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SOCIAL THEORY AND SOCIAL ACTION[1]

F. STUART CHAPIN
University of Minnesota

WHAT HAS social theory to say about social action? Since men do not act on biological motivations of hunger, fear and sex alone, but are guided by their underlying philosophy of economic, political and social relations, it is worth while to inquire into the connections between contemporary social theory and contemporary social action.

Clarification of thought about the complexities of contemporary social action may be promoted by the simplifying device of a two-fold division. We may mark off two different but over-lapping fields of social action. The first consists of planned social action directed toward goals. This is the area of decisive leadership, of legalistic political action in law-making and law enforcement, and of impulsive social reform movements. These forms of social action are interrelated and from them emerge the more personal social forces. The second field of social action consists of the unintended consequences that follow from the interrelationships among the personal social forces. Let us consider a few illustrations of unplanned consequences.

The unsettling effects upon the silver currencies of China and Mexico of the present silver purchase policy of the United States Government is an unplanned result of the relations between planned actions set up by the silver bloc in Congress and the plans of those

[1] Presidential address, Thirtieth Annual Meeting, American Sociological Society, New York City, December 30, 1935. The papers following this address in this number of the *Review* were all read at the same Annual Meeting, December 27–30, 1935.

who believe in a special monetary theory. In this field we observe the unplanned results of the interrelations of independently planned social actions. Thus unplanned combinations of blocs of interrelated human behaviors set up impersonal social forces not intended by the authors of particular plans. But unplanned results flow also from the combinations of individual acts. Thus we observe that a run on a bank leads to its closing and this to the failure of a creditor of the bank. We see the phenomena of hoarding contribute to a government's decision to go off gold.

These activities of hoarding or dishoarding of money are all the results of innumerable individual decisions. But since these decisions occur in a society equipped with a marvelously efficient network of communication agencies, the individual acts do not remain independent. They are cumulated, combined and transmitted with ever-increasing potential to remote areas, and there they may lead to results that are unplanned. We note that the crowd psychology of a panic undermines the basis of essentially sound business enterprises located in areas distant from the crisis.

All these cases illustrate how impersonal social forces may be set in motion by the unplanned combinations of independent individual behaviors. We call these phenomena impersonal social forces because the chain of cause and effect may be so long and complicated that the consequences cannot be interpreted as the realization of plans of particular persons. Furthermore, this type of phenomenon seems to be both more extended and more intense today than ever before. The reason appears to be found in the channels of transmission which are provided by modern mechanical agencies of communication and transportation. For centuries the interdependence of different regions and different nations was expressed in the structure of slow-moving foreign commerce. Today the telegraph, telephone, radio, newspaper, motion picture, airplane, automobile, railway and steamship line radiate information in a flash or move articles with speed. Consequently the formerly stable structure of social interdependence is subject to rude shocks and sudden pressures. This comes about because of the marvelously efficient network over which information and goods may be collected from widely separated sources and then move with increasing force through channels that converge on important centers.

Let us consider an example of planned and unplanned social action in combination. The Social Security Act represents a compromise be-

tween many forces each driving toward ends that different leaders regarded as socially-desirable goals. Experts on insurance, actuaries, economists, labor leaders and social workers, all led different factions who disagreed about the means to attain the goal of social security for the masses. Then there was the pressure of the Townsend old-age pension movement. This impulsive social reform gathered unto itself the spontaneous but unexpressed wish fantasies of that bewildered generation, the contemporary aged. Its panacea spread like wild-fire through the dry grass of hopeless yearning for security. Modern communication agencies facilitated its organization into a social movement. Congress and the executive were deluged with petitions. Political considerations of different sorts interfered with the Simon-pure expression of the plans of special groups and the Social Security Act came as the most practicable compromise of conflicting views. But out of the patch-work combination there may emerge certain unplanned results. The consequences of investing the huge reserves to be accumulated under the procedures of Federal Old-Age Benefits seem not to have been fully considered by those who were responsible for the final formulation. If the reserves[2] are to be invested in government bonds purchased during a boom period and hence stimulating to the investment market, what of the depreciating effects from the sale of bonds during a depression? Is this sort of investment of reserves not more likely to intensify the liquidation process at just the time when it needs checking?

We may now ask the question: Is there in social theory any counterpart to this rough dichotomy of the field of social action? It seems to me that there is. I would mark off an area to be called *normative* social theory from another area to be called *non-normative* social theory. Actually there is some over-lap but the dichotomy is useful because it leads to further distinctions, insights and meanings.

Under normative social theory I would include all utopian ideologies such as evangelical religious systems, the theory of social reform, the theory of state socialism, the theory of the communistic dictatorship of the proletariat, the theory of the coöperative commonwealth, etc. It is characteristic of all of these theories that they are concerned with formulating the principles that *should* guide social action in the use of appropriate means to the attainment of de-

[2] "The investment of unemployment reserves and business stability," Part IV, in A. H. Hansen, M. G. Murray, R. A. Stevenson, and B. M. Stewart, *A Program for Unemployment Insurance and Relief in the United States*, University of Minnesota Press, 1934, especially pp. 184–185, 194–195.

sired ends. In contrast, the non-normative theories include theories of interest, theories of profits, theories of monopoly, theories of business cycles, theories of crowd psychology, theories of the culture lag, theories of state functions, etc. It is a characteristic of these theories that they are concerned with formulating the principles of relationship that seem to explain the consequences that follow from certain sequences of social action. They occasionally try to do more than state how these occur; they sometimes attempt to explain why these occur.

In the area of overlap between the normative and the non-normative theories, there lie theories of sovereignty, theories of social progress, theories of social control, theories of value, etc. All these areas involve opinions.

In normative social theories we encounter value judgments that stress differences in kind. In the non-normative social theories we more frequently encounter quantity judgments that stress differences in degree within each kind. As a result of these differences, normative social theory is able to explain planned social action better than it can explain the unplanned results of the interrelated but independently planned social actions. The reason is that the mental set of the normative theorist is to explain results by treating impersonal consequences as if they were ends or goals. On the other hand, the non-normative social theorists are more successful in explaining why certain unplanned results follow from the interrelations of independently planned actions than they are in formulating the socially acceptable procedures that should be followed to attain a popularly desired goal. The reason is that the mental set of the non-normative social theorist is to abstract impersonal principles from social situations that were essentially personal in origin. This is part of his effort to be objective. But in so doing he may underweigh the role of human motivation, desire, mores, public opinion and value judgments. Out of these differences in mental set there arise the familiar controversies[3] that rage about the topic: What is the proper scientific method in sociology? The generalizing and synthesizing type tends to construct normative social theories and the analytical and investigative type tends to construct non-normative social theories. From the inter-play of criticisms between these two opposing groups of students there arise clarified ideas about the possible relationship of social theory to social action. In attempting to distinguish

[3] Bernard, L. L. "The Great Controversy," *Social Forces*, Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 64–72.

these two different trends in thought, I have no desire to offer a basis of reconciliation between them. Far be it from me to attempt to resolve a conflict in views which continues to be socially useful, because it forces the two sides to restate and clarify their concepts and theories.

The field of unplanned social action has been greatly extended and intensified by modern technological devices in communication and in transportation. Consider the consequences of conflict among government functions that follow when new government agencies are set up to attain ends described by utopian ideologies. Reflection upon this situation indicates the need of adjusting normative social theory to the facts of our mechanical age, so that we do not continue to plan social action as if single goals could be simply attained without setting up dangerous social and economic reverberations. Here non-normative social theory needs reformulation, so that it can be used to check expansive social action based upon inadequate theoretical assumptions. Too often these assumptions ignore the clear implications for social theory of the new mechanical devices of communication, which make almost too easy the establishment of new social structures. Right here it seems clear to me that the chief implication for social theory is that non-normative explanations must receive more consideration than hitherto, if we are to have a realistic social theory that squares with the expanding field of mass phenomena. The increase of mass phenomena of crowd psychology is greatly facilitated by machine communication used for propaganda; and the mass phenomena of specialization of economic function by social classes is promoted by the use of power machinery for quantity commodity production. Hence we need more widespread study of non-normative social theories. On the other hand, it is true that the expansion of the functions of government, local, state and national, requires that the narrow type of non-normative social theory be accommodated to the facts of human behavior. For, as social action is discharged through the social machinery of legalized political institutions, the role of opinion, desire and emotion, must be reckoned with.

All social theory must rely heavily upon concepts. In the early stages of formulation, purely verbal concepts that describe undisciplined impressions naturally play a major role. But if social theory is to advance beyond the dangers of verbalism of emotion and attain the stability given by objective experience, it is necessary that a

larger and larger proportion of social concepts be operationally defined. That is to say, social concepts should be more and more defined in terms of the operations and processes used in attempts to measure them or to test them by experiment. Now the significance of the operational definition of social concepts is only beginning to be appreciated. There are two reasons for this. First, it was necessary for sufficient time to elapse before the inadequacy of purely speculative social theory could be demonstrated. And this has certainly been done in a most decisive fashion during the present depression. Second, it required time and repeated experiment to construct dependable instruments of social measurement. In fact, this latter development is very slow to come, due to the absence of basic scientific training of young students in the social sciences, and due to the actual opposition of social scientists with interests that were primarily philosophical or normative. Nevertheless, there are a few indications of a beginning at the operational definition of social concepts. Examples of this development are the studies of public opinion by S. A. Rice and M. M. Willey, the more recent scales to measure social attitudes invented by C. Kirkpatrick and R. F. Sletto, the mores scales of C. C. Peters, the social status scales of Mary J. McCormick, F. S. Chapin and Alice Leahy, the studies in the definition of social contact or group contact by Dorothy Thomas and her associates, and the experimental studies of S. C. Dodd. In these we find illustrations of the operational definition of such social concepts as public opinion, social attitudes, mores, social status, social contact, and social experiment. So far as these concepts are involved in the formulation of social theory, operational definitions of them are now at hand.

The operational definition of the concepts of normative social theory, such as social class, wage slaves, proletariat, bourgeoise, socialite, aristocrat, plutocrat, etc., is difficult. On the other hand, the concepts of non-normative social theory, such as income velocity of money, transaction velocity of money, social change, invention, diffusion, social attitudes, social status and mores, are not so difficult to define operationally.

Since the mores are among the most widely used of concepts in social theory, let us examine more closely the operational definition of mores developed by C. C. Peters[4] in his attempt to measure the ways in which and the degree to which motion picture plays violate

[4] C. C. Peters, *Motion Pictures and Standards of Morality*, The Macmillan Co., 1933

the mores and thus perhaps undermine the morals of American youth. Peters performed the following operations in the construction of two of his many scales: one to measure the mores of socially democratic attitudes, and one to measure the mores of parental treatment of children. Starting with the hypothesis that the extent of badness or goodness could be measured "by the degree of shock indicated by the proportion of members of the group aroused to resentment by it,"[5] it was possible to get "these intangible and elusive social phenomena into quantitative form so that they could be subjected to statistical investigation." Thus there were collected from the observation of motion-picture scenes, and other sources, a large number of fragments of conduct. These were carefully written up and classified by pattern to discover gaps and to fill them with new scenes. In this way 82 scenes were found for democratic attitudes and 78 scenes of the treatment of children by parents. Next, these scenes were carefully calibrated, that is, given quantitative values for degree of "badness" after having five different groups of persons sort out the descriptions of movie-scene behavior into three piles. In one pile were those scenes felt intuitively to be more or less wrong, in another pile were those approved or admired, and an intermediate pile consisted of matter-of-course behavior. Thus the extent to which the scenes shocked members of society, and hence violated the mores, was indicated by the proportion of these readers in whom they aroused resentment or admiration. It is evident that when mores are defined in this way they are described in terms of the physical processes of behavior actually performed. Hence, to paraphrase Bridgman, the whole description reduces to an account of an actual physical experience, and must have the same validity as that of all direct observation of physical fact. It relies on sensory responses to clarify abstract thought. Moreover, such concepts, being framed in terms of operations actually performed in physical experience, must lead, at any stage of the research, to "conclusions in which room is left for future refinements within the uncertainties and approximations of our present physical operations."[6]

But before the importance of the operational definition of social concepts can be really understood, it is necessary to resolve a confusion in thought that is present in many discussions of the procedures of experiment and of measurement. The opinion that experiment can

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 8.
[6] P. W. Bridgman in *Scripta Mathematica*, Vol. 2, 1934, p. 1.

not be used in social research is an erroneous judgment. It is wrong because it is based upon a misconception of the real nature of experiment in the physical sciences. Now it is generally agreed that experiment is observation under conditions of control. This being so, the misconception creeps in when control is identified with or limited to the processes of physical manipulation. It is true, of course, that in the physical laboratory the scientist obtains control by manipulating devices that increase or reduce air pressure, or which raise or lower temperature, etc., but the real essence of this process is not the manipulation, it is the reading on the pressure gauge and on the thermometer scale. If the scientist went to the top of Pike's Peak he could find there already existing in nature a lowered air pressure and a lowered temperature identical with the laboratory readings on his pressure gauge and thermometer. As a matter of convenience and efficiency he reproduces artificially in the laboratory the conditions which he could have found in distant places, but the point is that control is attained when the measurements are the same.

In contrast to this advantageous laboratory situation, the argument runs that, because you can not physically manipulate human beings as you do materials in the physical laboratory, therefore you can not have experiment in social research. It is true that you can not produce an I.Q. of 50 in the laboratory by taking a normal person and subjecting him to such a degree of pressure that he becomes an imbecile, or produce a manic-depressive case by heating up a normal person. But this is not the point of the problem. You can go out and discover in society or in institutions individuals whose I.Q.'s measure 50. No social scientist wants to obtain control by physical manipulation of persons. He does not need to do this, for as soon as he has a valid scale to measure intelligence, social status, public opinion, social attitudes, etc., all that he has to do is to get measurements of representative groups of population on each of these scales. Then he *can control* intelligence, social status, social attitudes, etc., for purposes of experiment, *by selecting* a control group and an experimental group whose members have the same distribution of measurement on these scales. Having secured control by the device of selecting those individuals who show the same measurement on different variables, he may then proceed to the study of the way in which two uncontrolled variables are related. Thus while identical measurements indicative of control are obtained in the natural sciences by physical manipulation of the things studied, in social research the

similar measurements that are indicative of control are obtained by selection. In the one case there is *physical manipulation* of materials, in the other case there is *selection* of materials, but in both cases the final test of control is in the identity or *equivalence of measurements*. This being the case it is evident that the possibility of measurement determines the possibility of experiment, and the possibility of both measurement and experiment determines the possibility of getting an operational definition of concepts. Now measurement is merely quantitative description and is especially difficult to develop in the study of social relations. Nevertheless, the scales mentioned illustrate beginnings and as time passes there will no doubt be evidence of additional advances of this sort.

The most thoroughgoing illustration of the experimental method in sociology is the recent report of S. C. Dodd[7] of an experiment in rural hygiene in Syria. After some years of painstaking research in preparation and testing, he developed a scale to measure personal hygiene in terms of the behavior of native Syrians. Two samples were selected for study: an experimental village in which a hygiene program was to be put on; and equated control villages, without such a program. Before the program was put on in any of the villages, all were measured with the hygiene scale. After two years all the villages were again measured. Differences in the second scale position of the two samples was taken as a measure of the effects of the program, other things being as nearly as possible equal in terms of the precautions taken. This really important study is not widely known. Most reviewers of the book display an astonishing ignorance of scientific procedures. In fact, their reviews are little more than so many examples of indecent intellectual exposure.

Before leaving this point, however, we may clarify it a bit further by quoting a recent statement of Murchison. "Perhaps the chief characteristic of experimental science is that its ideas are simply names for certain series of operations that are highly reproducible. It is this quality of reproducibility that sets the operations of experimental science apart from the general operations of nature."[8]

What then is a *true* social theory? I have been careful to phrase the question in this way so that there may be no doubt about the point at issue. As phrased, the question implies that there is a true social

[7] S. C. Dodd, *A Controlled Experiment on Rural Hygiene in Syria*, American Press, Beirut, 1934.

[8] C. Murchison, "Pareto and Experimental Social Psychology," *Journal of Social Philosophy*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Oct. 1935.

theory which is evident in its finality, infallibility, or immutability. The question so phrased is without scientific meaning, because it implies the possibility of absolute formulations to describe and explain relational phenomena. We should, therefore, re-state the question, What are the criteria of a good or a *sound* social theory? Many answers could be made to this question. J. F. Brown[9] has suggested four criteria of a good theory: "(1) It should be economical in that it should be based on the fewest and simplest postulates, which will adequately integrate the experimental data. But economy must not be purchased at the price of neglect of facts; the best theories of today are *not* those most easily understood by sophomores. . . . (2) The best theory should be the only possible theory, i.e., the facts will not be as adequately explained by any other, and any other will contain contradictions. . . . (3) The best theory should be fruitful in the sense of leading to an accumulation of integrated facts. . . . (4) The theory must yield postulates to which universal assent may be obtained. . . ."

The rough dichotomy we have drawn among the patterns of social suggests a somewhat different set of conditions for a sound social theory. We contend, therefore, that sound social theory avoids connotations of any absolutistic categories. Sound social theory needs to be relativistic in the sense of being a statement of probabilities in the situation. It utilizes the tentative formulations of working hypotheses. Nevertheless it does postulate an arbitrarily selected but explicitly stated frame of reference to supply the points of departure for research. It utilizes concepts that are defined as far as possible by the operational method. That is, every social situation is to be described in terms of concepts which themselves are defined in terms of physical processes of experiment and measurement actually performed. Thus the use of the operational method to define concepts avoids the verbalism of emotional attitude, which embraces utopian ideologies that are serving as unconscious mechanisms of escape or of personal identification, and it substitutes for these a verbalism that is descriptive of objective experience. Then mathematical equations are *fitted* to observations and *not* used to *symbolize* a new word which is substituted for another word, which in turn merely ex-

[9] J. F. Brown, *The Mathematical Conceptions Underlying the Theory of Psychological and Social Fields*, Edwards Bros., 1935, pp. 25–26. For an example of the use of mathematical conceptions by implicit rather than explicit procedures and without the forbidding terminology of Brown, see F. Stuart Chapin's *Contemporary American Institutions*, Harper and Bros., 1935, especially pp. 319–352.

presses emotional attitude. A sound theory constitutes a logical system of relations among concepts, postulates and hypotheses, all of which taken singly are so many provisional tools used to interpret experience in a meaningful manner. It scrutinizes the discrepancies between levels of symbols: levels that begin with the more concrete symbolic substitutes for social reality and ascend to the more abstract symbolic substitutes. It examines such systems to insure that the transitions from level to level are logically made and do not depart from representations of reality to a degree that creates invalidating errors.

In conclusion, how may this sound social theory be applied as a guide to social action? The first application of sound social theory is to examine critically all utopian ideologies that underlie planned social action. The second application is to forecast consequences arising out of the unplanned combinations of those social actions that are independently planned. Hitherto the social scientist trained to do this work with competence has not been able to bring his technical knowledge to bear upon the problem in concrete cases. He has expressed his views in articles of a scholarly sort which probably never come to the attention of the public administrator or the business leader because they are tucked away in journals unknown to the public and couched in technical language unintelligible to most readers. He has been casually consulted, it is true, but in a purely chance contact.

But a change has come. State planning boards now exist as the needed social machinery to implement the function of the technical adviser. All projected legislation designed to achieve social and economic objectives by initiating changes in the existing structure of social organization should be referred to such planning boards for comment. There should be attached to such boards, as technical consultants, persons who are trained social scientists. Such persons should be actually advisory in the sense of being consulted *before* and *not after* administrative decision is made. They should render an expert opinion by stating the alternatives of social action and/or the probable consequences, and submit this statement to the proper public official or leader. Finally, this expert opinion should be considered and studied by administrators before the decision is announced publicly.