



Returning to Vico: The Role of the Individual in the Investigation of the Social Sciences*

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Abstract:

*This article deals with the discussion about the extent to which methods of investigation of natural sciences can be cross applied to the social sciences, and takes the point of view of the Italian political philosopher, rhetorician, historian, and jurist Giambattista Vico. In 1708, Vico pointed out key distinctions between what he thought to be appropriate methods of analysis for the social and natural sciences and the role of the individual as an important variable in his book *De Nostri Temporis Studiorum Ratione*. He believed in the superiority of maieutics to Cartesian logic in the application of the social sciences. To meaningfully investigate the social sciences, Vico explained that reductionist thinking was too limited; he suggested that there ought to be allowance for forms of knowledge beyond which the Cartesian process can surface. This is the path to the *verum-factum*, which is a form of comprehension achieved through truths held in the human mind as opposed to *verum-certum*, or certainties achieved through the Cartesian approach of unpacking what is true through empirical observation. Vico's analysis also provides an interesting explanation on where individual investigation fits the absence of credible rule-making institutions. For example, Brazil — a former Portuguese Colony — saw generations of Brazilians avoiding rules and precedents set by the Portuguese authority, which was oppressive and abusive. Human creativity was used to circumvent the rules, and created a culture of informal rules, which were adhered to instead of the rules that were codified.*

There is an old discussion about the extent to which methods of investigation of the natural sciences can be cross applied to the social sciences. There is a universe of argumentation on this question, which we will not attempt to replicate here. Rather, our goal is to highlight an individual point of view on the subject, that of the Italian political philosopher, rhetorician, historian, and jurist Giambattista Vico.

In 1708, Vico pointed to key distinctions between what he thought to be appropriate methods of analysis for the social and natural sciences in his *De Nostri Temporis Studiorum*

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Ratione. Importantly, he suggested that this process was not necessarily about the sciences themselves; rather, it hinged on the role of individual conception.

In taking up ways of knowing generally, as well as how we might understand the natural and social sciences in particular, Vico pointed to the role of the individual as an important variable. He reminded us that we ignore the lessons of the ancients at our peril — Vico eschewed reductionist thinking for the Greek and Roman traditions — and encouraged us to rely on rhetoric as a tool which we might use to comprehend the social and natural sciences.

Vico clearly believed in the superiority of maieutics to Cartesian logic in the application of the social sciences. The Cartesian method describes the world through observation, to point to what is systemic and predictable; it comprises precise labels and descriptions that can explain processes and point to results. But Vico argued that this method cannot meaningfully be applied to social sciences.

In the *De Antiquissima Italorum Sapientia* (1710), Vico famously argued that:

[...] to introduce geometrical method into practical life is 'like trying to go mad with the rules of reason,' attempting to proceed by a straight line among the tortuosities of life, as though human affairs were not ruled by capriciousness, temerity, opportunity, and chance. Similarly, to arrange a political speech according to the precepts of geometrical method is equivalent to stripping it of any acute remarks and to uttering nothing but pedestrian lines of argument.

Vico's masterwork, *Scienza Nuova*, was an extremely forward-thinking treatise which cut across all the social sciences. To meaningfully investigate the social sciences, Vico explained, reductionist thinking is too limited; he suggested that there ought to be allowance for forms of knowledge beyond which the Cartesian process can surface. This is the path to the *verum-factum*, which, Vico explained, is a form of comprehension achieved through truths held in the human mind as opposed to *verum-certum*, or certainties achieved through the Cartesian approach of unpacking what is true through empirical observation.

This is an important distinction; Vico explains that knowledge of the *verum-factum* can only extend to what an individual has him- or herself created, from buildings and computers to math and science. The role of the individual and the importance of individual investigation are thus central to what is a priori truth. This is in sharp contrast to the Cartesian approach of searching out and documenting what is objectively 'true'.

In explaining the process of human investigation and the role of the individual, Vico may have been channeling Aristotle, who in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, draws a line between *phronesis* (practical wisdom, which *cannot* be extrapolated into general laws) and *episteme* (knowledge through scientific method, which *can* be extrapolated into general laws).

To make these notions a bit more palatable, the social sciences prefer designations like 'credible' and 'not-credible' or 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable'. This leaves room for the *sensus communis*. As Aristotle suggested in *Topics*, the consensus consists in "those opinions accepted by everyone, or by the majority, or by the wise and among the wise, by all or most of them, or by those who are the most notable and having the highest reputation."

Consensus is an exercise in aligned individual creativity. It can agree and comport with or disagree and diverge from a rule-making authority. Vico makes the point that individuals have long taken the process of investigation into their own hands to achieve rules that are more credible and acceptable. Vico recognized this as a pattern across societies: that as individual minds form, a series of similar fundamental priorities for civil life takes shape. His *Sinopsi del diritto universale* — essentially the common denominator of his *De universi juris uno principio et fine uno liber unus* [1720]; *De constantia iurisprudens liber alter* [1721]; and *Notae in duos libros* [1722] — posits that all law comes from God as *diritto* — essentially a divine meta-architecture of truth and related rules — which is interpreted (either correctly or incorrectly) by individuals, rendering it *legge*. Vico focused on the consistency with which God's providence has surfaced by different individuals' acceptance of natural law and the execution of civil law; he complemented this analysis with a review of how various societies have interpreted these rules.

Vico's analysis also provides an interesting explanation of where individual investigation fits the absence of credible rule-making institutions. For example, Brazil — a former Portuguese Colony — saw generations of Brazilians avoiding rules and precedents set by the Portuguese authority, which was oppressive and abusive. Human creativity was used to circumvent the rules. This divergence from what was then authority became normative, and helped to create a culture of informal rules which were adhered to instead of what was codified. A term of art was even ascribed to this behavior: the "*jeitinho*" (in English, "an untranslatable term that corresponds roughly to a 'knack', 'twist', 'way' or 'fix'," according to Rosenn, 1971). Under the *Diritto universale*, the rules are set by the people, and what their consciences dictate.

Ultimately, Vico's views on the impracticality of Cartesian logic for the social sciences have not dissuaded generations of scholars from attempting to apply reductionist thinking to the field. The human commitment to so-called 'geometric thinking' is indeed strong. A particularly problematic result is legal positivism, which holds that the law is a closed system, logically organized, with hierarchical rules — essentially distilling law into a set of simple concepts to be combined and recombined to suit particular circumstances. Another byproduct is legal realism — a rejection of the positivistic conception of the scientific method — which holds that a legal decision will be made only by the discretionary power of the decision-maker. This approach glosses over the need for rationality, and generally rejects the role of consensus established between participants in a discourse as too close to positivism.

Virtus in medium est explained the ancients. Vico saw that the humanist tradition could accommodate logic, but suggested that meaningful investigation by individuals could be achieved through triangulation of theological, philosophical, and philological investigations to surface knowledge given through divine providence, through use of imagination and creativity (as opposed to Cartesian analysis), and by analysis of history, perhaps man's ultimate source of knowledge. This seems like a reasonable middle ground between the dogmatic conceptual approach of the positivists and the hyper-contextual empirical subjectivism of the realists.

Vico was a man centuries ahead of his time whose genius was sadly not recognized by the majority of his contemporaries. In a crushing bit of irony, positivism ruined his funeral:

the Marquis of Villarosa (who posthumously published Vico's autobiography) relates that at Vico's funeral, a dispute broke out among attendees as to which group was permitted to carry Vico's coffin to his final resting place; precedent was cited, rules were reviewed, but no clear answer was ascertained, and so the attendees simply abandoned his corpse.

Thankfully, Vico's genius was eventually recognized, and his insights have since achieved more reverential treatment. His emphasis on the role of the individual in the world — as not just a part of it, but as constantly transforming it — has taken our conceptions of what it means to investigate the social sciences at a far higher level.

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