

"UNDERSTANDING A FOREIGN SOCIETY: A SOCIOLOGIST'S VIEW" *

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In presenting a sociologist's point of view in this symposium I feel compelled to begin by stating a matter of general principle. This session may be taken as evidence that American social scientists feel the study of foreign cultures to be a problem of increasing concern, and perhaps as evidence of the fact that they are not fully satisfied with the progress made to date. It seems appropriate to offer the caution, therefore, that our problem cannot properly be defined as one of developing a new science of foreign societies. There cannot be one social science for the study of one's own country, and a different one for the study of other nations. The task should properly be stated not as one of making our methods of research more adequate for the study of foreign societies, but of improving our conceptual tools and methodological equipment to make us more effective in the study of any society.

I should like, therefore, to point out some general features of the sociologist's orientation which suit him to the task of contributing to the understanding of social systems as such, keeping within the framework of this symposium only to the extent that my illustrative material will be drawn from experience in interdisciplinary research in the study of the Soviet Union.

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This is a first draft, which will be considerably revised before publication, and the reader is urged to keep this fact in mind. Critical comments will be appreciated.

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The sociologist who takes institutions as his data can, I believe, make a signal contribution to the understanding of any society through what may, for purposes of discussion here, be distinguished as three different foci of research.

In the first place, the sociologist can enrich the investigation of problems or areas legitimately regarded as the chief concern of disciplines other than sociology. Certainly the economist has prime responsibility for studying the production and distribution of goods and services, and he has the conceptual framework and the research methods to deal most effectively with such phenomena as the price mechanism, gross national output, and national income. But the units which the economist takes as the basic elements in his analysis of the process of production and distribution may be invested with important social meaning for the individuals who participate in those processes. The factory is not merely a productive unit capable of turning out so many automobiles per day, but is also a social organization invested with values and emotional affect by the participants.

For example, the size of the labor force and the factors governing its flow are central problems in the study of any contemporary economy. It would be setting up a straw man to pretend that our economists have not come a long way from the type of economic thinking which operated as if the behaviour of labor could be subsumed under the same general theory which accounted for the movement of raw materials in the market. But it is not inappropriate

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to stress that among the conditions which significantly affect the labor supply and its distribution among the various segments of the economy and between different occupations are social values which are not systematically treated in most systems of ~~conceptual schemes~~ ~~for~~ economic analysis.

To illustrate this point we may note recent Soviet experience with the problems of recruiting workers for industry. In 1940 the Soviet government instituted, and continues in force today, a system of state labor reserves based on an annual draft of about half a million youths between the ages of 14 and 17. The youths so mobilized are trained in industrial and craft schools, and upon completion of their training are obliged to work for four years at an enterprise designated by the state. Economic analysis of this measure has quite correctly stressed that it was in large degree necessary to get rural youth off the farms, which enjoy a labor surplus, and into industrial production, and it has also emphasized that this reluctance of the rural youth to enter industry is related to living conditions in the crowded industrial centers, and so on.

But significantly enough this analysis did not deal with the fact that there is apparently no necessity to draft farm youth for service as white collar employees in offices and trade occupations in the urban centers. Yet the increase in the size of such occupational categories has been roughly proportional to the increase in the size of the industrial labor force. Nor is the difficulty to be resolved in terms of differential wages, since the pay of workers

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of average skill is generally higher than that for comparable skill grades in the employee category. The basic explanation lies, of course, in the differential status evaluation placed by Soviet youths upon brain or white collar as against physical or industrial work.

The persistence of such sentiments in Soviet society, presumably a workers' state, has an interesting history which cannot be entered into here, but it is appropriate to note that such social sentiments constitute data which the sociologist is sensitive to, has been traditionally concerned with, and is particularly well equipped to study. Furthermore, sociological analysis may serve as an important adjunct to standard economic studies not only in connection with this particular problem of the symbolic significance which certain statuses in the occupational hierarchy may have for the members of any society, but equally in the treatment of other social aspects of the productive process such as the patterning of inter-personal relations in work groups, the relation of informal group patterns to the formal structure of authority and responsibility in the plant, and so on. None of this is to suggest that the sociologist can replace the economist in the analysis of national economies, nor that he stands equal to him in that task. It does strongly argue that taking account of the kinds of social forces in the economic realm with which the sociologist is particularly concerned not only adds to the depth of our understanding of the economic behaviour of man, but actually may contribute

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to more effective economic analysis as such.

A second phase of the sociologist's contribution to the understanding of any society derives from his traditional concern with certain areas of social life not systematically treated by any of the other disciplines, with the possible exception of anthropology. Aspects of any society such as the size and quality of population, institutions like the family, and phenomena like urbanism have long been foci of sociological theory and research. Clearly no adequate working grasp of any social system is possible which does not take account of these elements and attempt to integrate them into the total scheme of analysis. It would seem obvious, for example, that an understanding of Chinese society is not possible for any individual who is not equipped or prepared to treat systematically the singularly important influence of the family and kinship ties in China. Similarly, the sociologist's long standing concern with the phenomenon of social stratification makes him a strong candidate for a major role in any effort to analyze a caste society such as that found in India.

Once again the sociologist's potential contribution may be highlighted by an example drawn from research experience on the Soviet Union. A fundamental problem in assessing the political strengths and weaknesses of the Soviet regime arises from the fact that it enforces rigid restrictions on the expression of public sentiment to the extent that there is serious question among

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political scientists as to whether the leaders may not be so isolated from the feelings and sentiments of the population as to be unable to calculate the degree of popular support or opposition which may be met by an government venture.

The sociologist, as a result of his concern with the social role of mass communication is able to provide at least a partial answer. For an investigation of the flow of mass communication in the U. S. S. R. quickly highlights the crucial role in Soviet society of the several million Bolshevik agitators through whom the regime is able to maintain fairly constant and intimate contact with the rank and file of the population. By permitting what for Soviet conditions is a relatively free atmosphere of discussion in the daily sessions conducted by the agitator with the workers in his shop or farm brigade, by then collating the reactions of the population which the agitator is thus able to collect and which he passes up through the Party hierarchy to the national department of propaganda and agitation, the leaders are able to maintain a reasonably effective mechanism for determining the state of popular sentiment on many issues.

A third, and probably the most important, feature of the sociology of institutions which is significantly related to the understanding of social systems is its emphasis on what has come to be known as structural-functional analysis. Stated in its simplest terms this approach assumes that the particular institutions and institutional sub-systems in any society are not independent entities

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such that any type of family system, ^{for example,} ~~etc.~~ may be freely combined with any kind of occupational system. It assumes the combination of elements in any social system is not simply a product of historical accident or the chance impact of culture diffusion. In opposition to such principles, it states that the institutions in any society are meaningfully inter-related; that the whole forms a relatively integrated total structure; and that the various elements of that structure operate to support or facilitate the functioning of other institutions in such a way that significant changes in any one institution may be expected to force adjustment or to create dislocation in others and hence in the functioning of the total structure.

In anticipation of repeated criticism and misunderstanding on these points it is necessary to state that this formulation does not at all necessarily ignore the problems of disequilibrium in social systems. On the contrary, it provides a theoretical framework for treating such disequilibrium, unfortunately called "social pathology", in terms of the lack of integration between the elements of the total structure and the consequent strains on individuals in the performance of their roles in different institutions and institutional sub-systems. Neither does this approach necessarily constitute a veiled defense of any existing status quo. Indeed, it provides a more adequate basis for consideration of planned social change by highlighting institutional forces which might act to frustrate such programs in-so-far as they did not take

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account of the facts of the inter-relatedness of the components of the total structure.

The most obvious advantage of such an approach to societies lies in the fact that it focuses on the social system as a whole, rather than concentrating on discrete elements or aspects. In addition, it facilitates avoidance of monistic interpretations of developments in one realm of social life which in fact are profoundly affected by forces operating in other parts of the system. It serves, furthermore, to minimize the tendency towards theories characterized both by an idealistic and over-rationalistic explanation of the actions of men, and by what is in effect an abandonment of scientific analysis through resort to such essentially mystical concepts as the "force" of history and the "immutability" of human nature.

A brief example drawn from the history of Soviet social development is again appropriate at this point. Acting according to what was at least one logical interpretation of Marxist-Leninist doctrine, Soviet leaders adopted, in the early years of the regime, a radical series of measures concerning the school and the family. In the schools standard curricula were largely abandoned and subjects such as arithmetic were de-emphasized, the reigning assumption being that pupils would learn through doing, preparing for life in society by participating in group projects, visiting factories, and so on. The structure of authority in the school was completely revamped, the conduct of the class largely entrusted to the pupils

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themselves through the agency of the Young Communist League, and the teacher given little formal power over the pupils and in many respects subjected to their authority. In regard to the family, not only were legalized free abortion and virtually absolute freedom of divorce permitted, but the child was expected and encouraged to question the authority of his parents, and indeed was viewed as being competent to instruct and if necessary to control them by resort to denunciation before the authorities.

In the early and middle thirties there began a marked shift away from these policies in Soviet law and practice. In the school regular curricula were reintroduced, the teacher was restored to authority and eventually given control over the cells of the Young Communist League itself; discipline, order, and respect for authority became the standard and predominant emphases in the Soviet educational process. Related changes took place in the regime's attitude towards the family. Not only were measures taken to strengthen the family by eliminating free abortion and sharply restricting access to divorce, but the family was reinterpreted as a pillar on which the nation rested and the parents were re-defined as partners of the state on whom it had devolved responsibility for bringing up loyal, disciplined, hard-working citizens.

These marked shifts in Soviet policy may be and have been variously interpreted as products of the abandonment of Marxist principle by the regime's leaders, and as the completely unexceptional exercise by the state of its right to curb social abuses harmful to

its citizens. Both of these explanations undoubtedly contain an element of validity, but the first merely puts the question one step back as to why the leaders abandoned Marxist principle, and the second raises the new question of why a system once considered best suited to the society's needs came later to be defined as pernicious. It is suggested here that a structural-functional approach to the problem greatly facilitates an understanding of these changes in Soviet policy. Of the many elements which entered into this situation there is time to take only one for illustration.

In the interval between the adoption of the radical measures of the twenties and the beginning of the major shifts in Soviet policy in the thirties certain crucial changes took place in the structure of Soviet society. A major industrial organization was established and agricultural production was reorganized on a new basis of large scale collective units extensively worked by machine. In addition, the Soviet regime began building up large scale mechanized armed forces in anticipation of imminent military struggles. The Soviet Union's industry, its large scale mechanized agriculture, and its military program, particularly under the conditions of forced development which characterized Soviet institutions, required people of high discipline, capable of respecting and subordinating themselves to authority. But the early Soviet school system and the suspect family had encouraged development of a personality which distrusted authority, reacted negatively to discipline, and indeed believed in the virtue of thwarting the demands

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of both. The changes introduced into the pattern of Soviet education and the legal and social status of the family can thus be most meaningfully understood as an attempt on the part of the nation's leaders to adapt those institutions to the newly defined needs of the society for the inculcation of a different attitude towards authority during the process of socialization of the future citizens.

What has been presented here certainly does not begin to exhaust the list of the types of contribution which sociology can make to a general social science effort to understand foreign societies. It has, for example, been impossible to give proper weight to the importance of sociological experience in the study of social change, to the potential usefulness of the methods and findings of particular branches of the field such as the sociology of religion and of law, or to the applicability of the modest arsenal of field techniques of empirical research which has been developed in the last two decades. Neither was the material presented here intended to serve as a model for the sociological analysis of social systems. That task is well beyond the scope of this discussion, and would soon involve us with problems such as the inter-relations of motivational patterns and social structure, and others of the difficulties facing contemporary sociological theory and research.

Certainly the view presented here -- and this is perhaps worth stressing because of former misunderstandings -- does not press any claim for sociology as some kind of "queen bee" of the social sciences for which the other disciplines are necessary but distinctly

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secondary workers. Rather, the basic assumption on which these comments have been based is that an adequate understanding of any social system, at least so long as we remain some distance from integrated social science, depends on our ability and willingness to utilize the peculiar contributions of each of the disciplines. The crucial criterion must always be the definition of the problem, the basic question -- How can we insure that the contribution of any discipline which could enrich the analysis of this given problem will not be neglected? -- and, secondarily, -- Which discipline is best equipped to take the lead with this particular problem and most effectively utilize the contribution of the other disciplines within the framework of its own scheme of analysis? This effort requires humility on the part of the representatives of the individual disciplines in recognizing the limits on the contribution of their own field, and frankness on the part of the entire fraternity in admitting the very real limits on what social science can do by way of explaining foreign societies at a point in time when that science is unfortunately being much oversold in the public press and in government offices.