

Titel: Ciencias culturales, [Uldall] 034-0300

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"CIENCIAS CULTURALES"

The status of the "ciencias culturales" vis-a-vis the exact sciences has often been debated, although no generally acceptable conclusion seems to have been reached. It is obvious that there are very considerable differences between the two groups of disciplines, but wherein exactly these differences consist and what is the reason for them, are questions which are not only difficult and complicated, but which are calculated to arouse a great deal of emotion.

The historians, who have, on the whole, been rather more vocal on the subject than their colleagues in the other "ciencias culturales", generally take the line that their material is so unstable, subject to such vacillations and sudden changes, that it is quite hopeless to try to systematise it; many ethnologists and sociologists, not to mention the unfortunate economists, feel the same way about it. Thus Burckhardt, in his Reflexiones sobre la historia universal, says that, "La historia es en realidad la menos científica de todas las ciencias, aunque nos transmite muchas cosas dignas de ser conocidas. Los conceptos bien perfilados tienen su cabida en la lógica, pero no en la historia, donde todo es fluctuante y aparece sujeto a constantes transiciones y mezclas. Los conceptos filosóficos e históricos tienen un carácter y un origen esencialmente distintos; los primeros deben ser tan fijos y tan cerrados como sea posible, los segundos por el contrario lo más flexibles y abiertos". This is, of course, a point of view, and it is understandable that a scholar who feels the very ground moving under his feet, should come to the conclusion that anything more than a mere description, in ordinary consensual terms, of the events within his observation is beyond his powers. Nevertheless, it remains unproved that the "fluctuante" of which the historian complains is inherent in the material and not in the method brought to bear upon it. There does not seem to be any reason to suppose, a priori, that the material of the exact sciences is in itself more stable than that of history, and yet the scientists have succeeded in applying those concepts fijos y cerrados which the historian declares himself unable to use.

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Toynbee, in his monumental work, A Study of History, presents a different argument, which obviously fails to convince himself, since he refuses to be deterred by it. There are three methods, he says, viz. history, science, and fiction, and each of these is suited to, in fact imposed by, different kinds of material. The historical method, "the ascertainment and record of particular facts is all that is possible in a field of study where the data happen to be few. The elucidation and formulation of laws [i.e. the scientific method] is both possible and necessary where the data are too numerous to tabulate but not too numerous to survey. The form of artistic creation and expression called fiction is the only technique that can be employed or is worth employing where the data are innumerable". Toynbee goes on to say that history, with no more than 21 civilised societies to deal with, cannot reasonably be asked to do more than it is doing, whereas anthropology, which has some 650 known primitive societies at its disposition, is just in the right situation to employ the scientific method. The argument, as has been mentioned, does not convince Toynbee himself, and, reasonable though it may seem at first blush, it should not be allowed to convince us either. We may concede