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## Humanistic Sociology: Phantom Movement or Reality ?

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I am at the moment concerned with just two questions. Both arose in connection with a hearing held recently at a California university. The hearing was convened at the request of a young sociology professor whose departmental personnel committee had voted to deny him tenure. The denial grounds were that his several articles and a book concerned with the development of so-called "humanistic sociology" do not constitute respectable social science.

Further, "Humanistic sociology is a phantom movement," the hearing committee members were told by the sociology department chairman who also serves as his department's personnel committee head. The hearing committee asked me as an "expert witness" if the department chairman's statement was accurate. When I gave the reasons why I thought it was not, the department chairman himself seemed mildly impressed. But he then took a new position. He said, "We're *all* humanists," explaining that since social scientists are humanists by definition, it is meaningless to use the term in a special descriptive sense.

There appears to be some general significance in the sentiments expressed by the quoted chairman. I therefore address myself to these two questions: Is there a phenomenon that can realistically be termed "humanistic sociology" ? and, Are all sociologists humanist ?

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\* Revised version of a paper presented at the 1973 meeting of the Pacific Sociological Association; portions of the paper have appeared in the author's *Sociology for a New Day* (New York : Random House, Inc., 1974) —Ed.

### Defining Humanism

Answers to the stated questions depend in part, of course, on what is meant by "humanistic". For present purposes, I define the term as belief that every human has potential worth and should have the opportunity to develop to the greatest extent possible consistent with the development of others.\* Corollary to this belief is the conviction that the belief can be implemented only in a society where equalitarianism and justice are basic values, and where truly democratic controls, due process, free inquiry, and free speech and press are meaningfully supported.

A humanistic sociology, therefore, is one which helps a society develop the characteristics indicated. And this means, in turn, that humanistic sociology is and must be value-committed in contrast to the value-free emphasis of the past; and its practitioners, to be effective, must typically engage in radical—i.e., fundamental, going to the root—analysis and action. But opting for such analysis and action does not imply that sentimentalism should replace science; it does not suggest that the humanistic perspective requires one to be soft-headed as well as soft-hearted, it does not take "...the distrust of reason as its model" (Bendix, 1970 : 741). As I indicate in another context (Hoult, 1974 : Ch. 4), properly controlled science can be an invaluable aid in reaching humanistic goals.

*It is obvious that humanism is a sheer faith. It has no more scientific basis than does traditional religion. But to its adherents, it is an utterly pragmatic view ; it is a version of enlightened self-interest, springing from a conviction that the alternatives to it contribute to a social order that is doomed to degradation if not total destruction.* One of the most likely alternatives today is the technocratic state conducted by "experts" who have but one prime value: mechanical efficiency. Such experts are 1984-types who, for example, did medical experiments in Nazi death camps, permitted known black American syphilis victims to die untreated so that specialized autopsy knowledge might be increased, and who today, under sponsorship of the U. S. Department of Defense, do health—and life-threatening research on human beings without their informed consent (Jacobs, 1972).

What can we do about the situation? Perhaps nothing, given the withdrawal tendencies and political indifference of so many of today's youth, together with other depressing political, economic, and ecological conditions. But if anything practical can be done, then the humanistic answer is to build a new society where justice is the watch-word and all individuals have a maximum of freedom tempered by a sense of responsibility for the welfare of others. Humanistic sociology's part in building such a society lies primarily in providing analysis and measuring techniques which pinpoint sources of injustice in such a way that observers are inspired to respond enthusiastically to appropriate calls for action.

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\* This is not humanism per se, according to philosopher Paul Kurtz (1969 : 9-11); he says it is merely one among several basic principles that many humanists agree are essential to a meaningful definition of their philosophy. It is nevertheless the aspect of humanism that I wish to emphasize here.

### Sociology as Pure Science

Although sociology proper began with the reformist ideas of Auguste Comte and others, the major thrust in the discipline has been, until very recently, to make it a pure rather than an applied science. The prevailing voices asserted that just as physics is to engineering, so should sociology be to social action. In the words of one pioneer sociologist, Franklin Henry Giddings :

we need men.....who will get busy with the adding machine and the logarithms, and give us *exact studies*, such as we get from the psychological laboratories.....*Sociology can be made an exact, quantitative science* if we can get industrious men interested in it (Bernard, 1909:196).

The view expressed by Giddings became so dominant that, by the 1930's, sociologists who spoke about helping others were commonly scorned as simplistic do-gooders afflicted with a social worker mentality. "In a graduate seminar led by a neo-Darwinian professor in the 1920's," Eldridge Sibley has recalled, "an adult student aroused only amused condescension when he asked, 'What has sociology done to make folks more kindly disposed toward one another?'" (1971 :14).

Rather than a "helping discipline," sociology was regarded as "ethically neutral" or "value-free" relative to ideological questions of the day. The practical implications of this view were given expression by the late George Lundberg in a widely quoted passage :

The services of *real* social scientists would be as indispensable to Fascists as to Communists and Democrats, just as are the services of physicists and physicians (1961 :57).

Therefore, Lundberg concluded, the social scientist need not be concerned with the nature of any given political regime; even a fascist government will let an apolitical technician alone, over the long run, because "No regime can get along without this technology" (pp.57-8). So, the proper political behavior for "*real* social scientists" is to be useful to the existing power structure even if it is despotic because after all "science has gone forward under a great variety of forms of government" (p.54).

I have emphasized that physical scientists are indispensable to any political regime. Social scientists might well work toward a corresponding status (Lundberg, 1961:57).

### The Structural-functional Point of View

The value-free approach to social events has been an important aspect of the structural-functional viewpoint. Some have regarded this view as a theory in its own right; others assert that it is nothing more than a new name for an approach as old as sociology itself (Davis, 1959). In any case, by concentrating on the negative or positive contributions of any social entity to the system of which it is a part, functionalists have usually avoided making moral judgments about, for example, political events. Instead they

have tried to ascertain the ways in which political regimes accomplish their manifest (obvious) and latent (hidden or unintended) purposes.

It should be noted, however, that some functionalists *have* cast judgment on the status quo. Karl Marx, for example, made a functional analysis of the economy and concluded that it "works," despite its manifest, injustices, only because laborers are misled by a "false consciousness." Therefore, the functional view does not force its users to be value free nor to support the established order (Merton, 1968:91-96). But many functionalists have used it to that end.

Status quo functionalists have become enthusiastic about the concept *system* which denotes any set of interrelated elements that may be regarded as a single entity. Popularity of the concept was insured when it was found that only within the framework of such a conceptual idea could electronic analyzing devices be utilized adequately. *System*, thus, gave an aura of "real science" to a discipline that was often unsystematic. In the words of Robert Friedrichs (1970:16), "'System' had an obviously attractive ring..." for sociologists who wanted to be known as scientists. The concept :

...anointed their work with the clarity of logic, (and) blessed it with a conceptual rigor that they associated with the more firmly established sciences.

"System" was admirably suited to the inclinations of value-free advocates because the concept generally connotes a set of nested sub-units interacting in dynamic equilibrium. If society is thus perceived, then continuity and stability are regarded as normal, and change and challenge as deviant. This being the case, there is ample justification for not making negative judgments about society. Instead, value-free system analysts asserted, the central problem for a truly objective social science is, first to, specify the "needs" (or, in systems language, "functional prerequisites") of societies and, second, indicate how to avoid upsetting an on-going process.

### Challenges to the Value-free Position

Politically neutral sociology has been challenged from time to time. Perhaps the most significant challenger relevant for present purposes was Robert S. Lynd (1939). In the late thirties, speaking for ahead of the time when significant numbers would listen to him, Lynd asserted that when it comes to anything that counts in human affairs, there is no such thing as a truly value-free position. When considered in terms of its consequences—and what matters other than consequences? Lynd asked it is clear that a value-free stance gives support to the existing order and is thus a commitment, a value stand. A Hitler can function with impunity if the intellectuals of his society tender him nothing but "benign neglect." With such "neutrality" he needs few storm troopers and secret police. Or, to bring the point closer to home, an American government can, with relative ease, commit the nation to an inhumane, exploitive war just so long as those who are most knowledgeable will say, "I take no stand on the war; I am a

scientist, and scientists do not indulge in value judgments regarding their subject matter."

In 1953, George Simpson published a monograph dealing with "Science as Morality." The morality of science—the moral order to which consistent scientists give their highest loyalty—is the rational society, the society based on reason. Thus:

The sociologist is reason in action, and he cannot rest content where non-rationality holds sway in our society, whether in the local community or the State. Moreover, social science needs certain conditions for its survival: Freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly; equality of opportunity so that it may tap resources throughout society; tolerance; and a political apparatus through which it can work for the application of its findings. The idea that as professional people we have no political role to play...is sheer nonsense when freedom is under attack even in our own country—and when is it not?—this is the road to the extinction of the sociologist (1953:45).

Criticism of ethical neutrality reached a new high with the late 1950's work of C. Wright Mills. He expressed his own evaluations in searing analyses of "white collar" workers, "the power elite," the causes of World War three, "the new men of power," and sociologists lacking in meaningful "sociological imagination."

The revolutionary events of the '60's—the black power movement, campus revolts, the Viet Nam war, government spying on civilians, inflation, urban riots—gave unparalleled impetus to a new sociology, (in the U.S.) one that evaluates and criticizes. One of the most notable new sociology papers was "Anti-Minotaur: The Myth of a Value-Free Sociology," published by Alvin Gouldner in 1962. Gouldner's paper seemed to open a floodgate, as symbolized by the 1955 appearance of *The New Sociology*, edited by Irving Louis Horowitz. By the end of the decade, Gouldner had produced *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1970); its central thesis is that sociology is at a turning point because the functionalist view that has prevailed—whether "value-free" or as a partner of the totalitarian-learning warfare-welfare state—cannot do what a sociology worth having ought to do. Therefore, Gouldner calls for the development of a radical sociology whose practitioners are self-understanding and self-controlled (i.e., "reflective") to such a degree that they can adequately help liberate humankind by combining needed social action with vital social analysis.

A remarkably similar conclusion was reached quite independently by Robert W. Friedrichs in his *A Sociology of Sociology* (1970), published within a month of Gouldner's...*Crisis*...in 1971, signaling the pervasiveness of the trend toward a new sociology, the American Sociological Association gave one of its most important awards to Friedrichs for his contribution to sociological theory. In the work that was the focus of the award, Friedrichs wrote (1970):

...the old scientist's tale that indifference to application is to be

justified by the value-free nature of science is sheer rubbish—but rubbish packaged so attractively and distributed so widely from so many admirable retail outlets that the scientist himself has become a “true believer.” He is even less aware of its role as a disguise cloaking his self-interest than is the general public (p. 163)...It would appear, then, that sociologists cannot even in principle claim the value-free label, that they must move beyond the priestly posture of neutrality and accept responsibility for value-laden action that is essentially prophetic in nature (p. 197).

Also significant is the recent revival of one of the two major schools of thought in social science. These two basic views are usually termed the *conflict* school and the *functional-structural* (or *consensus*) school. It is the former which, for a number of decades, has been neglected. As implied in William Chamblis' persuasive account (1973: 1-34), one of the reasons conflict theory fell out of favor was because it is politically inconvenient to those in power. It is such because it shows so clearly that the ruling elements of all societies have special power and privilege primarily because they control the major means of coercion and not because of general agreement that they are especially deserving or meritorious.

In contrast, functionalist theory stresses that those who control society do so because there is consensus that they should; corollary to such a view is the idea that the state is a prime instrument for promoting the common good. With such views, many functionalists readily become “establishment sociologists”\*; because they generally confine their studies to abstract discussions of how a society's various parts contribute to the whole, they do not raise critical questions about who particularly benefits from given social arrangements. “Whether they are studying war, social class, or deviant behavior, functionalists typically ask what functions it serves; the conflict approach adds: *for whom* is it functional?” (Chamblis 1973:5; italics added). The latter question frequently has the effect of laying bare the myths used by those in power to help maintain their special privileges and control over the masses, hence conflict theory is inherently critical of the status quo, unlike functionalism's generally bland acceptance of it.

### Humanistic Sociology

It is of course a matter of judgment, but it seems to me that recent events in the discipline, as outlined above, give substance to the claim that humanistic sociology is a real movement, not a phantom. At the very least, there now appears to be a sizable number of sociologists whose major interest is the establishment of a sociology that is variously denoted as

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\* “Lackey for the ruling class” is what they typically become, according to one radical analysis; as such, it is said, they often call for an “end to ideology; as a cover for their abandonment of radically—liberal social criticism in favor of a politically safer and personally more lucrative technocratic corporate-statism (see Kleinberg, 1973:10-12).

One cannot, of course, abandon abstractions altogether; they are the essence of scientific method. But the social scientist who constantly speaks in abstract terms, instead of getting down to cases, helps to perpetuate the status quo.....

"new," "reflexive," "radical," "existential," "evaluative," and so on. When viewed collectively, it seems appropriate to term all these sociologies *humanistic* since a chief characteristic of all of them is a pressing concern with improvement of the human condition.

The last observation brings up the second question with which this paper began: Are all sociologists humanistic? Is a chief characteristic of all "a pressing concern with improvement of the human condition?" The answer to this question is, again, a matter of judgment. My judgment is that all too few sociologists have been meaningfully humanistic. They may have inclinations in this direction, but in a number of cases one would have to scratch deeply to find evidence of humane concern.

As an example, I refer to the February 1973 issue of the *ASA Footnotes* in which a University of Washington sociologist, reacting to a recent conference, condemned fellow conferee Laura Nader as a "muckraker"; Ms. Nader had pointed out that many sociological concepts are implicitly elitist because those who formulate them are so often either complacent about, or fully agree with, the arbitrary hierarchical aspects of society. This does not seem like muckraking to me. Rather, it appears to be a realistic depiction of one aspect of a vitally important political-economic fact—namely, that one-third of the human species live "fat" largely by exploiting the other two-thirds. This fact is so well-founded by a variety of cross-cultural surveys of resource use and living levels, and is so basic in its implications for human society, that it should logically be a prime center of attention in any social science worthy of the name.

But it is obviously not a center of attention for many social scientists; some of these appear to be callously indifferent to the sad plight of the multitudes; no doubt others timidly prefer concentrating on abstractions that will not excite animosity among the politically powerful.

How militarists must treasure social scientists who carefully avoid speaking about "bombing out of a small country," choosing instead to describe "the parameters of political action." Scientists speaking thus are described by establishment authority as "certified realists," as "hard research personnel" (Roszak, 1969 : 143). Such personnel, whether they intend it or not, provide a gloss of respectability for the uglier aspects of power politics.

In contrast, when a humanistic social scientist, properly so-called, is confronted with a manure shovel, he or she calls it that or something more pungent, not trying to make the earthy elegant by speaking of "an implement designed for the manipulation of animal livings." Similarly, when reality prompts, the humanistic scientist graphically describes threats to kill

and burn hundreds of thousands of people; there is no making-do with misleading vocabulary such as "free fire zones" or "water-borne guard posts"; "search and destroy" is not sanitized to "search and clear," nor is bombing termed "reconnaissance in force."\* There is no use of "personnel management" to cover employer subversion of worker attempts to improve their lot. There is no "operation this or that" to disguise the possibility of megadeaths from hideous new weaponry. Thus, the scholar who legitimately claims to be a humanist does two things at least: he or she actively declines to help make science a craven hand-maiden for the politics of exploitation; at the same time, she or he uses science as the most effective means for ascertaining what is *really* going on in the world, in contrast to the misinformation that so many of those in power prefer to have the public believe. In sum, one cannot meaningfully speak of "*humanistic* social scientists" unless one is describing observers who view sociocultural events accurately as well as systematically, and who are simultaneously possessed by an overwhelming desire to have science used solely for the betterment of humankind in general. □

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\* Such were the common parlance used for ecocidal destruction of Viet Nam and Indo-China by the U.S. military propagandists.—Editor.

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A Scientific Workers' Forum (SWF) has been formed in Calcutta on 8 November 1974. An ad-hoc Executive Committee of 16 members was formed representing various institutions. Dr. Jyoti Dutta of Bose Institute and Shri H. Saha of Kalyani University were elected as President and General Secretary respectively. A provisional constitution was adopted. Formation of similar Forum organisations is now in progress at various places including Bombay, New Delhi, Bangalore, Kanpur, Pilani and Trivandrum.