Contemporary Societies Series

Jeffrey C. Alexander, Series Editor

Forthcoming

METHODS OF DISCOVERY

Heuristics for the Social Sciences

Andrew Abbott

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES
Jeffrey C. Alexander
SERIES EDITOR

W. W. NORTON & COMPANY ⊗ NEW YORK LONDON

Cum omnis ratio diligens disserendi duas habeat partis, unam inveniendi alteram iudicandi.

Every systematic treatment of argumentation has two branches, one concerned with invention of arguments and the other with judgment of their validity.

Cicero, *Topica* 1:6

its surrounding communities, whereas it might be *losing* precisely those kinds of people if it were surrounded by a different set of communities. From this point of view, there is no absolute scale of disorganization, only disorganization relative to a context. In the noncontextual mode, by contrast, the meaning of disorganization or liberalism is the same no matter what. Obviously, the assumption of such noncontextuality is central to survey methods. When we send out questionnaires, we are assuming that everyone who answers has the same frame of reference in mind.[1]

THERE ARE THUS several important debates about the nature of social reality that have methodological implications. The first involves the analytic distinction between social and cultural realms, with its associated methodological schemes of behaviorism and culturalism. A second, long-standing debate is between individualism and emergentism, with its associated schemes of methodological individualism and methodological emergentism. Third is the pairing of realism and constructionism, and fourth is its closely related cousin pairing of contextualism and noncontextualism. Each of these debates has important implications for methodological positions.

G. Choice and Constraint

Not all of the basic social scientific debates concern methods or ontology, however. Some of them concern the kinds of things that are to be explained, what is taken to be problematic in social life. A first issue is whether to focus on *choice* or *constraint*. In many ways, this is another version of the individualism/emergentism debate. For economists in particular, the key to

understanding society lies in understanding how people make choices or rather in figuring out the consequences of their making choices in groups. (Economists feel they already know how people make choices—by maximizing utility subject to a budget constraint. The question lies in figuring out how they make those choices and what the social consequences are when groups of people make such decisions in parallel.)

For many other social scientists, however, the key to understanding society is in figuring out—as the economist James Duesenberry once famously put it—"why people have no choices to make" (1960:233). On this view, social structure constrains and directs individuals. They are not free to make their way unconstrained, except in specifically designed institutional structures like economic markets. Rather, they are shaped by social forces, arrangements and connections that prevent free choice from exercising anything like a determinant role.

H. Conflict and Consensus

Another long-standing debate concerns *conflict* and *consensus*. The consensus position is that while people are inherently disorderly and social order is therefore precarious, social organization and institutions keep people from destroying themselves. (The reader may recognize this position as descending from the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes.) For this position, the standard question is why conflict does not pervade the social system. The answer is usually sought in norms, rules, and values—all the apparatus of social institutions, as this position calls them. Much of consensus research takes the form of teasing out hidden norms and rules that maintain stability in social situations, from the grand social values seen by writers like