

Social Science Bites

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leading social scientists

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Rom Harré on ‘What is Social Science?’

David Edmonds: *Before setting out on a series of interviews on the social sciences, some rather fundamental questions need addressing. What is social science? How do the social sciences differ from the so-called hard sciences, like physics and chemistry? Can social science be held to the same standards of rigour and can we expect it to be predictive, and falsifiable? Who better to answer these questions than polymath Rom Harré, a distinguished philosopher, psychologist and social scientist.*

Nigel Warburton: Rom Harré, welcome to Social Science Bites.

Rom Harré: Hello, nice to be with you all.

Nigel Warburton: *The topic we’re going to focus on is ‘What is social science?’ Could you just give a broad definition of what social science is.*

Rom Harré: Well it’s pretty hard to do that, but we could start with the idea that everybody lives in a society, that is, they live in families, they live in towns, they live in nations, and of course they want to know what it is they’re living in. And suddenly, about two thousand years ago, someone, Aristotle, stepped back and asked himself, let’s look at this world that we live in. It’s a bit like fish discovering the sea. There we are, living in the society - suddenly we can start to ask ourselves what is it and how does it work.

Nigel Warburton: *But that, in a way, is the kind of question that some historians ask themselves. You know, ‘What is the nature of the world that we live in in relation to the way it has been?’ But most people don’t think of history straightforwardly as a social science.*

Rom Harré: Well gradually, over the centuries, sociology and economics have come to be the study of contemporary society. So there is, of course, a historical sociology where we ask our self what life was like in this society of the middle ages, or the society of medieval Japan. And gradually these two aspects have come closer and closer together.

In the kind of work I do, I wouldn’t dream of attempting to study a contemporary phenomenon without studying its historical antecedents Years ago my students and I did a study of football hooliganism and when we were working out the sort of theory behind this we thought, let’s look in the past and see when similar things happened.: apprentice riots in London, the battles between the supporters of the

different teams of horse racing in ancient Rome - it's happened before. So sociology opens up into the past and of course some people think it should open up into the future.

Nigel Warburton: *So it's got a clear relation to the past and you said it involves focusing on social relations. It's also got the sense of it being a science, and I wondered what you see the relationship between the social sciences and the natural sciences to be?*

Rom Harré: Both are in the same kind of enterprise, that is, they're trying to give us a picture of how things are in some domain of the universe. The difference is the social sciences are concerned with something we make ourselves: we create societies but of course we don't create the solar system, we don't create the Hadron collider - or we do create that, but we don't create the particles its studying. But in sociology we're looking at our own work, our own artefact: we make it.

Nigel Warburton: *So does that add special problems in terms of achieving impersonal stance or repeatable experiments?*

Rom Harré: There's one enormously important problem in dealing with sociology and social sciences generally. Because we create this, we have to ask yourself what's the instrument with which we create it. In the last 50 or 60 years language has come to be seen to be the key element in all of this. Now, once again sociology and some other aspect of the human sciences, particularly linguistics – sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics - gets into the story. You can't draw a sharp separation. For example, if you want to understand the sociology of life in France you'd better understand the grammatical difference between 'tu' and 'vous'.

Nigel Warburton: *That's really intriguing. Obviously language isn't the only means of cultural transmission, so there must be many other ways in to the social sciences.*

Rom Harré: Well there are lots of other means, and some of these are very small scale, we don't even notice: terms of address, costume, hairstyles, flags, monuments. If you're an American, the Lincoln monument at the end of the mall is a gigantic chunk of marble, if anybody wants to say anything important in the United States, like Martin Luther King, they go to the Lincoln memorial: there it is America personified. So there are all kinds of these other carriers of social reality.

Nigel Warburton: *Let's go back to the science question. How do the social sciences relate to other sciences?*

Rom Harré: Well it's first of all it's a matter of method. By and large social scientists and natural scientists are into the same game. They're trying to find or develop a system of classification: the sort of categories that you need to identify what it is you're studying. Then you need to try to

develop an explanatory theory, how it came about that things happens the way they do. And, of course, in the natural sciences you build working models, either in the laboratory or in your head, as to how the world goes. In social sciences you try to do the same thing; however, you are part of the operation. So if you're making a working model of some aspect of social life, say family life, or, say, diagnostic activities in a clinic that in itself is a piece of social life. The first thing you have to learn if you are trying to do social science is the art of stepping back - stepping forward and stepping back. You have to be a participant observer in one sense to have a sense of what's going on; and then you have to step back and pretend you're not part of that reality to take a bird's eye view of it. This is why I think it's so important to think back to Aristotle who was the first to step back and study the constitutions of the Greek states as an enterprise - but he was a member of a Greek state and he was seeing it within his own frame of reference, and of course within his own language.

One further point: English is the language of sociology, it used to be German, then it was French. Now it's English. I go to dozens and dozens of countries, I've been all the world. Everywhere I go, except to South America, English is the *lingua franca* of the academic world. The social force of English is becoming part of the topic of sociology.

Nigel Warburton: *When we look back at the social scientists of the 19th century, we can see their biases easily and they seem to be, have all the assumptions of imperialism, or whatever their background set of beliefs is. In the present it's quite difficult sometimes to be aware of our own biases. How would a social scientist go about eliminating or allowing for those sorts of prejudices?*

Rom Harré: Well now I think we're very aware that those prejudices exist. So one of the things you start training people when they're undergraduates and doing a course in this kind of thing, is to get them to have a sense of their own worth. I'm just about to set off to the States to teach a course in quantitative psychology which is largely concerned with social matters and the first thing we're going to do is we're going to have an exercise in standing back and asking themselves what is it to be a member of George Stanley University. Don't take it for granted that you already know.

Nigel Warburton: *With the natural sciences we often have the possibility of repeating experiments, manipulating variables, so we can get very accurate information about what's going on. If you were investigating an outburst of violence at a particular football match, you couldn't just go back and then start tweaking the variables. I mean, what does a social scientist do in that sort of situation?*

Rom Harré: Well there's a long running controversy - became quite bitter - in social psychology about whether the experimental method has any place at all in the social world. I'm one of those who is very suspicious of the attempt to hammer social life into shape in a laboratory with three or four people to try to replicate the social behaviour of millions. I think it's just a huge mistake. Of course that throws the ball back in your court, how do you produce useful, valuable material that's not other than just vignettes of the passing scene. So you're trying to slide upwards a little bit towards some sort of level of generality. The way that people act in families - it's enormously different all over the world - but there are going to be certain sorts of commonality. The great mistake in the past I think, particularly in social psychology, was to presume that you knew what the commonalities were and then you could simply go around and see how many cultures fitted those commonality, the nuclear family. Take the nuclear family to New Guinea, we'll take it to Zimbabwe - it's not much good doing that because when you get there, there isn't anything really very much like the nuclear family. All the boys in New Guinea or the Celebes or somewhere like that, when they're nine they leave mum and go to live with dad and they don't see mum again for years and years. It's a very different sort of life. So we have to be very cautious about the extent to which we generalize.

Nigel Warburton: *There's obviously a certain amount of descriptive work done in the social sciences, but it's often meant to be predictive of how people will behave, not just account for how they have behaved. How do you make that move from the past to the future?*

Rom Harré: Well it's extremely problematical and, notoriously, social scientists, economists, are very bad at doing this, because the amount of variation of human society is simply enormous. Things happen which we haven't the faintest expectation that they will: for example, the last 7 or 8 years of chaos in the banking system. Who could have imagined such a thing would happen? How is it possible for intelligent people to do the things they did? There they were highly-educated, well-established, brilliant people, all the technology in the world, and they didn't have a clue.

Nigel Warburton: *So what is the value of social science research then?*

Rom Harré: Well I think it does give you a grasp of the world as it is at this moment, or rather as it was a little while ago. And, of course, that's not a bad thing: those who know no history are doomed to repeat it. But there's no guarantee that that is going to function like Newton's laws of motion. There is a kind of intuition that really brilliant social analysts or brilliant politicians are able to draw on in which they're drawing on

millions and millions of tiny pieces of data, organizing it somehow, coming up with a sense of what's going to happen.

Nigel Warburton: *Now, there's been a huge change in the sources of data for social scientists in recent years with the growth of the Internet, and this movement for people to put statistics and data freely available online. How is that changing the nature of the social sciences?*

Rom Harré: I think it may have a profound effect on sociology. It's a kind of despair - the huge amount of data, the equipment you would need to search this. And I think we might find ourselves going back to more micro-studies again, looking at how particular groups of people, quite small groups, function.

Nigel Warburton: *It strikes me that the best social scientists are also very skilful narrators: they know not just what's going on but they can tell the story in interesting ways that can reach a much wider public.*

Respondent: Well yes the great sociologists can tell stories. In fact it's another aspect of contemporary sociology: the idea of narratology, looking at the way in which people can build their life around stories, story lines. So, one of the most recent specialities is called Positioning Theory: the sociologist studies the way people are assign rights and duties to each other in terms of the stories that they persuade each other to believe and tell. For instance, if you're thinking about a family quarrel then you might think about it in terms of the story of that particular family, how mum and dad came to meet, what's the history of their ancestry, the sort of things you see on the television, people going back, they find a family story – 'gee, isn't it amazing: this is the story of my family' and of course that is going to feed into a family itself and transform it as discovering your ancestors is a way of changing the lives of your successors because now there's a whole new story to tell.

Nigel Warburton: *Given the social sciences aren't always great predictors of what's going to happen because of the persistence of the unforeseen in human affairs, how can you tell good sociology, good social science from bad?*

Rom Harré Well again that's very difficult to do. There's very little place for the methods you would use in the natural sciences. One way that has been talked about quite a bit over the last 20 or 30 years, is bringing it back to the people who you are investigating and asking them 'Does this illuminate your life?' It's a kind of psychiatry on a large scale, where you bring the story back to the person who came to you with anxiety or sufferings of various kind, and the person becomes convinced. It doesn't matter whether it's true or not: it's a matter of conviction or making sense of things. Years and years ago a group of

us began to ask the question about plays. Are plays sociology? A very well known sociologist the late Stanford Lyman thought they were, and he devoted quite a lot of time to studying the plays of Shakespeare, seeing Shakespeare as sociology. His idea was that the people of the time found Shakespeare convincing because he was telling stories that they recognised as the stories of their lives. So the way Hamlet and Ophelia behave is something that they recognised. So that's one way in which we can tell good sociology from bad. If you don't recognise it as part of your life, or life of people you know, it's not much good.

Nigel Warburton: *Social science is often thought of as including most anthropology, a lot of psychology, economics, sociology. Is there anything common to all these different enterprises?*

Rom Harré: Well, the one thing there is in common is their attempts to understand a group of people and how they behave. Human societies are very complex, so there are any number of different aspects of this. We've said nothing about medicine, you said nothing about epidemics: epidemics are a phenomenon in biology, but they have profound social consequences. A chemical discovery will transform the lives of millions of people socially. Look at what's happening now because we now have ways of keeping people alive much longer than they were: that's a bit of medicine, that's a bit of biology - profound social consequences. So the one item that is in common is the social world: it's got millions of aspects, say linguistics, history, economics, anthropology, geography, even geology is all part of sociology in a certain sense. The object of study is the same but the methods of study are vastly different.

Nigel Warburton: *From outside the social sciences there is often the prejudice that social scientists tend to be relativists; whereas natural scientists think, on the whole, that they are discovering something about the way the world is, social scientists are prone to say 'Well, there are many different ways of describing the world, there's no one God's eye view that we can discover.'*

Rom Harré: Well certainly let's say 50 years ago the natural scientists were gung-ho, going ahead going for the truth and it didn't matter where you did it or who you were or which laboratory you worked in - you were 'on the road to the truth.' But in sociology gradually it became clear that the societies you were looking at were really very different from one another. What counted as a good marriage in Namibia wouldn't have counted as a good marriage in New York. So the idea that there were different societies so different that each one had to be tackled separately, that was an important insight. But suddenly about 40 /50 years ago natural sciences began to ask themselves the question, 'If

I'd been brought up in a different way and worked in a different laboratory with a different set of instruments with different assistants helping me, would I have come up with the same answer?' What we're getting is a series of snapshots around a common core - which is the world out there. So in physical sciences I'm notorious as a philosophical realist: I think we're studying reality but we're taking shots from different points of view. It's not true in the social sciences because there isn't a world out there: there are any number of different practices that people are engaged in, it's not that there's a series of snapshots. The snapshots are the object of enterprise as I said at the beginning the social world is a world we create and in studying it we're continuing to re-create it. Karl Marx sat in the British Museum studying British industrial society: of course what he then wrote down in *Das Capital* became an instrument for the transformation for society itself.

Nigel Warburton: *Rom Harré thank you very much.*

Rom Harré: Thank you for having me. It's been a great pleasure.

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