

There is No Such Thing as A Social Science

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In Defence of Peter Winch

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CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	iv
Introduction:	
<i>The Legendary Peter Winch and the Myth of 'Social Science'</i>	1
Chapter One:	
<i>Beyond Pluralism, Monism, Relativism, Realism etc.: Reassessing Peter Winch</i>	54
Chapter Two:	
<i>Winch and Linguistic Idealism</i>	145
Chapter Three:	
<i>Seeing Things for Themselves: Winch, Ethnography, Ethnomethodology and Social Studies.</i>	188
Chapter Three:	
<i>Winch and Conservatism: The Question of Philosophical Quietism</i>	236
Conclusion	289

Preface

It is now 50 years since the publication of Peter Winch's *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy (ISS)*. Fifty years on, Winch's book is no less controversial, no less relevant and no less read. Students in philosophy, anthropology, economics, politics, psychology and sociology, have and will continue to find Winch's arguments of central relevance to their own concerns.

The landscape of the social studies can appear to have changed somewhat over the past 50 years. Where Positivism was once dominant students are now confronted with what can appear like a marketplace of methodologies and theories. In many ways, and contrary to the orthodox understanding of Winch, this makes *ISS* even more relevant now than when it appeared in 1958. For this marketplace of methodologies and theories can obscure from view the common assumptions underpinning all of those approaches, assumptions that Winch's writings expose as seriously flawed.

Winch's arguments have been widely misunderstood. In this book we seek to offer both a corrective to some of the most widespread and pervasive of those misunderstandings and issue a call to genuine dialogue to those who still find themselves in disagreement with Winch's central concerns, as expressed in *ISS* (and a number of subsequent articles).

This book has been co-authored by the three of us. The three of us have been discussing Winch (and Wittgenstein) in various fora for much of our academic lives (for one of us that covers much of the 50 years since the publication of *ISS*). We co-organise (along with Dave Francis, Philippe Rouchy and Christian Greiffenhagen) the annual *Mind and Society* seminar series, hosted over the past 15 years in Manchester and Cambridge. We have met, along with graduate students and colleagues, on regular occasions over the years in the Senior Common Room at Manchester University and in the Grafton Arms, Manchester to discuss issues explored in the following pages.

Our chief debt of thanks, therefore, goes to all those who have attended *Mind and Society* over the years and those who have attended Wes Sharrock's Wednesday afternoon discussion group in the SCR (a venue which increasingly seems to be seen by the university as a corporate hospitality suite and banquet hall rather than a senior common room). These discussions are often the highlight of the week for those involved, a time when we can discuss and argue about those things that interest us most.

Phil would like to thank Madeleine Kennedy-Macfoy. Rupert would like to thank Juliette Harkin, Theodor Schatzki and the students who have attended his philosophy of social science class at UEA over the years. Wes would like to thank 'agreeable colleagues'. Any mistakes are ours, of course.