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The Limits of Social Science. Causal Explanation and Value Relevance by Martyn Hammersley (book review)

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Martyn Hammersley: *The Limits of Social Science. Causal Explanation and Value Relevance*. London: SAGE. 2014. ISBN 978-1-4462-8749-1.

This compact book is basically about what social science can and cannot do, and by implication, what social science should and should not attempt to do. Hammersley's basic position is similar to Max Weber's: social scientists should aim at causal explanations of social world, but they should not pretend that they have any special authority with respect to values judgments. In addition, he argues that social scientists should resist the demands for being practical, authoritative or immediate, because social science cannot be these things. The idea is that if social science does not recognize its limitations, this will damage its ability to things that it actually can do. While Hammersley's audience are qualitative researchers, the arguments are general enough to be relevant also for social scientists employing quantitative methods.

The book is clearly written and has a well-organized structure. The introductory chapter provides a brief historical review of the various debates about policy-relevant social science and introduces Weber's writings as a source for "an extremely sophisticated assessment of key problems facing social science, and a clear and challenging stance towards them." (p. 12). Hammersley's key point is that the current social sciences are still haunted by essentially the same problems.

Chapter 1 presents a case for causal orientation in qualitative research. The chapter is build around a curious reversal: while in the first half of the 20th century the advocates of qualitative methodologies defended the central role of causal explanation for social inquiry (and criticized people using statistical methods for missing this), in the latter half of the century the positions have changed: the quantitative researchers see causal analysis as crucial but qualitative researchers are increasingly distancing themselves from any form of causal analysis. Hammersley argues that the qualitative researchers suffer from a poor self-understanding: in practice most qualitative researchers do provide causal explanations and wish to draw causal conclusions from their studies. However, due to their inept philosophy of science, they "rarely deploy systematically the full range of strategies required to generate, and especially to test, causal interpretations." (p. 28).

Chapter 2 expands this line of argumentation. The chapter contains a good presentation of pragmatics of explanation, but I did not find Hammersley's key distinction between theorizing and explanation very convincing nor useful. However, as these problems do not affect the overall argument of the book, I will leave them aside. The key point of the chapter is to show that value-relevant frameworks play an important role in determining what explanation-seeking question social scientists might want to answer.

The nature and role of the value-relevant frameworks is the topic of the Chapter 3. This key chapter provides a good discussion of various criticisms of principle of value-neutrality. Hammersley defends the weberian position, which simply requires that "conclusions of research be restricted to factual (rather than value) claims, and that any distortion of the research process by the researcher's own value commitments, or those of others, be minimized." (p. 70). Social scientists might naturally have various motivations for doing their research, but the goal of research (as a specialized activity) is not subordinate to these motivations. In this view scientific research has its own values, and the principle of value-neutrality basically states that the epistemic values of research should not be overrun by other considerations. On the other hand, the integrity of this position also implies that social scientists should not overreach: as they do not have any special authority of validity of values, they should abstain from misleading their audience by presenting value statements as consequences of their studies.

The next two chapters discuss ways in which social scientists might overreach their epistemic authority. Chapter 4 shows by a competent argumentation analysis how the attempts by critical realists to bypass the fact-value distinction fail. While this chapter is mostly of interest to people

who have been influenced by critical realism, the Chapter 5 is of more general interest. It illustrates the principle of value-neutrality by discussing in which sense social scientists can answer the question: Is Britain a meritocracy? According Hammersley, the weberian position sets important limits for answering questions like this. Most importantly, the notion of meritocracy is contested and value-laden, and social scientists cannot say which of the many of conflicting notions on meritocracy is the right one. Thus, social scientist can only answer the question when the audience has some sort of agreement about the notion. This implies that social scientists should be explicit about the notion of merit they are employing. While this does not limit the validity of study, it limits its relevance to audiences that wish to operate with different notion of merit. It also implies that social scientist should abstain from claims that they have captured the "essence" of merit as this claim might not hold for alternative conceptualization.

Chapter 6 focuses on another kind of overreach of epistemic authority. Hammersley challenges the assumption that social scientific explanations are intrinsically different from explanations provided by lay actors. He uses as a material various public explanations provided for 2011 youth riots in England to show that while social scientific commentators presented their explanations for riots as superior to the accounts presented by others, they were actually not that different. The healthy message of the chapter is that one should not automatically assume that social scientists have epistemic authority. The authority of science is based on research and systematic evaluation of evidence and when these are not available – for example, when providing commentary on ongoing social events – one should not assume that social scientists are that different from any other social commentators in terms of their sophistication or explanatory resources.

There are without doubt many people who do not accept Hammersley's views described above. These are people who should read this book. I don't expect instant conversion, but I wish this book triggers articulate and argumentative defenses of the alternative positions. If the critics do not just dismiss the book's argument as the "old weberian" position, but actually make an attempt to show where it goes wrong, Hammersley's book has been successful and primed a significant improvement in the self-understanding of the social sciences.

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