

***The Scientific Study of Society***

by Max Steuer

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reviewed by Theodore P. Lianos\*

This book attempts something that I have not seen before. It examines various important subjects from the point of view of “the five social sciences and their sisters”. The five social sciences are Anthropology, Economics, Political Science, Social Psychology and Sociology. Their sisters are Demography, Geography and Linguistics. The subjects covered are the following; Crime, Migration, The Family, Money, Housing and Religion.

For each of the above subjects the author reviews the papers that have appeared in leading journals of the five social sciences in recent years, in most cases in the 1990's. In Economics, for example, the journals used are American Economic Review, Economic Development and Cultural Change, Economic Inquiry, Economic Journal, Economic Policy, European Economic Review, Journal of Economic Organization and Behavior, Journal of Labour Economics, Journal of Political Economy and Quarterly Journal of Economics.

The author uses various methods in presenting the research reports. For example, in the cases of crime and religion research results are presented by social science discipline, in the case of migration the reports are presented by aspects (e.g. reasons for migrating, attitudes towards immigrants, etc.) and in the case of family according to the kind of information provided by the research (e.g. contextual facts, stylized facts etc.).

In the author's words the aim of this book is “to show in a convenient and organized way to actual social scientists, potential social scientists, and any interested parties, what is going on in social science across all five major disciplines. I am not offering an abstract discussion. Most of the book simply lays out what social scientists do”. Indeed, this is what the author does in the second part of book. But it should be noted that the first part (four chapters) of the book and also the third are very useful for any reader who is interested in methodological aspects of the social sciences.

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In attempting to evaluate Max Steuer's book, the first thing to be said is that this is an enormous undertaking that has produced interesting and useful results. Also, whenever Steuer expresses his own views, reservations and judgments he is always correct - in my opinion, at least. However, there are obvious limitations due to the need to limit the time period covered and the journals reviewed, but this does not alter or reduce the significance of the project. Those who read this book will certainly be much better informed about what social scientists do these days.

There is only one difficulty with this book, namely the lack of abstract discussion, for which however it cannot be criticized since the author clearly states that it is not his intention to offer abstract discussions. In this reviewer's opinion, a theoretical discussion on the unity of social sciences - not only in terms of subject matter but also in terms of the principles underlying the theories and the research methods - would have increased the value of the book substantially.

Of course knowing how the same subject, e.g. crime, is analysed in various scientific disciplines is very important. However, this in itself does not provide a unified view of social sciences.