical problems regarding foundations of science. Considerations regarding the demarcation problem and the problem of distinction between the natural and social sciences allows us to observe how the question of whether history is a part of social sciences translates into the problem of the status of the social sciences itself. Although testing continuously remains the key aspect of the scientific method, human cognitive limits and the theory-laden character of any observation form a strong argument in favour of the existence of a hermeneutical dimension of scientific explanation that is irreducible to the sphere of natural phenomena. This undermines a reference to testability as an argument against the scientific character of history. Furthermore, these considerations are reinforced and extended by implementation of Mises' distinction between praxeology and history. As a result, following the notion of science as a highly organised cognitive process, it seems highly justified to assume that history is organised highly enough to be a part of the social sciences.