
“Partisanship” and the sciences

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Though there has been a great deal of discussion about the nature, or even the possibility, of objectivity in the social sciences, there has been much less interest in the problem of “partisanship” in these sciences, including in history. “Partisanship” is one of those words like “violence” or “nation” which conceal a variety of meanings beneath an apparently simple and homogeneous surface. It is more often used as a term of disapproval or (much more rarely) praised than defined, and when it is formally defined¹, definitions tend to be either selective or normative. In fact, the common usages of the term conceal a wide range of meanings, stretching from the unacceptably narrow to the platitudinously broad.

At its broadest it may merely be another way of denying the possibility of a purely objective and value-free science, a proposition from which few historians, social scientists and philosophers would today totally dissent. At the opposite extreme it is the willingness to subordinate the processes and findings of research to the requirements of the researcher’s ideological or political commitment and whatever this implies, including their subordination to the ideological or political authorities accepted by him or her; however much these may conflict with what these processes and findings would be without such dictation. More commonly, of course, the researcher internalizes these requirements which thus become characteristics of science, or rather (since partisanship implies an adversary) of the “right” science against the “wrong” science – of women’s history as against male chauvinist history, proletarian science as against bourgeois science etc.

In fact, there are probably two overlapping spectra, of which one expresses the various nuances of the objective political or ideological