

[Book review] Jonathon W. Moses and Torbjørn Knutsen, **Ways of Knowing. Competing Methodologies in Social and Political Research, 2007**

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## Book Review

Jonathon W. Moses and Torbjørn Knutsen, [\*Ways of Knowing. Competing Methodologies in Social and Political Research\*](#), Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. ISBN-13: 9780230516656 (pbk). 344 pp. RRP: £21.99.

While many textbooks conveniently opt for a shopping-list approach to the description of research methods in the current social sciences, *Ways of Knowing* retraces their historical and intellectual lineage, focusing on the evolution of their philosophical underpinnings through time. The book is a successful attempt “to encourage students to be sensitive to the methodological priors of social scientists, and to become more conscious and aware of how these priors affect [their] work” (p. 15). Those interested in the development of the social sciences since the time of Francis Bacon have much to gain in reading this rich contextualisation of ideas.

The book’s division deliberately accentuates the contrast between two major perspectives in the study of society. The first section emphasises the importance of naturalism in the initial constitution of social inquiry as a scientific practice, structured around the experimental, statistical, case-oriented, and historical approaches. The authors provide a brief discussion of the various limits and perceived flaws of the naturalistic approach, most notably in relation to “law-like patterns” and visions of the world “as a single entity” (pp. 148-149). These critiques help to explain the emergence of alternative frameworks of understanding grounded in constructivist and interpretive methods, which are the subject of the second section of the book. The authors' historical overview transcends disciplinary boundaries, making it an appealing approach to social scientists, regardless of his or her research topic and preferred method of inquiry.

A great strength of the book resides in its in-depth coverage of both classic texts and recent scholarship in social and political theory. The works of Leopold von Ranke, John Stuart Mill or Émile Durkheim — to point out only a few — are given extensive attention by the authors, alongside contemporary discussions shaping the current methodological debates in academia. Similarly, the work of Karl Popper, Carl Hempel, Thomas Kuhn and other essential readings from the philosophy of science find their way into all chapters. From a practical perspective, then, their

writing elegantly solves the dilemma that the postgraduate student faces when having to select classic texts *versus* up-to-date readings by putting them in dialogue with each other. The authors handle an eclectic range of sources superbly, carrying the reader from Galton's exploration of statistical research (p. 76-sq.) to Immanuel Kant's thoughts on sense perception (p. 170-sq.). The one topic that arguably receives a slightly less informed treatment is comparative analysis, as the authors refrain from engaging recent literature on it. Specifically, their coverage of classical approaches (from John Stuart Mill to Przeworski and Teune) eludes some of the important debates in this field, such as the work of Giovanni Sartori on concept formation and comparing 'small-N' cases with 'low degrees of freedom' (Sartori 1970; see also Collier and Gerring 2008). More precise accounts of comparison as a method of analysis can be found in Newton and van Deth's (2005) excellent history of comparative politics.

The authors conclude their inquiry with a call in favour of methodological pluralism, which they had already announced in their opening pages. But the final chapter also develops another interesting argument that distances itself from the epistemological equivalent of the *e pluribus unum* motto. That is, they do not attempt to reconcile the successive historical narratives presented by suggesting broad principles to follow in order to produce valuable knowledge on society. Instead, the authors claim that they "are skeptical of any attempt to create a new hegemonic vision of science", which leads them to stress "the need to encourage problem-driven (not methods-driven) science" (pp. 289-290). Accordingly, the authors' subsequent argument on "methodological rapprochement" suggests reflexive cross-fertilisation instead of an uncanny marriage of approaches. This final statement resonates with the authors' own methods pursued in *Ways of Knowing*.

At this point, one might underline the role a philosophy of history plays in defining one's approach to science. *Ways of Knowing* does not describe a Hegelian narrative of scientific knowledge, driven by dialectical steps from naturalism to constructivism and then into a joined-up version of both. Instead, the book supports a Kuhnian representation of "wondrously different" (p. 285), and eventually incommensurable approaches, historically connected by paradigm shifts rather than continuities. Any idea of a final synthesis sealing the tension between naturalism and constructivism would seriously contradict the message supported by all the previous chapters: that

disagreement over analytical perspectives is essential to the dynamics of science itself. The authors' reasoned pluralism is hence very distinct from any "hegemonic" project over the intellectual dispositions of scientific inquiry.

In *Ways of Knowing*, the reader will find an ideal springboard from where to situate more specific discussions about the contemporary issues generating some of the most passionate debates within the social sciences (for an excellent example of such a view from the perspective of an American political scientist, see Hall 2007). The book stands out as a particularly valuable addition to the methodological and philosophical curriculum of the social sciences through its provision of a detailed historical inquiry of approaches to its practices.

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