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The Explanation of Social Action

John Levi Martin

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The Explanation of Social Action John Levi Martin
The Explanation of Social Action is a sustained critique of the conventional understanding of what it means to "explain" something in the social sciences. It makes the strong argument that the traditional understanding involves asking questions that have no clear foundation and provoke an unnecessary tension between lay and expert vocabularies. Drawing on the history and philosophy of the social sciences, John Levi Martin exposes the root of the problem as an attempt to counterpose two radically different types of answers to the question of why someone did a certain thing: first person and third person responses. The tendency is epitomized by attempts to explain human action in "causal" terms. This "causality" has little to do with reality and instead involves the creation and validation of abstract statements that almost no social scientist would defend literally.

This substitution of analysts' imaginations over actors' realities results from an intellectual history wherein social scientists began to distrust the self-understanding of actors in favor of fundamentally anti-democratic epistemologies. These were rooted most defensibly in a general understanding of an epistemic hiatus in social knowledge and least defensibly in the importation of practices of truth production from the hierarchical setting of institutions for the insane. Martin, instead of assuming that there is something fundamentally arbitrary about the cognitive schemes of actors, focuses on the nature of judgment. This implies the need for a social aesthetics, an understanding of the process whereby actors intuit intersubjectively valid qualities of complex social objects. In this thought-provoking and ambitious book, John Levi Martin argues that the most promising way forward to such a science of social aesthetics will involve a rigorous field theory.

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