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What is social science if not critical?

Jana Bacevic 🔟

Durham University, Durham, UK

Correspondence
Jana Bacevic, Department of Sociology,
Durham University, 32 Old Elvet, Durham
DH13HN, UK.
Email: jana.bacevic@durham.ac.uk

Abstract

This short article represents a contribution to the debate on the motion "Social science is explanation, or it is nothing." While in the format of parliamentary debating the contribution would fall on the side of the opposition, I will not be arguing against explanation as such. The work of explaining is in no way oppositional to or mutually exclusive with critique. Instead, my contribution will revolve around two arguments: one is that both critique and explanation exhibit characteristics we commonly attribute to science; the other is that reserving the label of science for explanation draws a boundary around social sciences in ways that exclude many of the interesting things it does. Some of the examples include the sociological analysis of governmental approaches to the COVID-19 pandemic, or critical analysis of concepts such as "cancel culture" or "terrorism." The conclusion is that explanation and critique are mutually supporting elements of science, and that combined they give us insights we cannot glean from either alone.

KEYWORDS
critique, explanation, social science, social theory

1 | INTRODUCTION

The debate about whether social science should be—exclusively, primarily, or predominantly—explanatory hinges on what we see as explanation, and what we see as alternatives. There is a longer debate about the nature of explanation in philosophy of science in general, and philosophy of social science in particular. It is not my intention to restate it here; however, if we attempted (too-brief) a summary, we could say that explanation in social science is an account of a process, usually a social process, that entails a relationship between cause and effect. In the history of social sciences, several other modes have appeared as alternatives or additions to explanation. One is *interpretation*: an account of a social process that does not focus on cause-and-effect relationships, but on the meaning of specific events and acts for particular groups of people (actors). Another aspect of social science is *critique*: this is an account of a social process that, though it may involve elements of both explanation and interpretation, also provides a normative or ethical evaluation. In other words, it takes a position towards its object of research.

Many kinds of social science can be said to be, explicitly or implicitly, critical (Bacevic, 2021a). In sociology, the label was most prominently applied by Pierre Bourdieu and his followers, who took critique to be an intrinsic part of sociological method, not just an outcome or application of sociological knowledge (e.g., Bourdieu, 1990). One of the most interesting challenges to this program in the 20th century came not from proponents of objectivist or ethically neutral social science, but from Bourdieu's own student Luc Boltanski. Boltanski's "sociology of critique" (2011; see also Susen, 2016) highlighted that critical capacity is not the unique preserve of social scientists, but that so-called "ordinary people" engage in critique that equally involves acts of measurement, valuation, and judgments about what is right, wrong, or unjust. Thus, sociology of critique problematized the assumed epistemological uniqueness of social-scientific critique. If critique (or critical capacity, more broadly) is something that all people do, how and why is critique within social sciences special?

My previous work has focused on the epistemological, political, and affective effects of this claim: what are we doing when we engage in critique from a social-scientific perspective? What are the effects of this position—the position that takes as a given that critique has effects on the social world—on both the "knower" and their object (Bacevic, 2019)? In the context of this contribution, however, I am less interested in the performative aspects of critique as a social practice as in the effects of distinguishing it from explanation in social sciences. What are the implications of saying "social science is explanation or [it is] nothing"? What can social science do other than explain? Are there important aspects, effects, or potentialities of social science that have to do with critique but cannot be subsumed under explanation? What is social science other than explanation—if, indeed, anything at all?

2 | SCIENCE AS POSITION

Explanation and critique share the presupposition that reality is worthy rendering in a different language, in a way that is not necessarily the same in which it appears to ordinary actors. This language is not unique to social science. We borrow concepts from philosophy ("ideas," "knowledge"), physics (concepts like "force," "power"), medicine ("viral"), and other fields. But in all cases, we create a meta-version of reality, a representation of sorts. Whether this version is more accurate, "just" different, or morally and politically preferable, of course, depends on the criterion for assessing it, our ontological commitments (whether we are realist, anti-realist, or pragmatist), as well as what are deemed appropriate ends of social science. But it nonetheless remains a representation.

To achieve this kind of representation requires taking a position separated from the object of research. This kind of view—which Claude Levi-Strauss, referring to anthropology, called *un regard eloigné*, a distant look—distinguishes sciences from other modes of knowing social reality. In social sciences, legitimate knowledge is not intuitive, embodied, or non-verbal; it is not transgenerational, secret, or implicit (though, of course, it can be all of these things—and there is increasing recognition of the fact that it had been in denial of this). It is written down, taught—usually in accredited programs—and mimetic, insofar as it aims to create an image of the social world that

resembles the real state of affairs. This process, in its very inception, enables distinguishing between oneself, as the observer, and the object of research. This kind of distancing is common to both explanation and critique: but they do it in slightly different ways, sometimes with different outcomes, which can lead to the confusing assumption that there is something mutually exclusive between the two genres.

To begin with, to explain something can by itself have the effect of denaturalizing it, in the sense of making it no longer seem obvious, independent of language, or of human framing. In addition, explanation attributes something to antecedent causes, or at least aims to establish relatively reliable correspondence between two factors (Hume's "constant conjunctions"). Because this was the distinguishing aspect of science in its beginnings, we sometimes make the mistake of treating it as foundational (Archer, 2003). This is also one of the implications of the formulation "explanation or nothing." Critique, on the other hand, must do a different thing: entail an evaluation of the object of knowledge, of what it purporting to be about. But both stem from the same initial movement—that of separation, of creating space between the knower and the known.

Of course, there is an ongoing discussion about whether this kind of epistemic disposition is a good one, and whether the kind of knowledge it engenders inevitably reproduces the extractive, anthropo- and Euro-centric relations that have built and continue to sustain colonial expansion and the climate crisis (e.g., Simpson, 2017; Todd, 2016). My view on this is agnostic: I am not sure whether an epistemic disposition that rests on ontological severance (on seeing oneself—and, by implication, humans—as distinct from the world) *necessarily* lends itself to expropriative, extractive, and individualistic modes of knowing/being-in-the-world, though it is certain it is likely to and has historically overwhelmingly done so. But I am also certain that epistemological severance from the *social* world (the world that humans have built, including thanks to the disposition just described) is necessary if we are ever to see social arrangements we are born or socialized into as something other than "natural." As ambivalent as it may make us today, this severance enabled early sociologists to recognize capitalism, patriarchy, racism or colonialism as historical, produced, and thus ultimately changeable; and this severance is intimately inscribed in the epistemological histories of both explanation and critique (cf. Latour, 2004). The question whether we can rescue their epistemological commonalities from their extractive and colonial legacies will, in the context of this contribution, have to take the back seat to the question whether they can be separated—whether it is possible to say that social science is "explanation or nothing"—and why, as I will argue, it should not be.

3 | SCIENCE AS LANGUAGE

Starting from the assumption that critique involves the intellectual movement of distancing, it is quite likely that academic critique will make use of language and, overall, conceptual apparatus of science. However, it may do this not by recourse to antecedent factors, but, for instance, prediction of the likely effects of certain forms of action. If we criticize a policy for its effects, we are not necessarily saying it will lead to those effects, but that it *might* lead to those effects. We also, implicitly or explicitly, take a position on these effects. Two recent sociological critiques of the UK government's approach to the Coronavirus pandemic make such an argument (Bacevic & McGoey, 2024; Fitzgerald, 2023). One argues that ambiguity about the effectiveness of mask-wearing, virus transmission routes, and mitigation measures suggests a shift from predicting and managing risks to maintaining social order through selective knowledge about them (Bacevic & McGoey, 2024; see also Bacevic, 2021a). Is this an explanation that is certain and easy to establish? Of course not. Yet, it is quite possible to make a coherent argument that not informing the general population about effectiveness of masks or ventilation is wrong both from a public health perspective, and from a philosophical, social justice-oriented perspective. But the latter kind of argument (though, of course, it can itself be disputed and challenged) requires the critical movement implied in the first; for instance, to notice that there is something particular (or peculiar) about the way in which knowledge about a virus is mediated in public in a certain (national, epistemological) context.

Similarly, it is a critical stance that enables analyzing the intersection between COVID-19 mitigation, border control, and nationalism (Fitzgerald, 2023). Is it possible to establish a correlation between border control and virus control? Absolutely (that's explanation). Is it possible to identify that this motif (of border control) is prominent in certain kinds of scientific advice? Yes (that's interpretation). But in order to use these elements to sketch the contours of a nationalism that unites seemingly contradictory political goals and to place it in the context of a global reconfiguration of security regimes, one needs critique.

This highlights the limitations of approaches to science that privilege explanation while excluding all other elements. This is the kind of science the UK government claimed to be following at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic: a combination of epidemiological modeling and behavioral science whose priority is to establish something close to constant conjunctions, and to ignore, as much as possible, the recursive nature of social knowledge (Bacevic, 2021a). This does not make it "wrong" or bad: a lot of behavioral science is both sound and useful when it comes to predicting action on a small scale. However, critique is not in its set of conceptual tools, so it cannot take a position towards the elements of the social world that it aspires to explain or predict. Behavioral science cannot show us that something is unjust: it is simply not designed to do that.

Now, we may be compelled to say that, on this view, critique is clearly closer to literature or philosophy, than to science *proper*. But in doing this, we already reduce science to explanation. Social science that is critical is much more than just esthetic or ethical evaluation. This brings me to the other commonality between explanation and critique: the possibility of being proven wrong.

4 | SCIENCE AS OPENNESS

Saying that social-scientific critique has to allow the possibility of being proven wrong is not necessarily to go the full Popperian route (Karl Popper argued that science should aim to generate falsifiable hypotheses), but it is to say that social-scientific critique has to open its position to scrutiny. It is not enough to say "Well, I disagree with the position that dinosaurs never existed" or "Free speech is under threat at universities": you have to lay out the process through which you reached that conclusion (e.g. Vickers & Bacevic, 2024).

This is often lost in the extension of "critique" to basically mean "I do not like something," but that is neither what critique means nor what it should do. This kind of facile reduction is happening in today's reception of, for instance, postcolonial critique and critical race theory; and it has happened earlier to feminist critique (see e.g. Ray et al., 2024). Because these forms of critique take an open position that identifies certain social relations and mechanisms—colonialism, racism, sexism—as unequal or oppressive, they risk being reduced to being (only or primarily) *about* those forms of oppression (Bacevic, 2021b). To be clear, I do not think this is justified: this reduction tends to come from the reactionary end of the political spectrum, often intertwined with the newest iteration of the so-called culture wars.

Sometimes, and especially under present circumstances, this leads us to become overly defensive about our ontological and epistemological foundations. This, I suspect, is also in the background of the initiatives to make social science "more scientific," including reducing it to explanation. But the latter is simply an overkill. Critique in social sciences should remain open to challenging its foundations. Scientific critique does not just say "this is racist." It says "this is racist *because*," where "because" may or may not involve a causal account, but must involve a definition of what race, racism, and forms and mechanisms of reproduction of inequality (on the assumption that this is where the critique comes from) are.

This does not mean we need to go over foundations every single time, which is a demand that social scientists often encounter on social media and other platforms ("explain to me *how* this is racist" or "*why* is it sexist to say women are naturally predisposed to motherhood," etc.). Much like natural sciences are able to bracket some of the key ontological discussions in their fields (and, in physics, even ignore a key ontological rift—that between quantum and Newtonian mechanics), so social sciences do not need to rehash Marx's theory of value, Du Bois' concept of the

color line or de Beauvoir's critique of gender hierarchy each time they engage in knowledge production. While we (hopefully!) teach students the genealogy of these concepts, a lot of our theoretical assumptions are both superseded, hybridized and bracketed by contemporary theories (for instance, de Beauvoir's by performativity, Du Bois' by CRT, both by intersectionality), and so on. But they should remain available for access and open to scrutiny.

To do social theory means to work in this area of scrutiny. In social ontology, for instance, we examine how the concepts in social sciences (such as class, gender, inequality, power, knowledge, truth, critique, and so on) correspond with reality (or not). Some philosophers perform this scrutiny through "pure" reflection, allegedly independently of social and political life. I do not think this is actually possible; I think our modes of thinking, including when we critically examine the precepts of those modes of thinking, are always shaped or influenced by our environment. This is why the kind of social ontology I do draws on the empirical examination of the social world, and the debates and discussions that go on within it, to inform revision and scrutiny of theoretical categories.

Critique in social sciences therefore shares not only an epistemological stance, but also a conceptual and methodological apparatus, with explanation. But it is neither reducible to it, nor is it in tension with it. This brings me to the implications of this distinction.

5 | GOOD SCIENCE IS CRITICAL

To say that social science is explanation or nothing instantiates an ontological hierarchy within science. This hierarchy implies that practices such as critique fall outside of the definitional scope of what is "science." This is not only unnecessary, but it also runs counter to the history of the social sciences. Even if we go back to the (traditionally narrated) history of sociology, the so-called "founding fathers"—Marx, Durkheim, Du Bois, Weber, as well as women who were usually erased or omitted in this history, such as Ida B. Wells or Jane Adams (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2007)—were centrally concerned with the quality of life and the prospects of making it better. This led to theories about how the existing structures and relations, identified as capitalism, racism, or patriarchy were making people miserable and oppressed. Same goes for Freud, whose efforts to make psychoanalysis conform to the standards of "science" were an effect of the desire to make it appear credible and respectable at the time when disciplines vying for the status of legitimate knowledge included astrology. This distance from the conditions in which they were mired would today identify as a critical distance, but it is no truer to say that their "science" enabled them to formulate a "critique" than that their "critique" enabled them to formulate "science." The two are, and have always been, conceptually, epistemologically, and processually intertwined.

Rather than saying that social science is explanation *first* or explanation *alone*, then, we could say the scientific study of the social world requires establishing distance from our object of knowledge, which enables us to perceive the world as something other than natural or "given." This distance can be attained through multiple means: the intersection of identity and social position—some people will feel more distant from their surroundings by the virtue of what, who, or how they are (Collins, 2015)—or the application of scientific instruments: measurement, assessment, classification, and so on (Boltanski, 2011). But to think that this method should be used in absence of a critical disposition would be insensitive to the social, political, and historical context in which social sciences operate; much like an attempt to do critique without recourse to this set of methods would not be scientific. Hence, to invert the proposition, it is possible to do critique without explaining; but it is almost impossible to do explanation well without at least in the process attaining the distancing disposition we identify with critique.

Take concepts such as "terrorism" (e.g. Abbas, 2021) or "cancel culture." If you go by way of explanation, you could establish that "cancel culture" requires the existence of social media (and media in general), as well as moral standards and codes (antecedent factors). If you throw in interpretation, you could, also, establish that some people (social actors) see the denial of platform as "cancellation"; that they, too, link it to the rise of social media; and that they may attribute different moral standards and interests to others who take part in this, whether they are "cancelling" or "being cancelled." But unless you add a critical disposition—that is, unless you are capable of

assuming sufficient distance from the concept (object of research)—you will entirely miss to see that the concept may have a particular effect or purpose: that is, that it may be doing something *other* than describing or diagnosing a problem in a representational way. For instance, you might fail to notice that it is more likely that those who complain about being "cancelled" will come from the right of the political spectrum, have a certain kind of identity, or belong to certain demographics. You might also fail to notice that "cancel culture" seems to be uniquely applied to recent instances of deplatforming, despite the longer history of no-platform and boycott of speakers on all sides of the political spectrum.

This kind of insight is uniquely afforded by the kind of social science that is critical. Again, it would still need to be science: this is why, while "cancel culture" can itself appear to be a form of critical narrative—that is, it takes a normative position towards the phenomenon it purports to diagnose—most uses of the term would fail to satisfy scientific standards and forms of evidence: for instance, they consider only cases when right-wing or transphobic speakers were "cancelled." Similarly, the concept of "terrorism" usually implies, even if a weak, moral stance: most people would agree terrorism is bad. However, being able to notice that the label "terrorist" is more often used to describe certain kinds of acts, perpetrated by a certain kind of racialized subject, calls for a critical disposition; this disposition cannot be generated by explanation alone.

This demonstrates quite clearly the need for a critical social science, not only in terms of scientific findings used to improve living conditions, but also in terms of informing what to look for in social phenomena. In other words, understanding that not everything will fit the criteria of "explanation" is as vital as understanding that not everything we call science will deserve the label of scientific critique; but if it is the future of social science that concerns us, what they share is much more important than what they lack.

6 | CONCLUSION

Explanation is an important element of social science, and it was in its foundations. But it is not the only one. Critique, though often taken to be less scientific, shares a number of ontological, epistemological, and political assumptions with explanation. These assumptions include that the (social) world is composed of elements that may affect one another in a temporally linear fashion, regardless of whether we express it causally or probabilistically (see Krause, 2016); that this world is knowable and can be detected, described, and probed by humans as knowers (epistemic subjects); and that this process is overall beneficial to humanity, either because it generates a truer and more accurate representation, or because it contributes to well-being, justice and equality. These shared assumptions are more important for the future of the social sciences than the differences between explanation and critique, not least because the amplification of differences to the degree of excluding critique from the set "social science" often serves primarily political or ideological ends, rather than scientific ones.

This contribution has also argued that critique for scientific ends must conform to certain procedural and methodological criteria, including being open about its ontological and epistemological assumptions. This, of course, means not all kinds of critique will (or should want to) be "scientific," but that critique in social sciences plays an important role in terms of situating relations (including causal) in context, and thus enabling science to remain relevant to the historical and political moment without becoming subsumed under it. As much as this distance can limit forms of social and political participation (Arendt, 2005), it remains a vital and unifying part of social science, and of scientific knowledge, as a whole.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest known to the author in the writing, production, or publication of this manuscript.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

ORCID

Jana Bacevic https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1801-5222

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