

Future of Sociological Research

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The Sociological Imagination, By C Wright Mills. New York. Oxford University Press. 1959. Pp 234. Price 6\$,

THE publication of *The Sociological Imagination* by Professor C Wright Mills provides an occasion to take stock of some of the recent currents of American sociology and their bearing upon sociological research in India. The book falls into two parts, the first being a critique of modern American sociology, its bureaucratic and ideological roles, while the second is of a more positive and programmatic character. The two parts may be separately treated without doing very great violence to the ideas developed by the author. In the present article attention will be devoted to the first part alone, and some references will also be made to certain popular styles not discussed by Wright Mills. This, of course, is not to deny the importance of the positive nature of Wright Mills's suggestion which some may find to be more useful than his criticisms and which, it is hoped, we will be able to discuss elsewhere (in a separate article).

Sociology in Disrepute

It has to be remembered that Professor Wright Mills has, in his own right, established himself as one of the leading figures of contemporary American sociology. His earlier books, and particularly *The Power Elite* (New York, 1956), have given hope that sociology in the United States may yet be taken out of its rut and fruitfully develop the classic tradition. Professor Mills writes with a keen sense of history and an awareness of the need to understand the relation between isolated social facts and the total social structure. He follows the classic tradition of Max Weber some of whose essays he has, in fact, translated and edited in collaboration with Hans Gerth. (*From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* edited by H E Gerth and C W Mills. London 1947).

Sociology in the United States has fallen into disrepute. This, in itself, is not alarming. What really is alarming is that few who are sensitive will fail to be convinced by Professor Wright Mills's argument

that this disrepute is indeed well-deserved.

Sociology has undergone a decline in the countries of its origin. France and Germany, understandably, as a consequence of the two world wars. Rightly or wrongly sociologists turn more and more to the United States for lead and inspiration in the development of their discipline. American sociology has come to dominate the world through sheer weight of numbers—number of University departments, number of books, number of journals, number of research programmes and also the number of Foundations. In the under-developed countries American sociology has the further fascination that it comes from a country which to many is an epitome of all that is scientific, modern and go-ahead.

People have found fault with American sociology for its lack of historical depth, its outlandish jargon and its puerile technicalities, Professor Mills believes, however, that there are more fundamental questions — questions of political and moral responsibility and of intellectual integrity. There has been a growing suspicion that much of the theoretical sophistry of contemporary sociology is a facade which has nothing but the most trivial and sterile ideas to stand upon. It is important that one of the most distinguished sociologists of contemporary America has come out with a forthright attack on this kind of sham and hypocrisy. There are many who will be offended by his critique; some may consider the attack to be overdone; but the book is a timely corrective to the abuses of the sociological tradition.

Modern American sociology is plagued with two very specific kinds of malady. These are referred to as Grand Theory on the one hand, and Abstracted Empiricism on the other. Grand Theory has achieved final perfection in the works of Talcott Parsons, admired by many as the greatest contemporary sociologist. The influence of Talcott Parsons is not confined to the United States, but

has spread to many countries, including India. Followers of this school of thought concentrate on the building of theoretical models in terms of what has been given the fashionable name of the Action Frame of Reference. Such models are, by their very nature, stripped of historical content and seek to present the general and specific features of Social Systems.

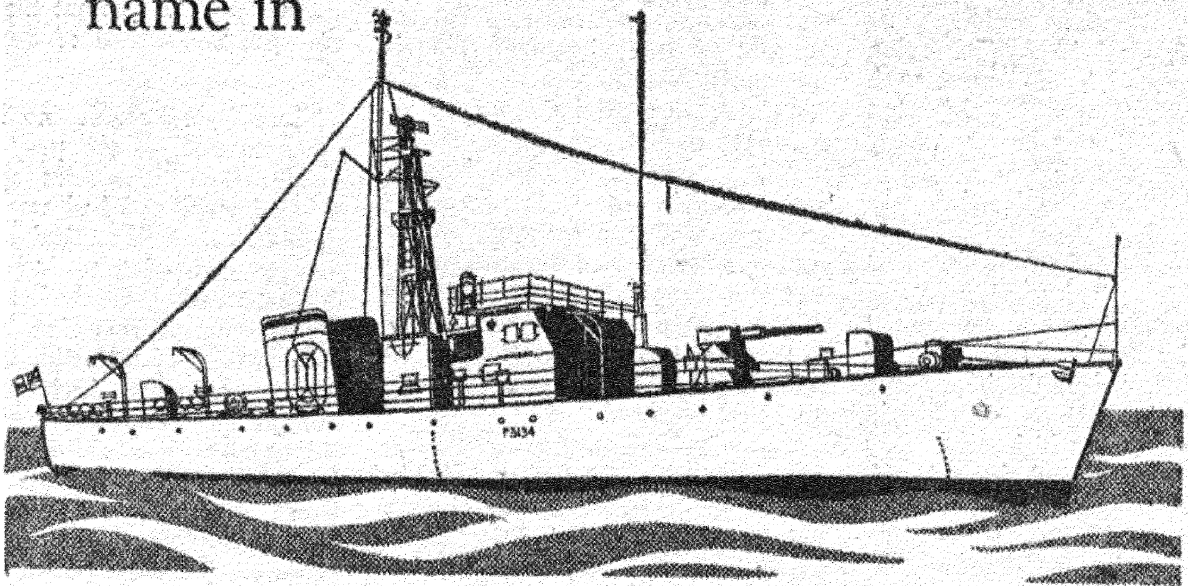
There is, of course, no harm in trying to analyse the properties of social systems, but there appear to be good ways and bad ways of doing this. Any theoretical discipline has, at some point, to deal with the abstract and general, but Grand Theory specialises in the re-fixations of abstractions. Grand Theory concerns itself with the building of various kinds of models of social systems, sub-systems and the "analytical" relations between them. A recent work along these lines is *Economy and Society* by Parsons and Smelser (Glencoe, 1956) which apparently is understood neither by economists nor by sociologists. Grand Theory is essentially deductive in approach, picking up empirical material here and there in order to give substance to its "analytical" models.

Talcott Parsons and His School

Talcott Parsons and his school have evolved a special style of exposition which appears to be particularly appropriate to their theoretical preoccupations. Grand Theory gives a safe berth to the observation and description of facts so that it may bring to bear all its adroitness in the "associating and dissociating of concepts." This leads very soon from sociological theory to problems of semantics. To meet the requirements of clear and precise conceptual analysis a new language has been created which, to say the least, is unintelligible. Wright Mills reproduces several passages from Talcott Parsons for which translations in ordinary English are thoughtfully provided. Not that Talcott Parsons alone writes in

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this style. The master has many able disciples, and here is a veritable tongue-twister from Marion Levy Jr:

"Functions refer to what is done, and structure refers to how (including in the meaning of "how" the concept "by what") what is done is done."

(*The Structure of Society*. Pp 60-61)

One may ask, what are the purposes subserved by this kind of theoretical style? Grand Theory has many functions to fulfil, some obvious, others not so obvious. To those who wish to achieve reputation as theorists without a patient and painstaking analysis of facts, it affords infinite opportunities for hair-splitting argumentation. To the gullible it is the acme of theoretical sophistication. Wright Mills believes that in the United States today Grand Theory has, in addition, an ideological role. By creating impressive models of the "integrated social system" out of meaningless words it diverts attention from the real distribution of power in society. Grand Theory, in ignoring history, has failed to take account of the dynamics of change. It has dealt almost exclusively with static models thereby justifying implicitly the *status quo*.

The real danger in this kind of theory is not only that it is sterile, but that it is so catching. The Action Frame of Reference has become a by-word among those whose self-esteem is flattered by their familiarity with difficult words, if Grand Theory has few ideas that are new, its language, at least, is very different from anything that ever existed before. Grand Theory, which in the hands of Talcott Parsons may or may not be a serious endeavour, has become among his followers a poor facade for ideas without coherence or meaning.

"Now all this raise., a sore point-intelligibility," The point becomes all the more sore when Grand Theory has to be considered in terms of the requirements of a University course. The followers of Grand Theory are not merely satisfied with the use of this kind of thing for their own research, but they would also like to make it a fundamental part of any theoretical training in sociology. The works of Talcott Parsons are making rapid inroads into University syllabuses, not only in the United States, but in this country as well. Since sociology in India is usually taught straight from the postgraduate level.

the student in some cases makes his first acquaintance with the subject through the works of Talcott Parsons. The experience, to say the least, is likely to be shattering.

The teaching of sociology in India at the post-graduate level is tied up with a special kind of problem—the problem of language. The difficulties of communicating through a foreign language have always existed, and seem to be particularly serious now in view of what many regard as a decline in the standard of English in Indian Universities. Students are hard put as it is to read and write through the medium of a foreign language. Their troubles are not likely to be reduced if, in addition to this, they have to master a vocabulary which trained scholars in Britain and America often find it impossible to comprehend. It is doubtful whether all those who are required to teach this kind of thing themselves fully understand what it is about. Students, at the best, can hope to memorise some of the master terms and disgorge them in their examination papers.

Most Methods Fewest Results

But Grand Theory, from the point of view of research, is a lesser evil when compared with Abstracted Empiricism. If Grand Theory is sterile, the other kind of thing is positively misleading. Abstracted Empiricism studies the interrelations of concrete social facts torn from their historical and structural matrices. Whereas Grand Theory is all-embracing in its generality. Abstracted Empiricism picks and chooses particular "variables" and studies their interconnections. Both have in common the fact that they ignore the existence of given historical structures, in the first case, in their relations to abstract theoretical models, and in the second case in their bearing upon the variations of particular social facts. Abstracted Empiricism, by choosing some variables rather than others, leads to conclusions that are often distorted, and sometimes false. The variables are chosen less in terms of their importance in a given historical context than for their adequacy with regard to The Scientific Method.

The increasing popularity of Abstracted Empiricism gives cogency to Poincare's statement about sociology that it is the science with the most methods and the fewest results.

Substantive studies are pushed into the background so that attention may be properly focussed on Methodology. Each methodologist begins afresh and expounds his own logic of procedure appropriate to his particular substantive studies which, however, are not always forthcoming. Part of this preoccupation with Methodology arises out of a desire to make sociology respectable by creating a place for it among the established sciences. Since great prestige attaches to the natural sciences today, if sociology cannot be ranked with the best kind of academic endeavour, it can, at least, be ranked with the second best. There are many who seek vicarious satisfaction in this manner, and sometimes this is evident from the very names they select for their works, as in the case of a book entitled *The Mathematical Biology of Social Behaviour* by N Rashevsky (Chicago. 1951).

Obsession with 'scientific methods' leads to the selection of problems that are trivial and without, intrinsic sociological significance. In fact, there are some sociologists of whom it may be said that they have methods, but no problems. Such people are, however, far from inactive. Among their many creations are what go by the names of Operational Research and Inter-Disciplinary Research. inter-Disciplinary Research calls for the co-operation of large teams of scientists and technicians, and this, as we shall presently see, has other than purely theoretical advantages.

Lazarsfeld has been one of the most enthusiastic advocates for the introduction of "mathematical thinking" into sociological theory. Two of his books which have gained wide acclaim in the United States and here are, *Mathematical Thinking in the Social Sciences* (Lazarsfeld. Paul E (e d.) Glencoe, 1954) and *The Language of Social Research* (Lazarsfeld. Paul F) and Rosenberg. Morris (eds.). Glencoe. 1955'). Such works are recommended to those who would achieve expertise in the application of multivariate and other types of analyst in social research.

There can be little doubt that precision adds greatly to the cogency of a theoretical exposition. Sometimes quantitative data reveal new insights that are not otherwise available. One of the classics of sociology. Durkheim's *Suicide* is a testimony to the merits of statistical

analysis when informed with a proper sociological insight. It may be recalled that the statistical techniques at Durkheim's disposal were limited, and some of the tools he used were crudely fashioned out by himself. Yet Durkheim was able to produce a masterly sociological analysis while today we have nothing but correlations and multivariate analyses of meaningless social facts. The difference lies fundamentally in this that Durkheim analysed social facts not merely as isolated variables but in terms of their place in the total social structure which was always the starting point of Durkheim's analyses. Those who do not work with any clear conception of the total social structure can only drift, and select problems which may be amenable to statistical analysis, but are without any intrinsic sociological significance.

Indifference to Institutional Setting

There is another basic difference between Durkheim's work and the work of modern sociometricians. The latter have erred when Durkheim specifically urged sociologists to avoid. Abstracted Empiricism tries to understand the institutional structure of society by simply studying the psychological reactions of individuals, ignoring thereby the difference between social facts and psychological facts. One needs only to turn to the works of Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown to realise that social facts cannot be reduced to psychological facts, and that a mere addition of individual reactions cannot lead to an understanding of the institutional structure.

Psychologism of this kind runs through the whole range of what goes under the rubric of Small Group Research. This kind of study, which requires the observation of human reactions under laboratory conditions, makes, in fact, little distinction between sociology and psychology. Needless to say that this can only lead to further confusions in both the branches of study. An example of a Small Group Study made with almost complete indifference to the institutional setting of human interactions is a book by George C Homans entitled *The Human Group*. (London, 1951). Here five groups are studied as comparable units in order to arrive at certain invariable relations between the "social elements". The groups are: (i) a work room in a modern Ame-

rican factory; (ii) an American street gang; (iii) the family in Tikopia; (iv) a New England town, and (v) a group of executives in an American company. This is Comparative Method with a vengeance.

However, the more sociology becomes laboratory-oriented, the more it becomes quantified and interdisciplinary, the easier it is to impress officials and the public about its practical utility. In the United States sociological research is rapidly becoming a part of bureaucratic activity. What Max Weber wrote fifty years ago about the alienation of the scholar from the means of his work seems more or less to be fulfilling itself in the case of sociology today. The sociologist is becoming increasingly a technician whose problems are dictated to him by the needs of large scale governmental and other bureaucracies. Lest it be thought that Wright Mills is unduly prejudiced against his colleagues, it may be mentioned that Robert Merton, one of the most popular figures in contemporary American sociology, has come to very much the same conclusions in his paper on *The Role of the Intellectual in Public Bureau-*

cracy, (in *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Glencoe, 1957).

Bureaucratic Ethos

The bureaucratic ethos seems to have pervaded social science research in America. What are its implications for the future of sociology in India? Certain kinds of sociological research appear to be more vulnerable to bureaucratic pressures than others. As long as the sociologist can depend upon his own field research, or his own library studies, he can keep himself detached from external pressures. On the other hand, certain kinds of research require large personnel, and these, in turn, depend for financial support upon governmental agencies or research foundations which appear to be fast increasing in number. Sociologists should be the last to harbour illusions that bureaucratic facilities can be made use of without submitting to bureaucratic pressures. Perhaps there is time to reconsider and to adopt once again the older type of work in which the sociologist was free to choose his own line of research, his own problems and his own methods.