

## PREFACE

As a form of study of human behaviour, sociology has been around for at least 150 years; probably a great deal longer if one is prepared to be relatively open-minded about what counts as sociological reflection on social life. It is, then, a bit long in the tooth for it to be continually excusing or explaining away its lack of empirical rigour on the grounds of its immaturity. That it has not developed a disciplinary structure which replicates or matches those of the natural and mathematical sciences cannot be because it has not had enough time to do so, nor that enough effort has not been expended on the task. Time and time again, figures in the discipline have pushed themselves forward, aspiring to be sociology's Galileo, Newton or Darwin (or, perhaps more likely, its Roger Bacon and Gilbert White) and yet still it remains recalcitrantly unwilling or unable to arrive at any consensus around an empirically based, formalised method. Despite all efforts to the contrary, its theories, methods, data and results remain 'soft' when compared to those of 'proper' science.<sup>1</sup>

In this monograph, we look at the latest attempt to dragoon sociology into a format which can stand comparison with the natural sciences. Analytical Sociology (AS) proposes to do this by re-building the discipline around theories of the middle range designed to offer explanations of the causal mechanisms which generate social structures. These explanations will resolve, once and for all, the two central challenges facing sociology; how to account for the relationship between micro and macro social structures and how to do so by documenting the mechanisms involved in an empirically grounded way. AS is, then, a composite bundle of philosophical principles, a general framework and directives for investigative methods. We will examine all three, and will refer to the bundle as Analytical Sociology's 'methodology'. One of the things which makes AS distinctive<sup>2</sup> is its wish to adopt agent-based modelling as an investigative technique. We will also spend some considerable time examining this proposal. Having reviewed the case which Analytical Sociology makes for its proposed re-direction, our conclusion is likely to be unwelcome to its proponents. As far as we can see, the serious problems involved in grounding an empirically based, causal social science have not been overcome. The central puzzles and dilemmas remain. Moreover, the turn to agent-based models and other forms of simulation is likely to add yet more confusion and unresolved problems to the *potpourri* we already have. In the last section, we reflect on some of the broader cultural and professional factors which seem to be

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<sup>1</sup> The contrast between 'hard' and 'soft' disciplines seems much less prevalent in commentaries on the social sciences these days. We would like to believe that this was because of the realisation that the social sciences' problems are just as hard, but differently so, as those of the natural sciences. Alas, we suspect it has more to do with the waning interest in and influence of the social sciences, and sociology in particular, among public intellectuals and policy pundits.

<sup>2</sup> Possibly the only thing, given that it is based on recycling very traditional positions.

preventing this perennial search for new beginnings, new starts and re-organisation from ever being successful. In our view, those who wish to drive sociology closer and closer to the natural sciences might do well to think more about its organisational character than its epistemology before formulating their campaigns.

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