
AUTHORS & CRITICS

A Reply to Mark Abrams

Can You Poll Values?

MARK ABRAMS' article "Changing Values" (ENCOUNTER, October) has the interesting purpose of "improving our understanding of the direction of, and potential for, social and political change." He seeks to do this by using the technique of the opinion poll to provide "reliable and valid measures of values in quantitative terms." (What other terms could a measurement be expressed in?) He fails for a number of reasons, fundamentally because the Poll technique cannot make the vital distinction between the people and the mass which Henry Fairlie very properly makes in "The Lessons of Watergate."

The mass is a conglomerate of units, the people a collection of highly differentiated persons. Statistical methods can only deal with the units of a conglomerate and, on subjects which are susceptible to measurement in units (such as money incomes or death rate), are indispensable. They cannot deal with subjects in which each respondent may count for more or less than a unit. For example, such methods are inapplicable to beliefs about values where a "Yes" to a particular question may indicate either a passionate affirmation for which a man would work or die, or a tepid preference for which he will not lift a finger.

His essay is not about "values" at all; it is about desires and preferences which are never values though sometimes based on value-judgments. A value, when it is not a market value, is what has intrinsic worth. Dr Abrams discusses what people want. Values are what people ought to want. Apart from one questionnaire which introduces the concept of desert, his polls are about what people wish to be the case. This is a perfectly respectable field of enquiry but *not* an enquiry into values. Dr Abrams makes it clear that he is using "value" in an unusual sense for he adopts a definition provided by Professor Rokeach under which a value is something which is socially or personally preferable to its opposite. That, at least, is fairly clear (just as Humpty-Dumpty made it clear what he meant by glory). But I have not been able to fathom what he means by "end-state", which would appear to imply something final and static

until we discover that *a life of pleasure* is an end-state. We are also supposed to find that *a comfortable life* is a terminal value of high significance, a description I should find more appropriate to *a comfortable death*.

It might be hoped that the expression of a preference would give some useful indication as to the value-beliefs on which it was based, but the clues can be totally misleading. I may prefer immediate gratification of a desire for grilled sole to a set of tickets for *The Ring* at Bayreuth next year. On his own premises Dr Abrams must assume, and report, that I value grilled sole more highly than *The Ring*, and he would be wrong. Perhaps I doubted my own or Bayreuth's survival until next year; perhaps I was desperately hungry at the time and this temporary condition overwhelmed my more enduring value-preference.

A COLLECTION OF STATISTICAL SAMPLES of the occurrence of certain preferences and wishes is in no sense a measurement of those preferences and wishes, still less of the values which may underlie them. Such things are not susceptible to measurement. If they were so susceptible, the aesthetic value of a piece of sculpture could be determined with a tape-measure. All the Opinion Poll can do is, not measure preferences, but to measure the frequency of their occurrence, a very different thing.

Abrams' first table brings out a further limitation in the method employed, namely the impossibility of framing a questionnaire dealing with complex issues such that the enumeration of answers can support a rational conclusion. Respondents were asked to say which seemed the most and the next most desirable of the following:

1. Maintain law and order in the nation.
2. Give the people more say in important political decisions.
3. Achieve a higher standard of living for everyone.
4. Protect freedom of speech.

This formulation is logically wicked. For a choice between several posited desiderata to be meaningful, the desiderata must be independent. These four are not independent. The achievement of the other three are all dependent on the maintenance of law and order. A respondent putting the defence of freedom of speech first has, by implication, really put the maintenance of law and order first. The people cannot have more say in anything unless freedom of speech is protected. The four desiderata are much more nearly a causally linked chain than four independents among which choice is possible. It is misleading and dangerous to suggest that a cause and its effect are alternative. Nobody can opt *for* something and *against* its necessary pre-

condition. This sort of *trahison des clercs* is a major cause of the disappointment at the non-fulfilment of unattainable expectations.

SIMILAR CONFUSIONS beset the tabulation of the *Perceived Present Standards of Living* for fifteen "broad socio-occupational groups." This looks innocent enough. But though the mass may be so sub-divided the people cannot be. Old-age pensioners, for example, perceived to have the lowest standard, include retired company directors who, prior to retirement, were perceived to have the highest standards, then plunged to the lowest. Many old-age pensioners are also investors and shareholders. I am myself dependent on income from investment but unfortunately do not reach my "perceived" standard. I fail to qualify on two out of the five criteria for affluence (these are all based on the possession of consumer-durables). Furthermore, on qualifying for the old-age pension, I expect a useful accretion of income rather than a plunge to the lowest standard. The trouble is that this class division (I use the term in a logical rather than a Marxist sense) will not do. The broad socio-occupational groups are not exclusive, many persons belong to two or more of the groups. Even more important, the variations of standard *within* a class are much wider than the "perceived" variations between classes.

AFTER ASKING the respondents what they perceived to be the standards of these overlapping classes, the interviewers went on to ask them what they thought should be the deserved standard of each class. Here we are getting nearer to a question of values, since desert is a moral concept. But the issue is clouded by the human proclivity to rate one's own desert too highly. The survey reports "a large and widespread sense of 'relative deprivation'." But since this only represents the natural tendency of each respondent to over-rate his own desert the impressive verbiage carries no profound social or political message. It is interesting that while the respondents thought that the gap between themselves and the highest-paid group should be reduced from 2.9 to 1.1, they also believed that the gap between themselves and the lowest-paid class should not be reduced at all.

In the light of this finding it is hard to see how Dr Abrams reaches his final general conclusion that the pressure for greater economic equality makes it essential to move towards such equality. What the figures throughout the article show is that most people wish for an absolute improvement in their own circumstances *and* a relative improvement in their own circumstances com-

pared to their neighbours. This is very far from a compulsive pressure for Equality. Position in the "pecking order" is valued at least as highly as the equality that would abolish any pecking order.

On the subject of greater economic equality the survey departs into Cloud-cuckoo land. This greater equality would be achieved, we are told, "in part, by holding down or even reducing the standard of living of some groups and, in part, by raising sharply the living standards of those now seen to be very poor." Now, since holding down or even reducing a few will not produce a fund able to raise sharply the standards of many, we are given no clue as to how this might be done. By borrowing? Yes, if enough lenders could be found. But the process would collapse when debts came to be repaid. Governments may decree how a cake is to be divided, even if this has side-effects on the size of the cake; but they cannot decree that the cake be bigger.

DR ABRAMS' OTHER MAIN CONCLUSION is that the "classical Protestant-capitalist-middle-class prescription for the good life—the postponement of gratification of desires and pleasures" is not now accepted by the majority. It is, however, doubtful whether this represents any change in underlying value-beliefs (though it is a change of value in the Rokeach-Abrams private language). The old-fashioned belief has been eroded by a change in contingent circumstances, not necessarily by any loss of faith in the defining values. It was always the case (in the said Protestant-capitalist-middle-class prescription) that a postponed gratification had to be rationally discounted down the time scale. But, when the purchasing power of money was stable, the postponement of gratification by saving increased the eventual amount of gratification. When the purchasing power of money is declining by some 20% per annum and when the rate of interest, though high, is still negative in relation to the depreciation of money, any postponement of gratification leads to a decrease in its eventual amount. A policy that was once sensible and rewarding is now daft. It is theoretically possible that this change might be reversed if governments had the courage and strength to stop Inflation.

IT BECOMES EVIDENT that the uses of Opinion Polls are limited. When the questions can be clearly defined, when the alternative choices are clear-cut, independent, and mutually exclusive, then the results are instructive. This is the case with the Polls reflecting the current support of political parties. No respondent can vote for more than one party. The parties are independent entities, their number is small and their membership does not overlap. The main elements

limiting predictive value of such polls are that a respondent may change his mind and, more important, may not bother to register his preference by casting his vote on polling-day. This is, of course, recognised by responsible pollsters who make no claim to prophesy—only to record a state of opinion at a given time. Similarly, such surveys can be very useful in market research devoted to a narrow range of projects.

Unfortunately, in more complex fields the difficulties of classification and the impossibility of drafting simple questions that are both meaningful and admit of unqualified answers render the technique of the opinion poll inapplicable. Complex problems seldom admit of simple questions or unqualified answers.

F. H. Keenlyside

MR KEENLYSIDE'S MISUNDERSTANDINGS are so numerous that I find it simplest to comment on them, not in the order of their importance, but rather in the order in which he presents them in his statement.

1. I fail to "make the vital distinction between the people and the mass." I do so because I regard any such distinction as false. It is a distinction still occasionally used either by demagogues who pretend that "mass" or "masses" denotes something finer and more compelling than "people", or by self-appointed élitists seeking a blanket insult to convey their conviction that the underlying population constitutes a sub-human species.

2. Of course the strength with which people hold convictions may vary enormously from "passionate affirmation" to a "tepid preference", and that is why for at least the past forty years those concerned with measuring attitudes and beliefs have developed scales which measure the saliency of each person's attitudes and beliefs. For example, when in our survey we asked people how much social equality they would like to see in Britain they were asked to use a 0-to-10 scale to indicate the strength of their views and some people "tepidly" replied with a score of 5 or 6 and others "passionately affirmed" a score of 10. Their replies were not treated as identical.

3. Mr Keenlyside is free to define "value" in any way that pleases him. I prefer to use it in the way it is generally employed by social scientists, i.e. an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end is "good" and that this goodness is best expressed in relation to its converse. For example, the belief that "freedom" is a value

embraces a rejection of its converse "slavery."

4. It might help Mr Keenlyside to understand what is meant by an "end-state" if he bears in mind the distinction commonly made between means and ends.

5. If Mr Keenlyside *persistently* preferred grilled sole to hearing *The Ring* at Bayreuth then he would be indicating something about his values.

6. The fact that Mr Keenlyside regards the four choices offered to respondents as a piece of "wicked logic" would seem to me to be a measure of his remoteness from the real world. He declares that three of the four are "all dependent on the maintenance of law and order" and that "by implication" no matter what the respondent says he "really puts the maintenance of law and order first." At least my morning newspaper (if not his) reports that currently there are people throughout the world who are prepared to sacrifice their liberty and, if necessary, their lives because they feel that freedom of speech and democratic government are more important than "law and order."

7. I know that among the retired population there are some affluent investors and shareholders, but I am also sure that when the phrase "old-age pensioners" is used most people understand it to mean those retired people whose main source of income is a State pension that is received as part of the national social security system.

8. I did not conclude that there is "a compulsive pressure for Equality." What I wrote was: "[this] is an egalitarianism that is both tinged by envy and held in check by deference towards their traditional 'betters' and by continuing undervaluation of society's traditional underdogs" (p. 32).

9. I offered "no clue" as to how to raise the standard of living of the many since the enquiry was not concerned to discover such clues. People who want a higher standard of living through a redistribution of income and wealth may (as Mr Keenlyside says) be living in a Cloud-cuckoo land; but their conviction that this is possible is very much a reality.

10. Mr Keenlyside's assertion that the abandonment of the "Protestant virtue" of saving and investing for the future is a rational response to the present state of 20% annual decline in the value of money is typically unhistorical. For at least the past 25 years the unique distinction of British society is the very high proportion of the national income devoted to consumption and, therefore the very low proportion going into saving and investment. This was true even when the annual rate of inflation was no more than 3% or 4%.

Mark Abrams

POOR GRAMMAR: A new "battle of the books" has broken out in German education with the revolt of parents against new required readings for children which has taken place in the state of Oldenburg. A new textbook, introduced after the progressive reform movement of recent years, "Drucksachen" (Printed Matter) has been popularly referred to as "Drecksachen" (Dirty Stuff). Among the authors represented in the readings for children is Ulrike Meinhof, currently on trial for anarcho-terroristic activities. Among the features of the new textbook is a special list of terms with which children can conveniently express their "alienation" by abusing the teachers ("Arschgeiger . . . Einpeitscher . . . etc."). On page 61 there is a passage which is supposed to represent modern wisdom on the subject of Grammar: ". . . There is, after all, no real agreement as to what constitutes proper speech or writing. Language is created by the poor, and it is the poor classes which renew it and keep it vital. And it is the rich who give it a class rigidity, in order to be able to look down on those who do not use the language as they do. . . ."

DIE WELT

DRACO'S DEATH: "Draconian" seemed a curiously inappropriate adjective to pick for Roy Jenkins's anti-terrorist measures. Perhaps he was making an unconscious concession to the growing feeling that capital punishment should have been among them.

The whole point about the punishments prescribed by Draco in Athens in the seventh century B.C. was that the death penalty applied not merely to murder but to almost everything else as well. As Plutarch noted, "those that were convicted of idleness were to die, and those that stole a cabbage or an apple."

Possibly Mr Jenkins had forgotten Draco's answer when asked why he made death the penalty for so long a list of offences: "Small ones deserve that, and I have no higher for the greater crimes."

DAILY TELEGRAPH

TRANSVERBIAL TORTUOSITY: There must surely somewhere be a reader with a secret wish to buy a dog and call him Spot, purely for the pleasure, when evicting him into the garden, of saying "Out, damned Spot!"

It is probable that the crossword craze which migrated from America and began to take hold in this country some 50 years ago has greatly increased this tendency to play with words, so that today one instantly recognizes the ability of a cart-horse to wreck an orchestra, or that of a decorator to re-design the Trocadero, while we do not need to be told that an exploding grenade tends to derange a grandee, making him angered or even enraged.

A chopstick is seen not only as a singularly

musical aid to eating in the Orient but also as comprising two remarkably antonymous synonyms of the verb "to cleave". Mary is famous not for reorganising the army (since Myra has an equal claim) but as the girl who extended the oyster season by one month (by putting an r into May of course).

All this is nothing new. Shakespeare punned with the best of them: "Is this the fine of his fines . . . to have his fine pate full of fine dirt?" asks Hamlet concerning the skull of one who may have been a lawyer. Bacon was a master of the anagram, but whether that well-known word in Act 5 Scene 1 of Love's Labour's Lost was created as an anagram of "Hi ludi, F Baconis nati, tuiti orbi" (These plays, born of F. Bacon, are preserved for the world) or vice versa, I am not sure. There is no truth in the rumour that the size of The Times Jumbo Crossword, 27 squares by 27, was dictated by the length of this monster word honorificabilitudinitatibus.

THE TIMES

IGNOBLE SAVAGE: Why bring Rousseau into it? We saw [Alan Watkins writes] Mr Heath's speech-writer, the Hon. William Waldegrave, sitting in a bus and discoursing toughly on phasing and timing in the campaign, for all the world as if he were an American or something. Mr Waldegrave is of humane education and is clearly a bright lad.

Why is he behaving in this way? Why is he writing the kind of rubbish that politicians want? Why does he not go back to All Souls or somewhere and write a book, or even a few articles?

Perhaps it was Mr Waldegrave however who inserted the reference to Rousseau in Mr Heath's speech on the social contract, an extract from which we also heard last night. This was a mistake. I am all for elevating public debate and not talking down to people, but references to long dead philosophers of whom Tory audiences have never heard—Labour audiences too for that matter—cause nothing except bewilderment and annoyance.

EVENING STANDARD

REVOLUTIONARY PROGRESS: The program of reforms of the Libyan Revolutionary Command Council has claimed a new victim—the metric system.

The Libyan news agency quoted the newspaper "Al-Fateh," organ of the command, as saying that the metric system is "Western" and "a vestige of colonialism" that would be changed soon.

It said changes are being made to adopt Arab weights and measures "used by the Arab nation before the colonialist conquests of our land."

Previous reform laws included the banning of alcohol; stoning of adulterers; chopping off the limbs of thieves; and imposition of Arabic script in passports of foreigners entering Libya.

INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE

LETTERS

"The New Proletariat"

THERE ARE MANY IMPORTANT confusions in Jonathan Power's article "The New Proletariat" [ENCOUNTER, September] but two are of outstanding importance and cannot be allowed to pass. At no point, as far as I can see, does he discuss the benefits of migration to the migrants themselves! He argues that *our* social stability is threatened, and that *their* nations do not gain. He states, moreover, that the only arguments, apart from these, worthy of consideration are those of our captains of industry who say we need migration for economic growth. Yet the basic argument is, and must be, that the individuals who choose to migrate are better off; and I can see no justification for taking the position either that they are the property of their countries, or that they are not "really" better off, because their migration was irrational. All the evidence is that migration is a rational response to economic opportunity, not a reckless plunge after the bright lights.

The second point is this: it is arguable (just) that rural development will slow down the drift to the cities in developing countries, where urban expected real incomes are perhaps only twice those of the rural areas. There is absolutely no way on earth that rural development in Turkey, Yugoslavia, Southern Italy, Portugal, Algeria, Morocco, or the West Indies will provide incomes sufficient to rival those of modern Germany, or France, or even Britain. Third World urban problems are simply irrelevant to the issue. Migration to a developed country is, and will remain, for the foreseeable future, the best opportunity (if available) for an unskilled migrant. Whether it is the best for our countries, or for theirs, is another question.

MARTIN WOLF

Washington, D.C.

JONATHAN POWER in your issue of September 1974 commits two analytical errors that colour unhelpfully some of his subsequent reasoning. He describes the disadvantageous aspects of urbanisation in underdeveloped countries as a result of rural-to-urban migration. The countryside remains neglected and the "family size grows." Power thus falls back on the popular belief that high fertility is a recent phenomenon and that it interferes with development. This belief is also comfortable, because it provides an easy let-off: if only the poor stopped having children. . . . Actually, the complexities of development are greater than this simple thought, as many voices recognise. Most recently, John D. Rockefeller III, a leading and

powerful proponent of the comfortable approach, hit the world headlines by qualifying a quarter-of-a-century of public activity (at the World Population Conference in Bucharest). It is also an empirical fact consistent with demographic theory that the proportion of children under 15 (the alleged "burden" on society) has not been changing markedly in underdeveloped societies from its level of around 40 or 45%, rural-urban migration or no migration.

The impact of international emigration on the sending country is summarised by suggesting for the future of Algeria, Turkey, and Portugal the present marasmus of depopulated Ireland. The combined populations of the three countries are seven times the size of the population of Ireland when it was hit by the Great Famine of 1845-49, while today's immigration opportunities are only a fraction of what was available 130 years ago. There is just not enough space to do the job. In whatever way the three countries might solve their problems, it will not be through the Irish model of depopulation.

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I HAVE READ Jonathan Power's article in ENCOUNTER, "The New Proletariat" [September]. Both my husband and I found it highly interesting. I do, however, think that there are a couple of points that could be dwelt upon to provide more understanding of the differences in regard to integration of immigrants in different countries, or even to their treatment as "equals."

One is the philosophy in regard to employment of women. There is a real difference between Sweden and Switzerland, as our attitudes and even Government policy are strongly in favour of married women working. Switzerland is "saving" its women; I hope it shows up in the statistics. The other is what might loosely be called the trade union attitude. In Sweden the sanitation workers are no underclass but belong to a well-paid union. I admit that there are some less protected jobs in restaurant kitchens, etc. But there is definitely less of a general tendency to hold immigrants down to specific underclass jobs.

These are just some brief marginal notes. My interest is explained by the fact that I have been chairman of the *equality* group for the TUC and the Labour Party. Our slogan *work for everybody*, meaning it literally, has now become the official programme, leading to attempts to place women, youth, handicapped, elderly, etc. in jobs *before* we resort to more immigration. An examination by an expert like Jonathan Power would be highly interesting.

ALVA MYRDAL

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