

Telegraphic Reviews

John Bibby

Barry Hindess, The Use of Official Statistics in Sociology : a Critique of Positivism and Ethnomethodology. London : Macmillan, 1973. (63pp., 75p)

Criticises ethnomethodology (Cicourel, Douglas) because it leads to "an infinite regression at no stage of which it is possible to escape the determination of seen but unnoticed background expectancies and hence leads to a complete relativism and to a necessary agnosticism with respect to the possibility of an objective knowledge of the world" (p. 12, also p. 24).

Positivism is criticised because it ignores the role of theory in the production of 'data'. This critique is illustrated by an examination of the agrarian class categories used in the 1951 Indian Census, which shows "that the evaluation of social statistics for scientific purposes is always and necessarily a theoretical exercise and, further, that different theoretical problematics must produce different and sometimes contradictory evaluations of any given set of statistics. The evaluation of social statistics is never reducible to a purely technical evaluation". Good heady stuff, but I am not clear whether it means we should avoid official statistics, or just that we should treat them with extreme care.

David and Judith Willer. Systematic Empiricism - Critique of a Pseudoscience New Jersey Prentice Hall.

Distinguishes between science and empiricism, on the grounds that the latter deals purely with observational categories, whereas the former does not. Since Durkheim, sociology has been exclusively empirical, gathering data without theory, and has demonstrated the futility of searching for laws through observation.

Mill, Pearson, Fisher and Blalock are criticised - these four seem to be the arch-demons of empiricism. Some of the critics seem to display basic misconceptions of statistical procedures. (for more details see a longer review of the book, available from John Bibby, on request).

Sami Zubaida, What is scientific sociology? (Review of books by the Willers, and by Hinders) Economy and Society 3 (1), February 1974, pp. 6) - 83

Gives a clear resume of the Willers' book, but very little criticism. Concludes that the most important question for empirical minds is What are the criteria of validity?

Lies, damn lies, and other quotable quotes (please send contributions for this section to Liz. Atkins)

"I remember when I was a kid, we'd sing a little ditty:
noughts are noughts
figures are figures
all for the white man
nothing for the niggers

That is one of the first things that Black Power must rectify"

Ted Joans, on p. 15 of A Black Manifesto in Jazz Poetry and Prose. (London : Calder and Boyars, 1971)