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SOCIAL ANALYSIS AND SOCIAL ACTION

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My interest over the years has moved from the study of smaller social units to that of larger ones, from greater concern with conceptualization to an emphasis on the social relevance of social science and from a fair segregation of the role of the sociologist and the active citizen to a greater effort to articulate the two. In doing so, I believe my work reflects trends which affect social sciences in general and sociology in particular. I shall focus first on these trends and then briefly discuss a contribution I might have made to their extension.

Numerous sociological article begins with a definition of a new concept (or relationship) and a discussion of methods to be employed to measure it. Such a definition is frequently followed by presentation of some data relevant to the new concept and familiar sociological variables related to it as for instance, 'the distribution of elephantiasis by age and sex in the cities with a population of over one hundred thousand'. Most sociologists, the author included, feel that such combination of theory and methods forms the very foundation on which sociology as a science ought to be built. In fact, it is being constructed on such a foundation. But many of us also feel that something is lacking.

What is lacking most is *social analysis*, the systematic exploration of social issues, i.e., concern with the methodological questions of sociological analysis of the great issues of our age, which tend to involve the study of macroscopic units. Though the subject of social analysis revolves around the issues and not the sociological building stones, the primary focus is on the instruments which need to be utilized to elevate the analysis of societal issues to improve amateur, intuitive or journalistic sociology. Traditional training in sociology is

no more a preparation for social analysis than the type of training required in biophysics or biochemistry for medical practice. Social analysis requires special training as well as distinct methods, knowledge and a professional tradition. It requires more than a simple application of an existing body of knowledge to the study of a set of problems; it is also a question of studying the problems that application of sociology engenders. When sick, one would hardly exchange treatment by one MD for that of two Ph.D.'s in biology. Hence, to describe social analysis as a key element of sociological study and training is a call for the professionalization of sociology – for adding to sociology as a science (as the institutionalized desire to know) the systematic concern with the application of knowledge (the institutionalized desire to help) (see Parsons, 1959).

The subject matter of social analysis is all of substantive sociology. However, social analysis as a discipline does not replace the fields of political sociology, race relations or the study of stratification, but deals with the generic methodological, intellectual and professional problems which the substantive sociologies raise. Each of the substantive fields combine – in addition to information about the subject matter – three essential elements: (i) to study politics, (ii) to draw on a general theory and methodology, (iii) to be prepared to handle the generic problems of substantive analysis. The same problems would reappear if one were to study other substantive fields – for example, the sociology of religion or criminology – but would not hold if one were engaged in sociological theory per se or pure methodology.

Analysis: Substance and Problems

What is the substance of social analysis and what generic problems does its study raise? The focus and *raison d'être* of social analysis are the problems of the age, the application of sociology to the understanding of society, its major sub collectivities and a society's place in more encompassing communities. While biochemistry views 'blood' as a component with varying chemical compositions, medicine on the other hand, considers the same as infested with illnesses. It is hoped that in the future – when our knowledge of hematology reaches an advanced stage – the distinction might disappear altogether. Meanwhile, somebody had to be concerned with how to cure illnesses using the very partial biochemical information available. The methodological question of medicine is hence how to act under 'partial' information. Both sociological theory as well as research

slices society into social systems, role sets and reference groups. Social analysis is concerned with applying such concepts to the evolution of a world community, the redistribution of social wealth, efforts to advance the growth of human rights, the development of 'have-not' countries and so on. In general, we quite properly train students to achieve higher levels of precision by drawing better samples, using additional refined measures, new specified concepts, etc. As a consequence, the trained sociologist often shies away from the major segments of social data because for one reason or another he is unable to obtain the kind of precision we taught him to look for. Thus, the field of analysis of societal problems is often left wide open to social commentators who have no methodological training at all. We should develop and teach the methods to be applied when information is fragmentary and vague, as it often is, because the trained sociologist can still do much better, especially when he is trained to face this problem, than the uninitiated social observer.

A hardly novel historical approach to sociology serves to emphasize our position. We started with grand social theories, formulated in emotion-laden terms (e.g., progress), covering more or less all of history and all of mankind. We began by flying so high on the verbal trapeze that most of our propositions could not be pinned down and those that could often did not withstand empirical tests. Our grandiose designs, therefore, collapsed (see Mills, 1937).

Then, we foreswore high jumps; we preferred to advance step by step, even if it should take us a hundred years to learn to walk firmly, rather than engage again in breathtaking but also neck-breaking gymnastics (see Dexter, 1958). We sharpened our tools on the radio-listening of housewives and focused our concepts by observing small groups of college sophomores. Such concentration was essential for a transition period; but behaviour, which is quite suitable for student days, becomes an adolescent fixation when it dominates the behaviour of a mature man. While sociological theory ought to be further extended and methods of collecting and analyzing data improved, we should recognize that our wings have developed; we are now ready to fly. It would be an overreaction to our earlier misadventures to remain earthbound to a restrictive interpretation of our discipline, to delay a new test flight of social analysis.

Another reason we, as a profession, shy away from social analysis is our fear of value judgments which, is believed to be more rampant in social than in sociological analysis. In the period which has elapsed since the publication of my theoretical book *The Active Society*, one

no more a preparation for social analysis than the type of training required in biophysics or biochemistry for medical practice. Social analysis requires special training as well as distinct methods, knowledge and a professional tradition. It requires more than a simple application of an existing body of knowledge to the study of a set of problems; it is also a question of studying the problems that application of sociology engenders. When sick, one would hardly exchange treatment by one MD for that of two Ph.D.'s in biology. Hence, to describe social analysis as a key element of sociological study and training is a call for the professionalization of sociology – for adding to sociology as a science (as the institutionalized desire to know) the systematic concern with the application of knowledge (the institutionalized desire to help) (see Parsons, 1959).

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question that has been particularly raised more frequently than any other – How can I maintain that the theory advanced is both critical (i.e., normative) and objective? My answer is that in things which we are critical we take the human needs and values of those subjects to our study, the members of society, as our basis for evaluation. We compare various social structures in terms of the extent to which they are responsive to their members; asking what factors prevent them from being more responsive than they are and the conditions under which their responsiveness maybe increased. We thus do not evaluate a social structure in terms of our preferences but in terms of those of its members.

This position is hardly a novel one. Gunnar Myrdal (1944) followed a similar approach in *The American Dilemma*. He did not state that Americans were failing to live up to his creed, to his conception of equality, but to theirs. It remains to be shown that Marx's and Mannheim's positions are not too remote from this approach.

The theory is objective in the methodological sense that all empirically minded observers will reach the same conclusions. Whatever their varying personal values, they may observe the same discrepancy between the values the members of society hold and the way of life their society and its component institutions promote or tolerate.

In the past, mainstream sociologists argued that sociology must be neutral to be objective. The critics, on the other hand, are of the opinion that it cannot be neutral and urged that one's normative position ought to be explicitly stated. As long as this course is followed, sociology is either normatively sterile (at least it claims to be), or subjectively based, which undermines its scientific foundation. We suggest that *using the subjects' values rather than our own allows sociology to leave behind this either/or position.*

Another problem, which often arises is that the members of society – the subjects of our study – maybe inauthentically committed and unaware of their real needs and preferences. Our proposition is that firstly, one can *empirically* test when the declared preferences are the real ones and when they are not genuine (as for instance, when there is a significant gap between the declared and real needs, the respondents tend to be defensive about their positions) and secondly, the attributes of the real needs can be empirically determined.

The final point is essential to the whole approach and raises a surprising amount of emotional resistance among many mainstream sociologists while it is considered almost self-evident by many psychologists and psychoanalysts as well as by anthropologists. One

reason for the resistance is that many sociologists subscribe to what Dennis Wrong called the 'over-socialized' conception of man, i.e., they assume that human needs are highly pliable by society and culture. Individuals, groups and subcultures may deviate, but the society never does; it sets the norms. As observed, the social demands (or role expectations) that one society advances maybe less responsive to human nature than the one fostered by another society. In this sense, the former society maybe said to be deviant or more conflicting with human nature than the latter one. Of course, both society and human nature affect each other, but neither has a prior logic nor normative claim for the adjustment of the other.

Practice: Needs and Roles

Empirically, the gap between human needs and social roles can be measured by socialization costs, social control costs and the direction of pressure to change. To assess this, take 100 freshmen and put 50 at random into highly bureaucratic roles and the remaining 50 into a highly particularistic, diffuse, affective 'organization'. If our position is valid, you will see that it will be more difficult to train the freshmen to behave in accordance with bureaucratic norms than with particularistic ones. Sustained conformity will require more agents of social control and more frequent use of sanctions and when control slackens there will be much more pressure in the bureaucratic organization to shift toward particularistic conduct than the other way round. This would indicate that bureaucratic norms are less fulfilling of human needs than particularistic ones. The same method can be applied to other socio-cultural differences and other populations.

There is one catch – if the subjects come from a society which is highly bureaucratic (e.g., Prussia in the late nineteenth century), they may initially feel more 'comfortable' in extremely bureaucratic roles. However, if the study is continued, it is expected that they will adapt to non-bureaucratic norms much more easily than subjects hailing from highly particularistic backgrounds will to bureaucratic ones. Finally, we expect those individuals in roles more suitable to human nature, at least after a period of accommodation to their new roles, to be happier and less anxious than those in less fulfilling roles.

Two more arguments in favour of the present transformation towards a more critical sociology need to be examined. It is said that sociologists, by learning to walk, will find out how to fly. One can

learn from the fruit fly, as correctly suggested, new laws of genetics apply to all animals and plants. Similarly, we can derive from sophomores' chit-chat – the universal laws of interaction – which enriches our understanding of social behaviour in general. But while it is true that in this way we can learn the 'universal' elements of our theory – all the common chemical characteristics of water are represented in any drop – we cannot study the emergent properties of complex units in non-complex ones. We will not learn much about the anatomy of elephants by studying the anatomy of fruit flies. Hence, while we ought to continue to examine small groups for their own sake and for the light they cast on social behaviour in general, *we ought to invest more of our resources in macroscopic sociology.*

But, as a second line of defence in favour of our present low (though rising) investment in social analysis, it is said you cannot direct scientists and tell them what to study. If sociologists find race relations an unrespectable subject, unless it can be used to perfect survey methods or to redefine the concept of prejudice, what can we do? What we can do is to realize that the distribution of scientific resources is not random. It, however, does not follow a *laissez-faire* pattern and is 'interfered with' regularly. The distribution of sociological manpower is directly affected by the advantage of required courses, which as a rule include theory and research techniques over optional courses. These courses owe their endorsement to the following: (i) Ph.D. committees that approve and encourage some subjects and discourage others, (ii) foundations and federal agencies, which we believe, support some subjects to the neglect of others, (iii) space awarded in our journals and (iv) attention granted at professional meetings to some specific subjects over the others. All these are occasions where theory and methodology are celebrated while social analysis is given, at best second class citizenship.

Finally, sociological scientism is revealed in the aloof attitude toward social action of many members of our profession. This is a severe case of elephantiasis in which the scientist role of the sociologist has made deep inroads into his role as a member of the educated elite community. This is not only a question of being a bare citizen but of not living up to a special social obligation we have as persons' who know society proficiently. To indicate more clearly what I have in mind, let me point out another helpful term (for social as well as sociological analysis) – that of 'role pairs'. Role pairs are responsibilities which appear frequently together in a society, in the

sense that they are carried out by one and the same actor. The importance of such combinations is that they provide the most effective means of communication known between two roles – personal union. They also allow economy of resources, as observed in the housewife–mother pair, security and elevator boy combination, teacher–researcher, doctor–medical professor and the like.

The role pair of sociologist – intellectual is particularly an effective one. Not that all sociologists are intellectuals or vice versa, but there seems to have been a much higher degree of overlapping between the two in the previous generations. The growing tendency to dissociate the two roles is particularly regrettable because the virtue of such role combination has assumed greater importance in recent times than it used to be in the days when it was a more common phenomenon. For, now we command a body of theory and methodology as well as a store of validated knowledge about man-in-society which can provide the much-needed background for speculation about society. The social analysis of Daniel Bell, Lewis Coser, Nathan Glazer, David Riesman, Dennis Wrong and other sociologists who fill this role pair is much more hard-headed, soundly based and politically sophisticated than that provided by earlier social analysis or by their former college mates who majored in English literature and still interpret the American scene in the light of moods revealed in *Moby Dick* or 'understand' Russia because they suffered with Dostoevsky.

As a discipline we do not encourage, or at least do not train for, the sociologist–social commentator pairing of roles. In earlier days, the clergy and radical movements provided the sparks that fused sociological training with social concern. Nowadays, in the age of specialization, an increasing number of sociologists feel that what is proper behaviour in their role as scientists is the proper behaviour in their community role as well; the only way they face a social problem is through the lenses of theory and methodology.

The sociologist's role is pre-empting time, energy and resources that belong to his role as intellectual, as one who is committed to societal issues and expresses his concern about them more effectively than the other observers since he knows more about the society he is commenting upon. Thus, he not only appears to be against nuclear war, but applies his knowledge of society to understand why nations become inflexible in the face of such a danger. While doing so, he shares his analysis with those who seek to reduce the danger through political action but at the same time lack the benefits of the sociologists' training and expertise.

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