



## **The Philosophy of American Social Science**

***Review of Morton White, *Social Thought in America****

This PDF is one of a series designed to assist scholars in their research on Isaiah Berlin, and the subjects in which he was interested.

The series will make digitally available both selected published essays and edited transcripts of unpublished material.

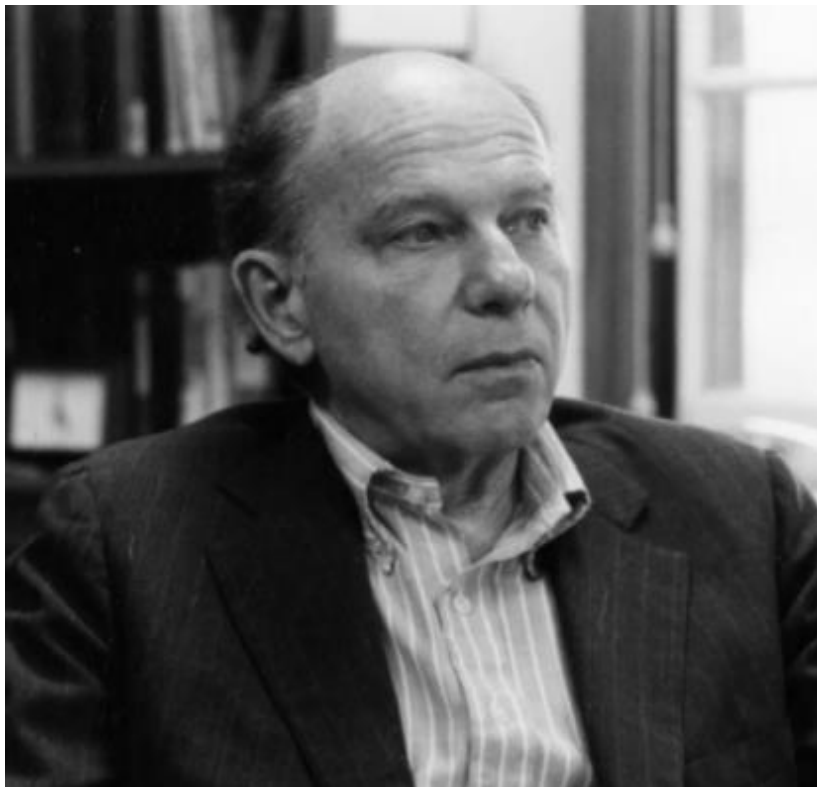
The red page numbers in square brackets in this online text mark the beginning of the relevant pages in the original publication, and are provided so that citations from book and online PDF can use the same page-numbering.

The PDF is posted by the Isaiah Berlin Legacy Fellow at Wolfson College, with the support of the Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust.

All enquiries, including those concerning rights, should be directed to the Legacy Fellow at [berlin@wolfson.ox.ac.uk](mailto:berlin@wolfson.ox.ac.uk)

# The Philosophy of American Social Science

Review of Morton White, *Social Thought in America* (New York, 1949: Viking), *Mind* 61 no. 243 (July 1952), 405–9



PROFESSOR WHITE'S book is an essay on the history of social ideas in America from the end of the nineteenth, to the thirties of the twentieth, century. It is a curious fact (as Mr W. H. Walsh remarked in a recent book) that at the present time, when the analysis of concepts and language is being prosecuted with so much vigour and success, philosophers continue to concentrate almost exclusively on the natural sciences, as providing matter peculiarly suitable to philosophical analysis (although relatively few

of them are equipped with precise, first-hand knowledge of any one natural science), and tend to neglect the social sciences, such as history or economics, for example, with which many of them are far more familiar – sciences the condition of whose basic concepts and categories are in far more urgent need of examination and classification. It is as if the old German division into *Natur-* and *Geisteswissenschaften*, which modern philosophers do not necessarily accept, together with Cartesian contempt for what is not susceptible to mathematical treatment, still unconsciously dominates their thought to a sufficient degree to cause them to reject the matter, as well as (more understandably) the philosophies, of history as a topic unfit for treatment by clear-headed philosophers.

Professor White, despite his training as a modern logician, is fortunately not inhibited by this tradition, and has set himself to examine certain notions common to a group of recent American writers whose thought appears to him to fall into a single ‘intellectual pattern’. This he describes as being compounded of pragmatism, institutionalism, behaviourism, legal realism, economic determinism and the ‘new history’. To this catalogue he later adds instrumentalism. This involves him in considering the development of the leading ideas of the historians Charles Beard and James Harvey Robinson, the celebrated jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes, the sociological economist Thorstein Veblen, and the philosopher John Dewey.

These thinkers by their writings, and to a large degree by their public activities, have profoundly influenced the thought and action of their fellow citizens, and indirectly affected European thought as well. Yet knowledge of this movement is remarkably exiguous outside the United States, where it has long occupied the centre of attention, and Professor White’s book is consequently a timely as well as intrinsically valuable exposition of this chapter in the history of thought. Since the author is not a professional logician for nothing, he fortunately does not confine himself to mere description, but adds illuminating analogies and criticisms, which serve at once to place his authors in an adequate historical

context and help to assess the intellectual value of their methods and conclusions.

Professor White begins by explaining that what is common to these thinkers, who did not compose in the void but in varying degrees knew and influenced each other, was firstly what he calls their ‘anti-formalism’, and secondly their notion of ‘reality’. The first, as Professor White very clearly explains, means predilection for inductive rather than deductive methods; a tendency to examine every subject in its historical context, in the light of its genesis and subsequent career; and a tendency to seek light for the illumination of one subject matter from methods successful in another, [406] with a corresponding tendency to represent the whole of human activity as being closely interconnected, in many unobvious but none the less highly important ways. And conversely it involves a belief that formal treatment of subjects in separate compartments, each susceptible only to its own method of analysis in terms of traditional categories operative each solely within its own field, must lead to distortion, falsification and ignorant pedantry.

As for the notion of ‘reality’, the tendency here is towards a purely empirical historicism – the notion of the ‘social flow’, the perpetually changing patterns of relationships between individuals and their institutions of which the empirical laws can be discovered, and in terms of which alone ‘the truth’ both about matters of fact and about ‘values’ can be established.

Professor White follows this with a succinct and lucid exposition of Dewey’s instrumentalism, for which ideas are ‘plans of action and mirrors of reality’, a doctrine hostile to all metaphysical speculation and one which lays great emphasis on the ‘practical intelligence’ – that is, ways in which men in fact deal (or could deal) with nature and with their own processes. Similarly, Professor White explains Veblen’s institutionalism as the empirical study of economic institutions and of other aspects of human culture in terms different in principle from those used by, say, classical economists – for example, by rejecting such idealised

entities as ‘the economic man’ or any other fixed, non-evolving figments.

Again, Holmes’s legal ‘realism’, working along analogous lines, denied that the law was something fixed and immutable, or deduced from the timeless principles of ethics or political theory, but consisted simply in attempts to determine how judges would act – ‘the prophecies of what the courts will do in fact, and nothing more pretentious, are what I mean by law’. The law thus consists simply of a set of predictions – it is an empirical science consisting largely of predictions about the behaviour of the courts, based on all the normal evidence, derived from whatever source is available to the enquirer.

This interpretation obviously involves an exceptional degree of emphasis on history, not merely the history of the law, but of everything else that is relevant, which explains inductively why the laws are as they are, and aids in answering the further question whether they are still useful in a given society. This Benthamite stress on social utility is another factor common to all the thinkers in question, and leads them to profess not to be concerned with individual motives or attitudes; and furthermore includes the policy (also derived from Bentham) of seeking to translate all expressions of moral significance into empirical descriptive statements. In spite of this, Hume, Bentham, Mill, and British empiricists generally, get short shrift at the hands of these American radicals, because they are held not to have been empirical enough, inasmuch as they failed to take sufficient cognisance of historical evolution and social, as opposed to individual, factors.

Thus Beard and Robinson, apart from seeking to explain historical evidence in terms of a materialism which, as Professor White shows, they largely derived not from England or Scotland but from the more tough-minded doctrines of Madison and Karl Marx, emphasise that history is a ‘weapon for explaining the present and controlling the future’, and not ‘recitals of moral and military intrigue’, and only incidentally useful to the philosopher because it alone provides genuine material for his analysis for such concepts as ‘law’, ‘science’, ‘history’, ‘the good’ etc. Professor

White gives an interesting account of Beard's writings, and in particular of his history of the United States in the nineteenth century, as a good example of his deflationary historical method, with its emphasis on 'unpleasant' economic motives as being more genuine springs of human [407] action than those dealt with in the shallower or more idealised accounts of conventional Whig or Tory writers, and he brings out well Beard's and Robinson's concern with social reform in the present – the kind of attitude which made Robinson proudly avow that he 'consistently subordinated the past to the present' and that his historical writing was motivated not by 'nostalgia for the past but rather by concern for the future'. This went with a strong prejudice (held, for example, both by Veblen and Dewey) against formal logic and all forms of rigorism, as being mere expedients to prop up beliefs no longer supported by experience; and conversely was connected with a desire to achieve a kind of naturalistic ethical neutralism, which in Holmes, for instance, led to the definition of the legal concept of malice as conveying no more than a 'tendency, in known circumstances, to cause temporal damage' and the like; or, in Veblen's case, to pretend that his celebrated social categories of 'the leisure class', 'conspicuous leisure', 'conspicuous consumption', 'conspicuous waste' etc. were, despite their suspiciously pejorative flavour, in fact free from all moral significance – purely scientific, purely descriptive.

Professor White, after faithfully describing the beliefs and methods of these radicals, then proceeds to point out certain conspicuous flaws in their position. He cautiously observes that while Veblen may have succeeded in remaining 'amoral' himself, he owed his great influence to the fact that he was in fact a moralist *malgré soi*, and was inevitably regarded as such by the impressionable young men of his time; and implies, what is indeed an unavoidable conclusion for anyone who does not wish to play with words, that behind all such pretended 'amoralism' lies concealed a powerful ethical and political attitude directed against a social order which Veblen alternately despaired of, mocked and condemned.

Similarly, Professor White sharply points out that Holmes, who dwelt in a cooler and more Olympian atmosphere, is certainly far from clear, and probably involved in a serious paradox, in his celebrated doctrine of what ‘The Law’ consists in. For, on the one hand, it is not, according to Holmes, the function of a legal pleader to ask himself what the law ‘ought to be’: his business is to serve his client, that is, accurately predict what the judge or jury will in fact say. But the judge or jury, in the course of their deliberations, cannot wholly confine themselves to considering either what other judges or juries have said in relevant situations, and deduce their verdict from (or approximate it to) this; nor yet can they derive it from written constitutions or other sets of purely legal general propositions such as statutes. They not only do but, Holmes tells us, *should* allow such considerations as the advantage to a given community in the particular circumstances have ‘due’ weight: but ‘should’ and ‘due’ (or whatever equivalents for these are used) are normative, and not, for Holmes, translatable into purely descriptive terms, however ultimate the analysis. And this contradicts the assumption that law is a purely descriptive and, indeed, experimental procedure. This paradox is sharpened by Holmes’s appeals to ‘expediency’ and attacks on ‘useless knowledge’ and other ‘unneutral’ use of words. Again, Professor White points out that the popularity of Holmes with ‘progressives’ derived from his celebrated decisions protecting civil liberties, which were anything but ‘ethically neutral’ in tone or substance.

When he comes to deal with Beard (Robinson tends to be neglected by Professor White and turns out to be the least important thinker of the group), Professor White reasonably complains that, despite his adherence to ‘legal realism’, ‘sociological jurisprudence’, a pragmatist political theory, and objective historical criteria, Beard does, nevertheless, in the end [408] erect just as fictional an entity as Adam Smith, namely the bad, grasping economic man as contrasted with Adam Smith’s virtuous one, thereby himself committing the abhorred sins of formalism and moral bias. Professor White goes on to expose Beard’s ‘objectivity’ as an effort to unmask unattractive realities behind fair-seeming

appearances, the motive for which is at least as much social indignation and the desire to discredit (intellectually and morally) the wrong kind of historians as a pure passion for the truth. Professor White further attacks Beard for supposing that history, unlike physics, needs not merely hypotheses, but value judgements, which (according to Beard) historians, because they are human beings, cannot avoid, and which, for Beard, refutes claims made for history (for example, by Condorcet or Ranke) of being capable of attaining to scientific objectivity. Professor White, like the Encyclopedists, does not see why historical laws cannot, in principle, be established as firmly as those of physics; yet although his arguments against Beard are formidable enough, his own 'sociological' position remains no more than a pious hope.

In the case of Dewey alone does Professor White fully display his true skill as a professional philosopher in discussing questions of central philosophical importance. In the course of a short but very effective criticism of Dewey's attempt to formulate a naturalistic theory of ethics (whereby all normative terms are translated into purely descriptive-psychological or sociological ones), Professor White conducts a successful refutation of Dewey's attempt to maintain that the relationship between 'is desirable' and 'is desired' is analogous to the relation between 'is objectively red' and 'appears red'. He has little trouble in showing (by classical methods) that, if the analogy is valid, then since 'desirable' in this context means 'ought to be desired', 'objectively red' should mean 'ought to appear red', which, as he shows, is absurd. Professor White refutes Dewey as easily as Moore in his day disposed of Mill, although conducting a somewhat different, though not less lethal, argument against an opponent more elusive if only because so much more foggy. Professor White's refutation is an excellent piece of philosophical argument: yet its very expertness makes it seem somewhat out of place in what is otherwise a critical, but not analytical, study of an intellectual movement, and leads to reflections about the purpose and plan of the entire book.



The purpose of this book appears to be the examination of the central philosophical ideas which underlie the work of a group of American social thinkers, whom Professor White well calls the ‘Encyclopedists of the Roosevelt Revolution’; to state their views, both explicit and implicit; to compare them; and to criticise them. What Professor White has in fact done is to write an exceptionally lucid, penetrating and just account of a social and intellectual movement, and, what is seldom attempted by professional philosophers, to evoke and describe a particular intellectual and moral atmosphere – the peculiar pattern of a set of related ideas and personalities. This he does with historical imagination and a sense of social reality seldom found among technical philosophers in the twentieth century.

Moreover, he has isolated and described such doctrines as legal realism, the economic interpretation of politics, institutional economics, the American ‘new history’, and the peculiar brand of modern American political liberalism, in such a way as to explain (even while he destroys their arguments) why they should have had so great a liberating effect upon those who were influenced by them.

When the ideas with which he deals are particularly confused or contradictory, Professor White points this out. In the case of Dewey, he goes to the length of conducting a formal and successful [409] argument against a specific ethical theory held by that philosopher. What Professor White does not do is to trace the historical roots of the doctrines in question in earlier or contemporary European doctrines (save by making a few references to Marx or Darwin or Freud), and this makes the theories of these American thinkers seem a good deal more original than, in fact, they were. Nor, again, does Professor White for the most part attempt to analyse the basic concepts which he holds up for our inspection with the philosophical tools at his disposal; in the one case where he does this – that of Dewey’s ethics – he does it so successfully as to make one wish that he had applied the same method to his other doctrinaires.

## THE PHILOSOPHY OF AMERICAN SOCIAL SCIENCE

It is true, as he himself points out, that neither Beard nor Holmes, neither Veblen nor Robinson, 'ever said anything about the logic of scientific procedure which has not been either elementary or obscure'; still, the examination of their own procedures and the analysis of the concepts and categories involved in them, whether their users recognised them or not, would have added appreciably to our understanding of the logical structure of the social sciences. But Professor White may reasonably reply that to do this he would have had to write another and much longer book. It is to be hoped that he will follow this admirable preliminary *esquisse* with a full-length dissection and evaluation of the methods of historical and social thinking, for which his qualifications fit him. As it is he has made an original contribution to an interesting subject.

*Copyright Isaiah Berlin 1952*

**Posted in Isaiah Berlin Online 7 March 2022**