

Culture and Synthesis in the Social Sciences

Author(s): Francis Neilson

Source: *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Apr., 1943), pp. 387-389

Published by: American Journal of Economics and Sociology, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3484106>

Accessed: 21-12-2020 23:54 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

American Journal of Economics and Sociology, Inc. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*

· C O M M E N T ·

Culture and Synthesis in the Social Sciences

[A reader of THE JOURNAL in Wellesley Hills, Mass., who prefers to remain anonymous and who did not write for publication, has sent in a communication in regard to the article, "Émile Mâle and the Spirit of Medieval Culture,"¹ in which he asserts that the study, "whatever its merits, has nothing to do with economics and sociology," and asks, "What is there of value to students of economics or sociology in this?" The question represents a challenge to the central thesis of the collaborators in this project, which is that constructive synthesis in the social sciences, without prejudice to specialization or departmentalization, is both possible and fruitful. As Dr. Alvin Johnson put it in an early issue, this position holds that "any practical social-economic problem is in itself organic."² THE JOURNAL welcomes not only discussions of its theses but challenges of the very notion that is its *raison d'être*. The author of the article has replied to the query in the following significant comment.—EDITOR'S NOTE.]

THE COMMUNICATION from THE JOURNAL's correspondent raises questions which interest me deeply. It is something of a shock to me to learn that culture in the fields of economics and sociology is taboo.

The dictionary defines the word sociology thus:

The science of the origin and evolution of society, or of the forms, institutions, and functions of human groups. Its subject matter is variously conceived to be society, culture, social institutions, collective behavior, or social interaction.

Surely the correspondent will acknowledge that Herbert Spencer was a sociologist. In his "First Principles" he deals with the very point of the article:

All early paintings and sculptures throughout Europe, were religious in subject—represented Christs, crucifixions, virgins, holy families, apostles, saints. They formed integral parts of church architecture, and were

¹ AM. JOUR. ECON. SOCIO., Vol. 2, No. 1 (Oct. 1942), pp. 15 ff.

² Alvin Johnson, "The Role of the Social Sciences in Political Reconstruction," *Ib.*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Jan. 1942), p. 92. Dr. Johnson continues: "It is never exclusively a problem of economics or sociology or political science. All three sciences—and a number of others—are involved."

among the means of exciting worship: as in Roman Catholic countries they still are.

Now if we are to exclude any of the refined activities of man from the fields of economics and sociology, we shall be guilty of undoing the work of Henry George³ who proved conclusively that the science of political economy was not, as formerly considered, "an arid and dismal science." I thought that George's treatment of the subject had won the approbation of friend and foe, not only because he clearly defined economic terms, but because he brought to the subject an astonishing amount of knowledge of cultural history which lifted it to higher planes of literary grandeur.

It grieves me to realize from the correspondent's comment that specialization in a subject has reached a point where there seems to be no return to the catholic spirit in literature which was certainly the charm of English writers. In narrowing the scope of economics and sociology, the critic is taking a particularly autocratic line, and, if he persists in it, I am afraid such works as "Progress and Poverty"⁴ and a good many histories will have to be burned because the authors have been so unfortunate as to deal with the exact sciences, art and religion. I have been under the impression that one of the great attractions of Henry George's work was its breadth and depth, covering the whole life of economic and political man. Most assuredly some of the best of his writing has been devoted to passages in which he seems to revel in a catholic spirit and treats us to many glimpses of acute understanding of various authors and subjects which heighten the joys of the reader.

Now if THE JOURNAL were to exclude articles upon culture (which includes the refinements of mankind), I wonder if it would be possible, the correspondent having his way, for us to accept essays upon Spengler's "Decline of the West" or Egon Friedell's "A Cultural History of the Modern Age." Both these works deal with economics and sociology, and their

³ The correspondent indicated that he, like the present writer, had been influenced by the contributions of the American, Henry George. Franz Oppenheimer has criticized George's contemporary, Alfred Marshall, on the ground that Marshall's conception of the field of economics would raid the domain of sociology; see his "A Post-Mortem on Cambridge Economics." For a summary of the recent controversy over sociology's "imperialistic" tendencies, see L. L. Bernard's investigation, "The Fields and Methods of Sociology."

⁴ This and other books by George are published by the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, New York. The best study of the catholicity of George's writings is by Professor George R. Geiger in "The Philosophy of Henry George," New York, Macmillan, 1934. For the works in the social sciences and the humanities which influenced George's thought, see my essay, "Henry George, the Scholar," New York, Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1940. George's scientific method has been ably analyzed by Professor Hiram Jome in his paper, "Henry George, the Scientist," New York, 1939.

authors were catholic-minded men who realized that man is a creature of many desires and aspirations. I do not know of a single important work that has been published that does not include culture in the broad sense of the term as part of the socio-economic system. If the evolution of culture is not a sociological subject, then surely the time has come when scholars should shut up shop and leave the publication of magazines to the dyed-in-the-wool specialist who would departmentalize every flimsy notion that attracts the intellect of modern man.

Perhaps I have grievously misunderstood several of the definite tendencies of the past twenty years which the acknowledged best thinkers of the time have hailed with delight. I have been under the impression that such sociologists as Spengler, Étienne Gilson, Friedell and, in some respects, Bergson were to be praised not only for their scholarship, but also for their breadth of vision, including the whole activities of man. Perhaps they were guilty of a license that should never have been countenanced; but the critic's comment about the article goes much farther afield, and, if it is carried to its utmost length, we may soon find that Einstein should never refer to art and that Max Planck in his book, "Where is Science Going?" exceeded the special requirements of essays on science when he referred to music, politics, war, psychology, and metaphysics.

Surely the title of the essay, "The Spirit of Medieval Culture," is sociological. As for the article itself, there is implied in it grandness of achievement under an economic system⁵ wherein a serf, having the benefit of about twelve acres of land, could, by a few weeks work (thirteen out of each year), produce sufficient to provide for himself and his family for the entire year. What was possible under that system is impossible under this and, as contrast is of assistance in helping to determine the worth of subjects we discuss, I thought it would be of interest to men of this day to spare an hour to study some aspects of a culture which produced many of the greatest monuments man has raised in literature, philosophy and architecture.

FRANCIS NEILSON

⁵The relation of culture to economy has been the subject of many useful recent investigations by Henri Pirenne, Amintore Fanfani, R. H. Tawney, Eileen Power and others. See, for example, Pirenne's *L'histoire du moyen-âge*, Eng. tr., "Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe," New York, Harcourt Brace, 1937, and especially Fanfani, *Cattolicesimo e protestantesimo nella Formazione storica del capitalismo*, Eng. tr., "Catholicism, Protestantism and Capitalism," London, Sheed and Ward, 1935, chapter II, "The Essence of Capitalism." For Professor Tawney's argument that the present economic system is rather a mode of life, determined by a spiritual orientation, than a system of organizing labor, see his "Religion and the Rise of Capitalism," London, 1929.