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GENERAL LAWS AND HISTORICAL GENERALIZATIONS IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES*

1. The Limits of Validity of a Generalization

A sociologist who has investigated a certain group of people, and analyzed the functioning of a certain number of institutions or social groups, and who then sets out to find a theoretical interpretation of his results, is often faced with a problem which may be defined as the problem of the limits of validity of a generalization. If he wants set up a theory, he needs to formulate his assertions as generally as possible to provide the widest possible validity. If, in addition, he is acquainted with the postulates of the methodology of science, he usually wants his propositions to be universal, free from limitations time and space, so that they may become scientific laws, since he is aware that statements of this type have many particularly valuable theoretical properties.1

If, on the other hand, the sociologist is cautious, he is also alert the fact that the more the limits of the validity of his theory exceed the investigated reality the greater is the danger of his statement being false.

The various types of statements met within the science, analyzed from the point of view of increasing risk of error involved, may be classified as follows:

1. Descriptive generalizations, in which the validity of the statement does not extend beyond the scope of its empirical

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1 See: Popper (1959).
evidence. It is obvious that in this type of generalization false statements are possible, but here the error may be due to faulty observation of experimental technique to the use of inadequate indicators or inadequate measurement of the phenomena investigated and not to any risk caused by inductive extrapolation.

2. Historical generalizations where the validity of the statement extends beyond the material examined, but where the validity is nevertheless limited by certain time-space co-ordinates or is limited in some other way analogous in theoretical outcome. Historical generalizations may be classified into two kinds, according to the degree of risk of error involved:

A. Historical generalizations based on material so selected that the sociologist is able to estimate how far his sample is representative of the population which his generalization concerns, and also estimate the chances that his assertions may be false. The case where the method involves the use of a random sample is an example of a situation in which the sociologist is able to formulate a statement on a given population, knowing the size of the risk that his statement may be false.

B. Historical generalizations based on material which, although derived from a certain population, is selected in such a way that the probability of error cannot be calculated with any exactitude. Such a situation is well known to historians who try to reconstruct the picture of an epoch on the basis of incomplete archival material.

At this stage there obviously exist all the previously mentioned dangers occurring in an analysis of descriptive generalizations. The indicators employed may be inadequate in view of the identified attitudes, while the archival material may be false or mistakenly interpreted. There arises here, however, an issue which does not occur with descriptive generalizations: i.e., they may be false because we have improperly assumed that the material examined is representative also of the material not examined; we were unjustified in assuming that within the boundaries laid down by the time-space co-ordinates of our generalization, the phenomena are uniform in their similarity to our sample.

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2 E.g., by giving the singular name of a community or culture for which the generalization is meant to be valid.