

Arguments Connecting Social Sciences and Philosophy

Ian Jarvie in Conversation With Francisco Osorio

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Abstract: In an interview with Francisco OSORIO, Ian JARVIE talks about social sciences and philosophy in his role as an editor of the journal *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*. The conversation between JARVIE and OSORIO explores the changes in journal publishing from the 1970s to the current century, such as the transition from the analogue to digital, from subscription models to open access, from logical empiricism to current trends in epistemology, as well as other social and political issues.

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About the Interview

This conversation took place by e-mail from March to November 2013 as result of an invitation to Ian JARVIE to chair a conference in Santiago for journal editors sponsored by the Chilean Commission of Science and Technology. The Latin American journal *Cinta de Moebio* (Möbius strip) was the organizer of this project because of its interest in epistemology of social science and was keen to know JARVIE's experience as editor of the journal *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*. [1]

About the Interviewee

Ian JARVIE is a well-known philosopher from York University in Toronto. He is the founding editor of the journal *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*. He was born in England in 1937, first studying social anthropology at The London School of Economics and Political Science, but later moving into philosophy where he met Sir Karl POPPER. With POPPER as his PhD supervisor, JARVIE studied logic and scientific method. Today JARVIE is Distinguished Research Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at York University (Toronto). With more than 300 publications so far, his work has also been translated into Italian, German, Japanese, Spanish and Portuguese. [2]

Selected recent publications:

Jarvie, Ian (2009). Popper's continuing relevance. In Zuzana Parusnikova & Robert S. Cohen (Eds.), *Rethinking Popper*. Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science (Vol. 272; pp.217-245). New York: Springer.

Jarvie, Ian & Agassi, Joseph (2008). *A critical rationalist aesthetics*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Jarvie, Ian & Zamora-Bonilla, Jesus (Eds.) (2011). *The SAGE handbook of the philosophy of social sciences*. London: Sage. [3]

1. The Beginning

OSORIO: Can I start by asking how you became the managing editor of *Philosophy of the Social Sciences (PoSS)* back in the 1970s? [4]

JARVIE: My late York colleague, John O. WISDOM (whom I knew also from the London School of Economics, where he had been editor of *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*), proposed that we set up at York an Institute for Philosophy of the Social Sciences and an associated journal. This would be in 1968 or 1969. He convened various meetings of sympathetic social scientists and philosophers and eventually a proposal was presented to the President of the University. The president said that money was getting tighter and an institute was deemed too expensive. A journal, however, was an excellent idea and he was prepared to offer seed money to start it. WISDOM, myself, John O'NEILL and Harold KAPLAN, a political scientist, were picked to run it as editors, and I was selected to be the coordinator and manager. My original title was "Editorial Secretary." [5]

WISDOM saw the opportunity to consolidate an emerging philosophical specialty just as, a generation before *Philosophy of Science* and, later, *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, had given focus and definition to an earlier emerging specialty. From the start he wanted the journal as a meeting ground for philosophers of science and social scientists. He also wanted us to foster dialogue between the various parties and schools. The editors were two social scientists and two philosophers. [6]

We found a willing publisher (Aberdeen University Press) and our subsidy was adequate for several years. We put out a call for papers and the rest of the story can be found in our online archive of back issues:

<http://pos.sagepub.com/content/by/year>. [7]

The social and institutional conditions that enabled these developments were that York had since its foundation (in 1959) had concentration in the social sciences and the humanities, and it had been structured to foster interdisciplinarity. It was these features that attracted the editors to the university. [8]

OSORIO: There are several interesting questions that could follow. One set of questions I would like to ask are about publishing then and compare it with current trends. [9]

JARVIE: Let us start with the past. I saw my role as mostly coordinating—but sometimes initiating—attempts to create interdisciplinary dialogue. The editors'

CVs embodied interdisciplinarity. WISDOM worked in psychology, O'NEILL in sociology, KAPLAN in political science, and I published in social anthropology. We thought good and bad philosophy was at work in the social sciences; and that social sciences had interesting criticisms of the positivism and individualism almost taken for granted in philosophy. WISDOM had a background in the philosophy of natural science and mathematics. John O'NEILL had been supervised by the Marxist BARAN, and was a translator of some works of MERLEAU-PONTY. I of course had been trained by POPPER. [10]

At that time, and to this day, a characteristic model for mixing philosophy and social science was that the social scientist would adopt a philosophy (Marxism, phenomenology, positivism, WITTGENSTEIN, POPPER, critical realism) and then proceed to "apply" it to his/her own project. Concepts were simply imported and operationalized and the existing jargon was relabeled. It was hoped that the adopted "first philosophy" would somehow cast light on problems of society that were proving intractable. We editors saw exercises of this kind, not fully documented in writing, and as also going in the wrong direction. It was not the task of philosophy to "straighten out" confused social science. Rather, the model we preferred treated discussion of presuppositions and alternatives as philosophical problems which arose from first order problems of science. Philosophy just was rational discussion of such problems, utilizing whatever method came to hand. Always implicit were the background commitments of social philosophy. Resistance to methodological individualism, e.g., usually stemmed from a commitment to the holism of MARX or DURKHEIM; and the adoption of those positions, in turn, had to do with their being seen as radical or critical alternatives to current social conditions and even norms. [11]

Another characteristic model was to use a philosophy as a skeptical weapon against the very possibility of doing social science. When *PoSS* was founded there was much turbulent discussion around the claim of Peter WINCH that WITTGENSTEIN's work superseded and made impossible any science of society such as envisaged by MILL, or DURKHEIM or WEBER. From a different source, those influenced by phenomenology similarly proclaimed the impossibility of "positivist" social science as envisaged by MILL or DURKHEIM, viewing the explanation of society as an interpretative exercise. [12]

These skeptical claims invited rigorous articulation and robust discussion that appealed to valid arguments, including empirical arguments. We thought of *PoSS* as a site where such debate could flourish. WISDOM and I certainly thought POPPER's philosophy was an ideal framework for legitimating such dialogic exchange. [13]

It is hard to assess to what degree we succeeded. What criteria of assessment should we use? Some dialogue did take place; but equally often the outset positions were more clearly stated in evasion of direct confrontation. The clearer statements were mostly the result of the refereeing process. With the exception of a few special issue we were dependent on what was submitted. [14]

Perhaps the hope for fruitful dialogue was naive. If we look at such lively areas as the debates over WINCH, over methodological individualism, over Critical Theory, the trajectory has been that the protagonists refine and maintain their positions, but some kind of consensus develops as to what is interesting and fruitful. Interest shifted. Rationalists might hope that this is due to argumentative considerations; we might fear it is a drift of fashion. Submissions from younger scholars reflect where they and their supervisors think the action is or where it is going to. This or that issue is thereby seen as closed. Even if one disagrees with such a consensus, one should note that it is the way the academic world moves. [15]

OSORIO: The second line of questions is about what do you think was your role as an editor back in 1970s and today. What I find of interest in this conversation is your experience because you have lead and witnessed the transformations of academic communication in the interdisciplinary world of philosophy and social science. [16]

JARVIE: Let me now turn to the differences between academic publishing *then* as compared to *now*. (*Then* would be the 1970s.) First of all, philosophy of the social sciences then was a niche, a very small field indeed. Now, if we count economics, game and rational choice theory, it is considerably expanded and subdivided. Second, it was a field emerging in the collapse of logical positivism as a failed revolution in philosophy. Some philosophers were modifying the program to try to save what they could; some were taking a strongly anti-science attitude and working out its implications. Third, all publishing was paper publishing: the digital revolution was not even a gleam in anyone's eye. This meant that the publishing process was very slow. Manuscripts received were sent out over the course of a week or two, to referees who were given 6-8 weeks to respond, and a fairly detailed questionnaire to complete. It took time to build a cadre of referees willing; to assess papers of varying quality for a new journal and without tangible reward. Some were willing to deliver a judgment, but not a reasoned judgment. WISDOM, who had devised our refereeing system, insisted that we give authors reasons both for acceptance and for rejection, as well as, obviously, for improvement in specifiable ways. Thus many scholars received free feedback from our valiant volunteers, whether or not they got a publication out of the process. [17]

Now philosophy of the social sciences is well established and serviced by rival and alternative journals. It is if anything more widely taught outside of North America than within. It is hardly marked by the aftermath of logical positivism and, where it is, that is its least interesting form. Perhaps the sale of our journal to Sage Journals was a portent of our success in institutionalizing the subject: we are part now of a profitable academic publishing enterprise that closely monitors our performance and to which, presumably, we are hostage. Coincident with that change has been the rise of institutions to facilitate more face-to-face dialogue, especially the Roundtable, originally based in St. Louis, and the source of the papers in each March issue, and, more recently, ENPOSS¹, a harbinger of the

1 European Network for the Philosophy of the Social Sciences, see <http://enposs.eu/> [Accessed: March 11, 2014].

very lively European scene, and the source of papers in our September issues. And, finally, the shift of media from paper to digital. This was accomplished with very few teething problems, presumably because software designers had tried out their ideas in other venues. Our entire list of referees was incorporated into the administration website, all submission was put online, and the entire archive of the journal was digitalized to be instantly searchable. It is only a matter of time, in my opinion, before paper publishing of journals will fade out while readership is still on the increase. [18]

2. The Role of the Editor

OSORIO: Before returning to publishing, let me go back a little to your role as editor. Perhaps being sensitive to the way in which philosophy and social sciences relate to each other (either in some forms of collaboration or in complete misunderstanding) is today the same role for an editor. That hasn't changed essentially. What I see in your role is promoting a debate, allowing arguments to be presented and discussed and, maybe, leading a little in some sense (if that is accomplished is another matter). So my question is if the role of an editor is somehow the same while publishing has moved so fast in so many directions. [19]

JARVIE: Your question is a little complicated. We always must bear in mind that the journal editor role is a placeholder, not a leadership position. Many journals replace their editors on a fixed schedule. Of course, any new editor tries to improve efficiency and to shape the journal somewhat. But there are institutional limitations to this and there are questions of intellectual integrity as well. The journal editor does not, typically, try to impose personality on the journal, the way newspaper and magazine editors do. A journal editor does not usually get a living wage from the employment. Rather, the journal editor undertakes the task in the spirit of serving an intellectual community and its output. Making selections, policing standards, and controlling access are where there is some discretion. Fostering critical discussion was always my aim in selecting and insisting on standards. [20]

Naturally, being somewhat interdisciplinary myself, I was a good fit for the journal. Although *PoSS* is more open than other journals to work of a critical rationalist or Popperian coloration, we never tried to swing the discipline in our direction. This was because we thought engagement and debate were more important. Hence we fostered debate around WINCH and his Wittgensteinian anti-philosophy of the social sciences. We fostered debate around Critical Theory. We have discussed major books, such as, COLLINS's social theory of philosophy and SEARLE's theory of the social world. As long as discussion is ongoing and no reasonable point of view is willfully ignored we can consider ourselves a success. Such leadership as I may embody as editor is enabling. In my own writing I aimed to advocate Critical Rationalism with limited success at best. [21]

As to changes in publishing and their effects on this editorial role. The outcome of all of today's changes is far from clear. Institutions like journals are renovating themselves for the digital era but much of this has to do with means and not with

ends. Before journals there was the institution of correspondence between scientists. Journals have coexisted with and benefited from the impact of e-mail. Digitizing the archives of science is an amazing accomplishment and resource. Even if print journals disappear, that is merely their housing as an intellectual institution. The institution is a necessary feature of science and so will continue in another housing. [22]

Presently, online journals are a mixed bag. My guess is that journals beholden to learned societies and journals housed under universities will continue to dominate because decisions to hire and tenure still demand assessments, and assessments demand standards. Universities and learned societies are our bastions of standards. Journals that are for profit or are self-published are open to suspicions as to their scholarly standards. Fraud and plagiarism are big temptations, made all the easier because of web publishing, and then mere withdrawal of pieces is insufficient rectification. Recently we have heard about plagiarists and fraudsters losing their funding and their positions. Some governments think that, if it is public money that is misappropriated, such fraud is criminal. We see then the reliance on standing institutions: universities, learned societies, governments, the law. Where I see some difficulty is that publishers naturally keep their eye on the bottom line. A journal such as ours, which is a niche journal, serving a subspecialty (philosophy of the social sciences) of a specialty (philosophy of science) of non-natural science subjects (the humanities; the social sciences) is not able to aim for large circulation figures, even online. Whether and how many niche journals will survive is anyone's guess. Some publishers are more profit-point oriented than others. The editors of such niche field journals as *PoSS* are husbanding a small plot. Digitizing makes part of the job much easier and is very beneficial for scholars on the periphery (they can keep in touch better and seek wide exposure). Much depends also on keeping electronic scholarly communication simple and untrammelled. [23]

3. Philosophy of Social Sciences

OSORIO: I'm tempted to enter into the digital field and its consequences, but before going into that area, let me ask you as a philosopher. In your view, what are the problems you can observe in current philosophy of social sciences? I'm trying to picture what would *PoSS* look like if it was born in 2013. I guess logical positivism would not be a key subject (I'm not saying it is not important) but perhaps we have other issues philosophers and social scientists are trying to think about. [24]

JARVIE: The central problem in the philosophy of the social sciences at the present time is the conflict between the empirical and the a priori methods. Those in the party of scientific philosophy are interested in assessing the social sciences for the new knowledge they develop. Those in the a priori camp seek deeper understanding of social life, understanding that comes from reflection and analysis, not from empirical research. Analytic philosophers of social science, the majority today, try to fuse clarity and rigor with a priori methods. They are to some extent split between naturalists, who we might see as the descendants of

positivism and anti-naturalist conventionalists and intentionalists. The dominant social science is economics and its various applications and variations. Economics aims to explain things and to aid policy. It has a priori elements, but also strong empirical claims that seem to be testable. This produces huge numbers of publications and of specialized journals. We would not focus on all this if founded today because there is just too much material and too much competition. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* keeps a watching brief on these developments whilst rarely hosting the major debates. This is because our orientation has always been towards sociology, anthropology, and political science. History, geography, and economics, have their own journals, and so do their respective philosophies. We publish the occasional spillover from them. One way to characterize this spillover would be to say that we are the journal of choice for the most general of issues, methodological, historical, and metaphysical. Authors who want to examine the presuppositions of current thinking in a field will see us as the journal of choice. Hence we publish work by critical realists who combine metaphysical and metaphorical critique of contemporary social science. We publish critical rationalists who conduct an ongoing campaign to make the social sciences more open to falsification and less in search for justification. We occasionally publish broadsides from the Wittgensteinians, who offer particular kinds of a priori critique of social science. The huge and continuing discussion about collective intentions and collectivities generally stemming from the work of GILBERT, TUOMELA, SEARLE and many less august philosophers is partly conducted in our pages. This discussion is simultaneously metaphysical and methodological, and has replaced the older holism/individualism debate. Reduction, emergence, and the bearing of Darwinism in the social sciences are intensely discussed. There are other issues, but my impression is that the overall one is about truth. American pragmatism has been very influential in Europe and the realists, both critical and critical rationalist, keep trying to push back against it. This agenda goes back to POPPER, who viewed pragmatist conventionalism as logically sound but unsatisfactory nonetheless. Without even knowing that this agenda item goes back to POPPER, many scholars take it as their background problematic. [25]

Of course, other issues turn up in our pages, including excited discussion of some of the latest interventions in books and/or articles. Philosophy of the social sciences as a subject is much more dispersed and active than it was 40 years ago and, whilst the problematic has shifted, there are relations of descent and overlap between then and now. In sum, we service a larger and more ramified field than when we started out and like our competing sister journals can but cover a fraction of it. We would have narrower ambitions and coverage if we started today. [26]

4. Publishing Today

OSORIO: Let me connect your argument, that philosophy of social science today is very active and dispersed, with two ideas. First, current university trends (part time staff, pressure for publishing, lack of funding, rankings, etc.). Second, current digital publishing trends (open access, blogs, online journals, Internet, Facebook, Twitter, etc.). I'm not suggesting a causal relationship but trying to ask in your view the role as editor in today's world. [27]

JARVIE: The first question, university trends, concerns politics; the second, digitalization, technology. No doubt there is opportunity to exploit technological change for political purposes. Although the world economy is unprecedentedly affluent, governments believe they have to be able to claim they are "saving money." Implementing technology is almost always backed by such claims, viz. the virtual university ("distance education"). [28]

By contrast, when the subject philosophy of the social sciences got up and running (1940s) the political climate was favorable to social engineering. Hence both philosophy and the social sciences were taken seriously and used as input into educational reform and expansion, and into the crafting of the protectionist state. Our journal, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, was founded by academics who favored scientific philosophy, so-called; that is, philosophy growing out of and continuous with the scientific enterprise. At the time we would have considered economics as part of the consensus on social reform and social engineering. It is remarkable how much the situation has changed almost unnoticed. Economics, the largest and most respected of the social sciences, shifted its position on the political spectrum from intervention and technology (Keynesianism) towards preaching the gospel of neoliberalism, i.e. minimum intervention and instituting market-style competition wherever possible. A handful of economists resisted, of course. But mainly, it should be noticed, in the same period sociology, anthropology, and geography, became more radical rather than less, and deeply estranged from economics. Whether this change and indeed split in the social sciences is a product or the driver of changes in the wider world of politics is best left to historians. Certainly these political shifts in the social sciences were under way before the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the formal close of the Cold War. As far as the academy goes, neoliberalism favors radical change in funding and structure, so that higher education becomes an investment risk taken by individuals who benefit, rather than by the society that benefits. The old-fashioned idea that education was in itself a good thing, and hence the more educated a population the better (J. S. MILL), has been subjected to some sort of cost-benefit analysis intended to suggest otherwise. Certainly the prior models of higher education were *dirigiste* rather than market-driven. Once extremely conservative institutions, universities became in the era of expansion bastions of the left. At the same time, these bastions of the left were strongly resistant to changes in the academy, including those that questioned the value of humanities and social sciences education, as well as those that questioned promotion based on research, and such privileges as tenure. [29]

And yet, our subject, the philosophy of the social sciences, grows. To an extent this flows from the expansion of higher education itself, to an extent from globalization. One well-known feature of globalization has been the entrenchment, in business, as in scholarship, of English as the *lingua franca*. So whereas the philosophy of the social sciences was once an Anglo-American enterprise, it is now a global enterprise to which Scandinavia, Asia, and continental Europe vigorously contribute. In this, South America lags a little behind, although there are signs that that will change. Even when debate in philosophy of the social sciences gets scholastic, there is underlying hope that socially relevant matters are at stake. The academy may for once be in the vanguard, awaiting the decline of the neoliberal fashion. [30]

Technological challenges to publishing practices are another matter. Possibly we are seeing the gradual demise of the 19th century model of the paper periodical. Already the digitization of learned periodicals greatly facilitates research at the same time as it makes bogus numerical measures of "impact" possible. The journal I edit has a quite small base of paper copy subscribers, but a much magnified readership through bundling with other journals as a digital subscription package. Digitalization, thus, gives us a wider readership at the same time as widespread use of English in scholarship draws to us a wider range of contributors. Lower funding and lack of permanent positions are having little effect. Even when the journal began, in 1970, we received manuscripts from scholars who were still in graduate school. Students, in other words, were already aware of the need to build a CV before they were on the job market, and not just when they were in the tenure stream. [31]

The position of an editor in all this is more of an observer than a participant. An editor is usually a senior scholar, and hence in a permanent rather than a temporary position. An editorial position is one of status, but its power is strictly circumscribed. An editor has no influence on the shaping and finance of academic institutions. Like journals themselves, my editorial role piggy-backs on my university position. Most journals are published by commercial firms, even when they are "university" presses and, except where there is a powerful sponsoring body, most decisions around sustaining them and adapting them to technology are made by those publishing firms. Our transition from paper-based work to web-based work, for example, was entirely driven by our publisher, Sage. This transition has brought many advantages, but it was announced rather than discussed. Hence an editor cannot but feel obliged to focus on scholarly standards and other academic values and find ways to secure them in a rapidly changing technological environment. So far extant journals have done a good job. The appearance of entrepreneurial journals, put together on the cheap, and for profit, is another matter. As long as scholars are not duped into taking them seriously they will be no threat. This will make the role of tenure committees and graduate student counseling vital. The former need to be very clear about digital outlets that lack standards, the latter needs to alert graduate students to the existence of false front journals. In general, the more publishing the web makes possible the better, which is a commonplace for those committed to dialogue. Freedom of speech is in theory endorsed everywhere (in practice is another

matter). The web, however, is undisciplined, which is good for speech but not so good for standards. Science and scholarship are areas where standards are needed, so they will always have a privileged position in the publishing arena. Journals are like laboratories, experiments, and conferences, essential to the inter-subjective criticism that drives science. Hence they are a permanent presence, however much metamorphosis they undergo. [32]

OSORIO: Dr Ian JARVIE, many thanks for sharing your thoughts and experiences. [33]

JARVIE: It's been a pleasure. [34]

Author

Francisco OSORIO is a social anthropologist from University of Chile, editor of [Cinta de Moebio](#) [Moebius Strip], a journal devoted to epistemology of social sciences in Latin American. Fulbright fellow (1999) Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. Honorary visiting fellow Anthropology Department, University of Manchester (2007-2010) and postdoctoral research fellow at Communication Computing Research Centre at Sheffield Hallam University (2011). His experience as editor started in 1997 creating the first online journal in the area of philosophy and social sciences in Latin America, run by the [Social Science Faculty](#) (FACSO) at University of Chile.

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