

Review Article

The Political Sciences. By H. Stretton. Routledge, London, 1969. xii, 453 pp. U.K. price: 55s.

IT SEEMS THAT Stretton has taken Namier's advice, which he quotes on p. 68, to heart: 'Never work in a field until a fool has been there before you.' For while Dray and Danto, Mandelbaum and Morton White, Gardiner and Scriven are not exactly fools, they are all philosophers who know of the practice of history only by hearsay and their speculations about the nature of historical (and, by implication, sociological) knowledge are therefore highly theoretical and not always relevant. But Stretton is a historian and he therefore tackles the problem to which he addresses himself in this book with a first-hand knowledge of what he is talking about. The book consists of an examination of historical and sociological knowledge. The author never really distinguishes between the two, and, though in another context this would be a grave mistake, as far as his present problem is concerned one can cheerfully follow him here. The problem is whether our historical knowledge is value-free and therefore 'scientific'.

Stretton writes with great verve and crispness. He begins with a minute analysis of a genuine question: why did Joseph Chamberlain, the best known protagonist of social reform in the British Cabinet, change his mind about old age pensions in December 1899? Stretton surveys the answers which have been given, improvises some tentative additional ones and shows with great brilliance how every attempt to deal with the question must depend on valuations. From there he goes on to examine the wider question of the nature and significance of imperialism in modern history and with the same sparkling persuasiveness comes up with the same conclusion. In the third part of the book he proceeds to a number of case studies: he analyses Halévy and Dahrendorf, Riesman and E. H. Carr, Myrdal and Talcott Parsons to show how their alleged science is value-charged. His chapters are a little uneven. The one on Halévy is a masterpiece; and so is the one on Carr. He is interesting on Myrdal and Riesman, but fails to do justice to Keynes and is really very disappointing on Samuelson, especially in view of Galbraith's celebrated witticisms on this subject. Stretton never even mentions Galbraith and one could wish that Stretton had applied his own crisp style to both *The Affluent Society* and *The Industrial State*. This would have been a particularly rewarding exercise for a writer of Stretton's acumen; for Galbraith, himself fully aware of his own valuations, would have made a second-order foil for Stretton. But all in all the first and third parts of this book, with their searching and revealing analysis of all these many writers, will be a valuable and permanent contribution to the literature of historical and sociological criticism.

The author's final conclusions, however, are expressed in a slightly elliptical manner. To begin with, there is the title. The political *sciences* in the title must, in view of the conclusions, be meant satirically. In that case,

would it not have been more direct to call the book *The Political Arts?* But this would have let the cat out of the bag. Nor is it certain that this would have done greater justice to the conclusion for he does take pains to point out on pp. 419-20 that artistic activity does not correspond to the value-charged history and sociology of social scientists. So there is room for doubt — a doubt which is, however, not allayed by the concluding sentence: 'the scientist is a citizen. His duty goes beyond discovering and understanding. It becomes his business to win' (p. 431). If this is the conclusion of the insight that the social sciences are value-charged, does it not point to the fact that they ought to be taken less *seriously* and that perhaps Oakeshott is right when he says that politics is something to be learnt from tradition, a form of action with which intellectuals and their theories ought not to meddle? But Stretton is much less conservative in outlook than Oakeshott and he does seem convinced that the political sciences do help to ameliorate man's condition, provided we do not allow them to get away with a false claim to objectivity and scientific impartiality. But if so, what precisely is their significance? It is perhaps a pity that the most precise statement of Stretton's view is on p. vi in the Preface: valuations 'should be improved, not replaced. Those who teach their students otherwise, corrupt them.'

This, of course, is where the rub lies. Stretton approaches the whole matter in a gentlemanly way. He applies his sharp criticism and analysis to a number of particular 'scientific' works. But he does not see the problem as a general problem. If he had advanced to greater abstraction he would have seen that he is not as original as he thinks. For a long time now the better social scientists have known that their activity is carried out in a social setting and that there is something like a sociology of knowledge; and that, if pursued systematically, that sociology of knowledge might lead to general principles in terms of which we might understand how the social sciences are culture-conditioned. It is true — and this is perhaps the reason for Stretton's decision to omit a discussion of these attempts at a sociology of knowledge — that all known attempts at the sociology of knowledge have for one reason or another been very disappointing. Most of them are too Hegelian (or too Marxist), some are too Germanic and all of them are themselves the products of a certain kind of central European intellectual culture so that one ought to proceed from them to a sociology of the sociology of knowledge. But this way there lies an infinite regress — no doubt a gold mine for future Ph.D. candidates; but a hopelessly frustrating quagmire for all intelligent people. And thus Stretton's refusal to advance to such abstraction is perhaps commendable after all, although it would perhaps have been prudent for him to acknowledge these efforts somewhere in a footnote or the preface. One has to admit, however, that without being drawn into the theory of it, Stretton has made more practical contributions to the sociology of knowledge than all avowed speculators in the field known to me. Perhaps the finest result of these chapters is that it is made quite clear that what has hitherto been regarded as the sociology of knowledge is far too rough and coarse a science. It is always concerned to explain the inevitable valuations in terms of the established culture of the age the writer lived in, thus making the greatest intellects as well as the very minor ones appear as victims of certain cultural conditions or as unwitting prisoners of their epochs or their societies. By contrast, Stretton's analyses show that these valuations are *not* conditioned in a Hegelian or

Marxist manner by epochs of culture or social systems but are much more subtly produced by quite conscious and critical reactions to or assessments of epochs and societies. These analyses are therefore not so much exercises in the sociology of knowledge as exercises in that fruitful field where the sociology and logic of knowledge meet.

This is not to say that Stretton makes no attempt at theory. The second part of the book is entirely taken up with theory. It is supposed to link the first and third parts. But I am afraid to say that the book would have been a better book if the second part had been omitted. At any rate it is not quite clear how the theoretical reflections on truth, laws and facts in the second part constitute a necessary link between the masterly analyses of the first and third parts.

The reflections in the second part are meant to explore the problem of selectivity which Stretton rightly has noticed to underly the whole question of the alleged scientificness of history and sociology. But here for once Stretton seems to be at a disadvantage as a historian. He never really comes to terms with the question. Historians and social scientists must select. Nobody would or could quarrel with this contention. But according to Stretton they have to select *facts*. If Stretton had proceeded beyond this point, he would have seen that there are no such things as *hard* facts. Each fact ('World War II broke out on September 3rd, 1939'; 'on Wednesday June 25th, 1969, Patrolman James Loder was charged with the killing of a 14-year-old Negro girl in Omaha, Nebraska') can be sub-divided into sub-facts. This sub-divisibility is infinite. And we must therefore grant that what we call a 'fact' is not a hard fact but in itself a combination of sub-facts into a fact. This means that each so-called fact is really much more like a composed mini-narrative than like a hard fact. The historian's search for facts is therefore like a search in quicksand and nowhere can he hope to strike hard rock. But at the same time this very softness of his raw material does provide him with guidance. The compilers of his source materials, whether they be ancient chroniclers or contemporary reporters, must themselves have been engaged in some kind of selectivity in order to report the facts they report rather than others and to combine certain sub-facts into the facts they report and to forego the possibility of different combinations. In searching for facts, the historian and social scientist can therefore follow the clue provided by the criterion of selection employed by the original compilers of his *sources*. Instead of being involved in an infinite regress, the historian and social scientist are therefore able to consider that the rawest part of their raw material is the *thoughts* of the people on whose reports, written or oral, he relies. There follows an important methodological principle: no historian or social scientist must ever disregard let alone brush aside the intentions of the people whose reports he uses. If these people are very foreign to him and live either far away or in the past, he must make a special imaginative effort to grasp them and in no case should he pursue a selection of facts without firmly linking it to the selectivity originally employed by the people whose selected facts he selects from.

Not only does Stretton fail to provide a satisfactory analysis of this matter but he is actually unaware of this whole complex problem. In discussing Langer's *The Diplomacy of Imperialism, 1890-1902*, for instance, he says on p. 136 that Langer had 'read everything in all languages, knew everything in all archives. So when he selected he was deliberate.' Are we to infer from this that Stretton thinks that there was no more to be known

than Langer knew? Is Stretton not aware of the fact that what went into all the archives in all languages was only a minute fraction of what actually happened and that the facts which *did* find their way into archival records were composed from sub-facts not so much into facts but into mini-narratives? Moreover, if one is mindful of this problem, one will also be less inclined than Stretton is on p. 224 to see a complete and total dichotomy between 'idealism' and the new science's protestations of freedom from value. On this latter point, though, he may be forgiven. For Collingwood himself used to think of this dichotomy; and both Ryle (*The Concept of Mind*, London, 1949, pp. 56ff.) and Popper as well as a great many other writers think that 'empathy' is incompatible with a purely empirical treatment of facts. But if one recalls that behind the empirically verifiable 'facts' there are sub-facts as well as altogether omitted facts, one will be forced to the conclusion that this alleged dichotomy is by no means ultimate and that, for instance, Popper and Collingwood, or Popper and Oakeshott, are much closer together on this point than is commonly believed. (Cf. my remarks on this subject, 'Professor Ryle's "Concept of Mind"', *The Cambridge Journal*, IV (1951), 297, and 'Historical Understanding', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, III (1953), 207-8.) In order to grasp the thought or intention which governed the composition of the mini-narratives which are the so-called hard facts of our sources one does not rely on purely intuitive empathy any more than one takes these hard facts which are really mini-narratives in disguise at their face value and proceeds empirically from them. One can indeed make as empirical a study of these thoughts as one can of these so-called hard facts.

The weakest section, however, of Stretton's second, theoretical, part, is the section on the use of general laws. There has of late been much controversy on the rôle of general laws (or 'covering laws') in historical narratives linking series of particular events. One of the strongest arguments in their favour is the consideration that since no two facts are linked by their simple sequence in time — this much is implied by Stretton's own insistence on selectivity — and that since no fact is a hard fact but a mini-narrative consisting of sub-facts, facts must be linked to one another by *something*. And there seems to be no account of an alternative link which can rival the Popperian view that that link is provided by general laws, albeit by laws which are often of a trivial kind and therefore unstated, perhaps with the proviso that many of these laws, though general, are not necessarily of unlimited universality. Stretton's treatment of this matter is lamentable. To begin with he attributes (p. 213) the covering law theory to Hempel. Though historically incorrect, this attribution is forgivable because it is true that it was Hempel who first made the theory available in its final form in English in 1942. But Stretton's cavalier rejection of the theory cannot be forgiven. (It is symptomatic that though its author, Popper, is mentioned in this connection on p. 213, there is no reference to Popper in the index.) After quoting Robert Brown, *Explanation in Social Science*, London, 1963, pp. 50-51, in defence of what Stretton is pleased to call 'Hempel's simplicities' he dismisses them out of hand and states that the theory has been 'expertly doubted'. There is also an innuendo ('it provoked much philosophical controversy ten years ago') that the theory is out of date.

With all due respect, Brown's meandering book is not a convincing defence of the covering law theory and even if it were, it is not much of

an authority to invoke. Why not quote Hempel or Popper himself? Moreover, if one turns to the footnote (pp. 437-8) in which Stretton cites the 'expert doubts', one will be deeply disappointed. On inspection it turns out that the reference is to Dray, Morton White, Danto and Scriven. But in fact Morton White makes a vague courtesy to the theory. This much is granted by Stretton. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History*, Cambridge, 1968, pp. 213ff., true, has doubts and refers to Dray. But he also has something positive to say on the theory and ends up, p. 232, by 'salvaging that part of the truth. . . .' Scriven, in an earlier article, not cited by Stretton, 'Truisms as the Ground for Historical Explanations', in P. Gardiner, ed., *Theories of History*, Glencoe, 1959, p. 445, completely misunderstood and mis-applied the theory; and one must therefore have grave reservations about his views. There remains Dray, who not only doubted the theory but tried to refute it. This refutation, in my view, as stated in this journal, 'The Skeleton and the Mollusc', I, 2 (1967), 112, is completely untenable. So much then for Stretton's 'expert doubt'! Finally there can be no question that it is 'out of date'. Popper has thrown the considerable weight of his authority behind it in all the many editions of *The Open Society and its Enemies*. In view of all this, we are entitled to something more searching than Stretton's remarks on p. 213, where the discussion is confined to Brown. (Brown's book, like much of Stretton's, was written at the Australian National University. Are we to detect a shadow of parochialism?) The more so as Stretton very perceptively surmises that what is relevant in these covering laws is not only their universality, but their truth. It is perhaps a pity that he did not consider the plausibility of my examination of this precise problem, that is of the relationship between the degree of universality and the truth of these laws on p. 115, I, 2 (1967), of this journal, or, if this was too recent to be taken into account, in my 'Historical Understanding', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, III (1953), 206.

The pity of this failure and of Stretton's cavalier rejection of the whole theory is all the greater, because a closer examination of it might have led him to see that these covering laws are precisely a very important part of the thoughts which prompt people to combine sub-facts into certain facts rather than into other facts and help them to select some facts rather than others to make up a narrative. This would have thrown a great deal of light on Stretton's intelligent discussion of causation on pp. 52ff. and his helpful use of diagrams. It would have helped him to further explain the fact that these causal diagrams get more and more complicated the more one probes because the 'universal' laws at people's disposal differ from one another. And, therefore, what seems a causal connection in the light of one set of laws is not so in the light of a different set; and so forth. And finally it would have obliged him to be less confident about his dichotomy, referred to above, between idealism and a science free of value on p. 224. For I think that my own rejection of this dichotomy is correct precisely because of the rôle played by covering laws: on one side these laws are the idealistic component in a historical narrative, for they reflect the thoughts of the people to whom we owe the facts which have been put on record; and on the other side these laws are, far from being due to empathy or intuition, an empirically ascertainable part of the historian's narrative: it is either true or not true that the people to whom we owe our facts (i.e. our raw material) used such and such laws to compile *their* facts from sub-facts and select such and such facts to go into their archives

or chronicles, etc. In my view, therefore, this excellent and useful book is greatly marred by the middle part. The middle part should either have been omitted altogether — because it does not really add anything to the splendid value of the first and third part; or it ought to have been widely expanded to reach forward to a subtler and more searching grasp of the problem involved in selectivity — because then, and only then, would it have provided a worthwhile link between the first and third parts. I find myself unhesitatingly on Stretton's side that valuations are essential as well as inevitable and ought to be improved, not replaced. But perhaps one ought to be a little more sympathetic to the many misguided efforts which have been and are being made to exclude them than Stretton is and recall Heidegger's appalling travesty of Weber. When the Nazis installed Heidegger as Rector of Freiburg University he stood Weber's honest attempt at a value-free social science entitled *Science as a Vocation* on its head and entitled his inaugural address *The Vocation of Science* and told his audience that it was the task of science to justify the Nazi Reich. If we follow Stretton, and I am sure we must, it is therefore necessary that we take his prefatory statement that valuations ought to be improved very literally and very seriously.

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