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# The Failure of the Social Sciences

By GLENN E. HOOVER

FOR SOME YEARS the prestige of the social scientists has been falling while the problems they were expected to solve have become more complex and more urgent. In this essay I shall attempt to summarize the criticism which has developed, and suggest some remedies.<sup>1</sup>

The fundamental cause of our disrepute is that we have contributed so little which the world finds useful. In the field of government, for instance, save for the introduction of the council-manager plan in some of our cities, there has been almost no improvement in our governmental machinery, either Federal, state or local, nor have the political scientists made the public conscious of the need for such improvements. The democratic process we profess to admire is but the "politics" we so genuinely despise, and electoral campaigns amuse or annoy more often than they enlighten. Political activity is regarded as a kind of vice, and progress in it is as unthinkable as in seduction or sedition. In the art of living together, whether at the level of the family, the community, the state or the nation, there are more signs of retrogression than of progress.

In the field of international relations our failure is so obvious that the point need not be labored, and our race and industrial relations are so bad that only our enemies can derive comfort from thinking of them. Dissatisfaction with the governmental direction of our economy is all but universal and, setting aside the achievements of our armed forces, even our war effort has many aspects of a WPA program con-

<sup>1</sup> The writer does not wish to add to the rather sterile discussion of the limits of the social sciences. At various times, he has been a student and practitioner in the fields of law, economics, political science and sociology, all of which are generally included.

ducted without limitations on either expenditures or the size of the national debt.

The public's attitude toward the social scientists is well exemplified by its reaction to the economists during the last decade. For as long as there was reasonably full employment and "million share days" on the New York Stock Exchange the public neither knew nor cared what the economists were doing. But as the Great Depression persisted the economists were put on the spot. They were asked if they knew what caused depressions or, more important, if they knew how to prevent them. The public became increasingly critical of a science to which, in the last generation, the American people had devoted more millions of dollars and more man-hours than all the rest of the world since time began; it had grown dissatisfied with the returns from its investment.

The replies of the economists were not too satisfactory. They said, with considerable truth, that they were not in positions of authority; that national policies are determined by the Congress and the President, and that these men are not normally trained in economics but rather in the law, which is not even included in the social sciences except by courtesy. Lawyers are concerned primarily with the settlement of property disputes in accordance with principles laid down in previous court decisions, and they face the past as squarely as true social scientists face the future. In short, the economists told their critics that their complaints should be addressed to Washington which alone had the power to alter the course of economic events.

The apologia of the economists would have been much stronger could they have said that their professional organization had exerted every effort to formulate a program for dealing with the depression and had submitted it to those in authority. However, they formulated no such program nor

did they even attempt to do so, and Washington was abandoned to its own intellectual resources. The Administration had no choice but to snatch its economic ideas from here, there and everywhere on a sort of catch-as-can basis. Those who fail to put their science at the service of their country in a time of national emergency largely deserve the criticism which the economists have received in such abundance.

There are some who believe that for any group of scientists to offer the government their concerted judgment on any controversial problem would be presumptuous, especially in view of the tentative nature of all scientific conclusions. But social programs cannot wait on final truth. Governments must act, and the social scientists should contribute, with appropriate modesty, what they have of information and of wisdom.

#### The Vice of Ethical Neutrality

THE SOCIAL SCIENTISTS have condemned themselves to relative futility by electing to remain neutral in their treatment of the social problems which are essentially ethical in character. Neither information nor logic have much to contribute in determining the "fairness" of wages or agricultural prices, or in examining the "right" to bargain collectively, or in arriving at a "just" distribution of the tax burden, or in deciding the alleged "unfairness" of proposals for the social appropriation of economic rent. Such problems are commonly described as economic, but they arise from conflicts of interests which can be settled only when agreement is reached on the ethical principles involved. This is the fundamental truth in the old adage that "questions are never settled until they are settled right."

But the social scientists have insisted on retaining what they call their "scientific objectivity." They like to be thought above the battle and they profess to be concerned, not with the course of events, but with the accumulation of knowledge. They erroneously assumed that they should be

as indifferent to ethical questions as the natural scientists are. They observed that the science of explosives was developed by chemists and physicists who never stopped to consider the propriety of bombing undefended cities. Because such questions seemed to lie outside the scope of the physical scientists, the social scientists would have no truck with them either, for they were determined to be as "objective" as their natural science colleagues.

What the social scientists failed to see was that if social problems were chiefly ethical in character, they, by preserving their "ethical neutrality," would restrict themselves to the sterile research and futile speculation that fills so many pages in the professional journals. By renouncing all interest in the outcome of social events they abandoned the field to the politicians, demagogues and charlatans. The surrender was both complete and ignominious.

**Other Factors Contributing to the Failure of the Social Sciences**  
THE USEFULNESS of the social scientists has been further impaired by excessive specialization. For example it is considered presumptuous for any economist to write or speak on any phase of the labor problem unless he is known as a specialist in that field. To acquire this reputation he must attend labor conventions, fraternize with union leaders, serve on wage boards and the like. As a result of such activities he will usually become a sort of labor advocate, and will be as unfitted to discuss the fundamentals of the various labor problems as is the ordinary trade union official.

Both the labor economist and the trade union official have come to depend on the continued existence of that monopoly poker game euphemistically known as "collective bargaining." Both will urge the continuation of that game and the retention of the Wagner Act which compels the employers to play it. The labor economists continue to repeat the old clichés, even after the logic of war has effectively supplanted collective bargaining with a system of governmentally deter-

mined wage rates. They defend the little world in which they are specialists and they have nothing to offer the revolutionary age in which we live.

In the same way many of the economists who have specialized in agricultural problems, as a result of this specialization, are less reliable councillors than they otherwise would be. The title of agricultural economist is traditionally restricted to those who have taught in an agricultural college or have been employed by the U. S. Department of Agriculture. Because it is not likely that an economist will continue in either of these employments for very long if he incurs the opposition of any of the nationally-organized farm groups, he starts with the premise that what is good for the farmer is good for the nation. From that premise he is pretty apt to support export bounties, protective duties, marketing restrictions, bogus sanitary regulations and all the rest of the deviltry by which the American farmer has alienated his customers abroad and is crowding the patience of his customers at home.

The social scientists have erred, too, in assuming that the increase of knowledge rather than its dissemination was their primary task. This assumption can be made by the natural scientists because those who can utilize the advances made in these fields will have a direct financial interest in adopting them. An improved strain of corn, a new metal alloy or an improved type of motor will spread rapidly enough around the world, but no one has a financial interest in propagating the truths discovered and formulated by the social scientists. The benefits of foreign trade, for example, are still as little understood as in the days of Adam Smith. The economists have long understood them, but instead of spreading that understanding by effective teaching, in and out of the classroom, they have frittered away their energies in the refinement of theories which were already too refined for effective use.

The social sciences, as the name implies, are those sciences

which can be applied *to* society, and in a democracy at least, are applied *by* society. The application of these sciences to our social problems must wait on general understanding and acceptance. It follows therefore that the truths of the social sciences must be persistently spread while in the natural sciences they need only be discovered, for business enterprisers and farmers will spread them soon enough. Because our social scientists have failed in their teaching function, our social problems have grown from bad to worse notwithstanding the accumulation of knowledge which was adequate for their solution. The time-lag between the formulation of a sound social program and the application of it may reach from here to chaos.

#### A New Type of Social Scientist

BEFORE THE WAR we social scientists were carried along by an uncritical faith in education which was so strong that, except in emergencies, there was little disposition to bring us to account and make us display our achievements. The public was vaguely convinced that science was wonderful, and by calling ourselves scientists we shared the honors bestowed on our natural science colleagues whose gadgets, remedies and inventions were paraded before our eyes and dinned into our ears by the skillful adepts of the advertising art.

But with the Army and Navy effectively installed in our colleges and universities our free ride has ended. Our futility which was only suspected in time of peace has been officially pronounced in time of war. Both the supply of and the demand for the social scientists are melting away. Teachers in our fields are being rather gleefully tagged by the local draft boards, and on the demand side, we shall have no students other than women and 4-F males until the War ends. Our draft-exempt practitioners (with some possible loss of dignity) have hurried into "refresher" courses so they may teach elementary courses in physics, mathematics, meteor-

ology and the like. Our profession was "expendable" but it did not, like the queens, die "proudly."

When peace is restored we can shift our eyes from the battlefields to the social problems we shall have in such abundance. Military heroes will then be a dime a dozen and the demand will be, not for men who can win wars, but for statesmen who can prevent them, who can see us safely through the period of demobilization, who can provide the institutional setting in which full employment can be maintained and in which all classes, races and nations can cultivate the art of living together.

We shall then need a new type of social scientist, half-scholar and half-warrior, who will both advise and fight in every good cause, whether federal, state or local. When issues arise which can be determined only by the voters, the new social scientists must carry their program to the people. They should recall that in the last century, John Bright and Richard Cobden, working almost alone, converted the British isles into a classroom, and convinced the British people of the folly and iniquity of governmental restrictions on international trade.

Since Bright and Cobden accomplished their miracle of mass education there have been hundreds of American economists who shared their beliefs, but they held themselves aloof from the democratic hurly-burly and accomplished almost nothing. They made no effective resistance to the protectionist trend which culminated in the fatal Smoot-Hawley tariff of 1930. Although more than a thousand of them urged President Hoover to veto that depression-making law, their appeal was rejected because they had neglected the adult education program with which Bright and Cobden had transformed public opinion in the British isles.

The ineffectiveness of American social scientists was also due to the fact that we have been only mediocre teachers in the classroom and very bad ones outside of it. Effective teaching requires a proficiency in the arts of writing and



speaking which were but little cultivated by our older scholars. There is scarcely a dozen of them whose writings on public questions are accepted by the better periodicals of general circulation. They write chiefly for the professional journals which offer little but stones and sawdust to a generation which is floundering in problems that threaten to overwhelm it. Many of these journals have so little reader appeal that they survive only because they are the official organs of certain professional societies or are published by the press of some university which is making an investment in prestige. They are no more designed to influence the course of human events than astronomical journals are designed to influence the course of the stars.

For a time there were high hopes that the radio might enable the social scientists to reach a wider audience but there is general complaint from the radio executives that our scholars speak even worse than they write. The long years spent in lecturing those whose attendance is compulsory has unfitted them to serve as tribunes of the people. We have no impelling message, no platform skill, no ability to coin a Churchillian phrase, no what-it-takes to hold either a lecture or a radio audience. There is a need for young scholars who can popularize the social sciences in our century as John Tyndall and Thomas Huxley popularized the natural sciences in the last one.

A new generation of social scientists will find the post-war era to be one of unusual opportunity, for men will be more critical of the old ways and old institutions whose defects became apparent in the bright light of the world conflagration. All our old problems, save the fear of Axis aggression, will be with us still, many of them more acute than ever. Their solutions have been postponed because of the need to concentrate on victory, but if the younger social scientists will focus their attention on them, their prestige will be greater than any their predecessors ever enjoyed.