

What's the Matter with Sociology?

BY CRANE BRINTON

IT seems ungenerous to ask what's the matter with sociology. The poor thing has been ailing ever since Auguste Comte a hundred years ago christened it a barbarous mixture of Latin and Greek. Until the even feebler science of education worked its way into academic circles a generation ago, sociology was in almost every university the pariah subject, the subject to which even the most uninspired student in the humanities, grinding away at the adverb in Suetonius or the three-field system in Much Michingham, could feel comfortably superior.

Sociology was committed, if only by its ending in "ology," to bringing forth the kind of cumulative and systematic knowledge achieved by sciences like zoölogy and geology. This it has certainly not yet done, and the contrasts between its aspiration and its achievement, its grand name and its confusing, often trivial content, were too obvious to be hidden. They were not hidden from the sociologists themselves, who can certainly not be accused of undue self-esteem. Sociologists are on the whole a modest lot, and their occasional outbreaks into prophecy are but natural compensations for their permanent inferiority complex.

Mr. Robert S. Lynd is perhaps best known to the general public of all American academic sociologists, for the "Middletown" books which he wrote with Mrs. Lynd have had a remarkable popular success. This new book*, for which he alone is responsible, offers a good occasion for one more survey of the ailing science. We need not be greatly worried if "sociology" and the "social sciences" seem occasionally almost interchangeable terms. Some sociologists have always claimed that theirs is the master social science, the one that brings together into a whole all the scattered information about man in society to be found in history, political science, economics, and the rest. Mr. Lynd in one part of his book protests against this attempt to make of

* **KNOWLEDGE FOR WHAT?** *The Place of the Social Sciences in American Culture.* By Robert S. Lynd. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1939. \$2.50.



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sociology a "kind of holding company for all the special social sciences," but before he gets through he is clear that someone somehow should attempt to answer the most extensive and all-embracing questions about men in society.

There is no need to quarrel about words; certainly natural scientists do not do so. Let us open "sociology" up pretty wide, and catch such non-academics as Mr. Stuart Chase and Mr. Everett Dean Martin, such ex-academics as Mr. Harry Elmer Barnes and Mr. Thurman Arnold, such academics as Mr. Lynd and Mr. Gardner Murphy, and even a few wandering historians like the late James Harvey Robinson. However differently you may label them, these writers are all trying to arrive at systematic knowledge of the way men behave in society. They are attempting to do something analogous to what the natural scientist does; even the wittiest or the most graceful stylist among them usually does not profess to be trying to do what the philosopher or the novelist does. It is surely fair then to judge sociology as would-be science, not as would-be philosophy or literature.

If you will look closely at some of the books by men on the foregoing list, if you will extend the list by noting bibliographies and cross-references, you will discover that for the most part their authors refer to one another extensively, and to others like themselves in the past. In Mr. Lynd's book, for instance, you will find contemporaries like Gardner Murphy, the Allports, Wesley Mitchell, Laski, the Webbs, Beard, Dewey, Carl Becker, and a few figures from the past, such as Greek philosophers, or French and English liberal thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. You will not find Pareto, Max Weber, W. G. Sumner, Montaigne, Machiavelli, Polybius; and you will find only unimportant references to Le Play, to Henry Maine, only slighting references to North Whitehead and Elton Mayo, none to L. J. Henderson. Your final list would be an imposing collection of men familiar in the pages of *The New Republic* and *The Nation*; it would be a list heavily weighted

with "liberal" intellectuals. Even in monographs filled with facts and figures, with experiment and observation attempted on the best scientific models, you would find that a good deal of the sociologist's material comes from the reflections of his sympathetic co-workers in the intellectual's vineyard.

You are now close to what is chiefly the matter with sociology. Its practitioners are to an overwhelming extent partisans, improvers, preachers. That useful Greek word, "Logos," appears in sociology as it appears in the Gospel according to St. John, not as it appears in biology. Most sociologists are so interested in trying to devise ways of improving men's behavior that they neglect the less noble but more

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I LOOK AT AMERICAN FICTION
By PHYLLIS BENTLEY

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Reviewed by Charles F. Harrold

useful task of observing that behavior, and finding useful uniformities in it. Even when they attempt, as Mr. Stuart Chase did in his "Tyranny of Words," to leave behind their preacher's tricks and get down to facts, old habit is too much for them, and they indulge in a preacher's crusade against preaching. And when, as did J. H. Robinson, they come to recognize that men are not primarily rational, they still try to reason them out of irrationality. Mr. Lynd himself refers to Graham Wallas, E. P. Herring, and other realistic students of political behavior in men, and, up-to-date as he is, dwells frequently on the necessity for recognizing the irrational in men, and giving it proper play. But all this doesn't really sink in. He forgets it at once as soon as he starts the work of salvation by planning.

Moreover, most American sociologists are facing a dilemma increasingly serious for liberals: how reconcile their libertarian, equalitarian, and democratic traditions with their growing feelings of contempt for the ordinary American, the man who tunes in on Father Coughlin, reads *The Saturday Evening Post* or *True Story*, throws orange peels and cigarette stubs out of his Ford, and even votes Republican? They cannot trust this man, and yet they are constantly "planning" all sorts of nice things for him. Mr. Lynd's last chapter has a series of plans which makes the present national administration look like a branch of the Liberty League. They are plans which depend for their execution upon the domination of a relatively small group of enlightened superiors—sociologists perhaps—who must surely have to put over their plans by force or ruse on a large number of ordinary unenlightened men. But it will be done democratically, of course. Our sociologist is not going to copy the methods of the dictators. At least he says he isn't, and we may believe that he won't get the chance.

The sociologist is thus filled with mixed feelings towards the men who are the subjects of his study. He loves them—from a distance—and wants to make them happier and better; but he distrusts them, he is impatient with their blindness, their vegetable way of rooting down into ways he detests, and he gets very angry with them. He doesn't often burst out as frankly as did Mr. T. S. Matthews in his recent petulant remarks in *The New Republic* about our "swineherd editors."* Mr. Matthews, however, was only displaying indiscreetly what most of his fellow liberals also feel, but manage to bring out veiled in a little more elegance. Natural scientists are lucky; their emotions aren't so unhappily involved in their guinea pigs and their carbohydrates. For the scientist is not, as scientist, engaged in the effort to make moral values pre-

* Quoted in the *S.R.L.*, April 8.

vail. Plenty of natural scientists do indeed make little excursions from the laboratory to the pulpit, and usually make greater asses of themselves in the latter post than do social scientists, since they lack the saving grace of the social scientists' inferiority complex. But the physicist looking for God in an Expanding Universe is obviously engaged in an old, and often profitable, research, which has, however, no place in the discipline of physics. The line which separates sociology from theology is unfortunately not so clear.

Mr. Lynd will not admit that the scientist has no business to make value judgments, and devotes a rather ragged chapter to an attack on conservatives who harp on "dispassionate research" and



Steiner-Morris

Robert S. Lynd

"scientific objectivity." But he rather innocently cuts the ground from under himself when he writes, "Values may be and are properly and necessarily applied in the preliminary selection of 'significant,' 'important' problems for research. They may be but should not be applied thereafter to bias one's analysis or the interpretation of the meanings inherent in one's data." The best theorists of scientific method will admit that the scientist's choice of problems to be studied is probably largely determined by his sense of values, which means by his whole personal history. If Mr. Lynd and his fellow-sociologists really did keep their personal hopes and fears entirely out of their thinking *once they decided what to think about*, there wouldn't be nearly so much the matter with sociology.

There is another, and related, trouble from which most sociologists suffer. They are so used to manipulating ideas rather than things that they come to have a great contempt for all that is implied in the word "practical," a contempt which has something to do with their contempt for plain people. "It is here assumed,"

writes Mr. Lynd magnificently, "that 'It can't be done' is irrelevant to social science, if the rigidities of institutionalized habit or human inertia are all that appear to block the march toward desirable cultural change." "Perish the colonies rather than a principle!", Robespierre is supposed to have said. A grand sentiment scarcely echoed by the residents of San Domingo and Martinique. Mr. Lynd is here perhaps posturing a bit, but not in a way becoming to a scientist. His are grand feelings, Cyrano's plume of defiance adorning the intellectual and reformer; Rostand's hero, however, seems a strange model for a sociologist.

Mr. Lynd, when he writes of "rigidities" and "inertia" in such scornful and negative terms, makes clear the greatest error into which the refusal of the intellectual to look into ordinary, undignified matters leads him. Custom, habit, tradition, inertia—refer as you like to the way human beings tend to keep on doing what they have been conditioned to do—is not usually felt by ordinary men as a constraint, a limiting factor, a source of cramp or discomfort. Quite the contrary. There seems every evidence that most of the conduct, even of very intelligent men devoted to abstract studies, is of this routine sort, conduct never consciously built up, rarely criticized, and even more rarely altered, by deliberate thinking. And such conduct, far from being felt as oppressive, is almost as natural, as effortless, and as essential as breathing. But you can't write as elegantly about such conduct as you can about progress, social welfare, planning, or cultural heritage, the American Way, and so forth. You can always *assume* such conduct isn't important—as long as you are preaching, or writing, sociology. You don't make any such assumption if you have dealings with men beyond the classroom, lecture-platform, or pulpit.

Still another ailment of sociologists is their insistence on asking the biggest and most unanswerable questions. Mr. Lynd entitles a chapter "Some Outrageous Hypotheses." The word "outrageous" he took from the late W. M. Davis, a distinguished geologist. Davis meant what he said by the word; Mr. Lynd apparently takes it to mean "grandiose," "all-embracing." This sort of change is unhappily customary when social scientists borrow from natural scientists. Actually the natural scientist always starts with modest hypotheses which can be tested in a limited field, goes to the facts to test, and adds only gradually to the range of his problems as he feels himself on ground that stays firm. He does not ask himself meaningless questions, and by "meaningless" he indicates, as Bridgman puts it, a problem for which there exists no available operation, no effective test. There is

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The Dynamics of Nazism

THE END OF ECONOMIC MAN: A STUDY OF THE NEW TOTALITARIANISM. By Peter F. Drucker. New York: John Day. 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ELI GINZBERG

CONVINCED that the tragic plight of the democracies can largely be explained by their repeated failure to understand the dynamics of the totalitarian revolutions (especially Nazism), Peter Drucker has written a brilliant book about the conditions governing Hitler's birth and growth.

Drucker begins his significant task of adult education by pointing out the danger of evaluating the Nazi Revolution in terms of the paranoid delusions of a political upstart, a mistake so serious that it probably will not be corrected without drawing England and France, and perhaps the entire world, into a sanguinary struggle to check the *furor teutonicus*.

Although it would be foolhardy, if not false, to contend that the Third Reich was predetermined by the Weimar Republic, Drucker is nevertheless justified in emphasizing that the breakdown of industrial capitalism and the dissolution of the communist ideal prepared the way for the Brown Terror.

The inability of industry to provide jobs for the young and security for the old, and the inability of the state to offer compensations greater than enforced idleness and miserable doles, conspired to break the allegiance of many to the *status quo*. Drucker shows that as the conviction spread that the impotence of industry and the state was organic rather than functional, ever larger numbers became tolerant of, if not active participants in, furthering the destruction of the Republic.

That change would be change to the right was inevitable in view of the disillusionment of western Europe with the Soviet alternative to capitalism, and the political obtuseness of the social democrats who were stymied by their reformist-pacifist approach. This approach, justified if at all in an expanding economy, was thoroughly unrealistic in defeated and bankrupt Germany. Drucker traces, with penetrating insight, the collapse of the trade unions, powerful organizations that succumbed to fat bureaucrats and thin philosophies.

Equally illuminating is the author's analysis of the churches. Preoccupied with doctrine and dogma, they failed miserably in understanding the crucial problems of a dissolving society. Hence they were unable to speak with authority and act with power in defense of Christian values.

War, inflation, depression prepared Germany for change. In fact, so thorough

was the preparation that the country entrusted itself to a man whose promises were disbelieved by his followers and whose threats were ridiculed by his opponents.

Hitler rode into office on a bastard charger of hate and hope. But diffuse hostility and infantile aspirations could not create jobs for the unemployed nor security for the usurpers. Confronted with the task of organizing the country, Drucker shows how the Nazis inevitably stumbled upon the "war economy." In the name of national defense, trade unions were destroyed, capitalists shorn of their power, the universities polluted, the Jews disfranchised, political opponents murdered. But the "war economy" solved the most pressing economic problem—unemployment—and eased the most pressing

social problem—new opportunities and rewards for the underprivileged.

These achievements have been dearly bought, but since the internal victories of the "war economy" depend upon external victories, even worse costs must still be met. In a world of strident nationalisms, external victories will eventually be checked.

In contrast to the puerile propagandists and precocious publicists who have attempted to rationalize the new totalitarianism in terms of economic aggrandizement of the poor, Drucker insists that fascism be viewed as an *ad hoc* solution which opportunists have developed to secure and maintain power—though in the process, they became victims of their own solution.

Still unfolding before our eyes, a story of this magnitude can surely not be captured in its entirety, but within these limitations, Drucker has accomplished very much.

Hygiene with a Difference

YOU'RE THE DOCTOR. By Victor Heiser, M.D. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by MABEL S. ULRICH, M.D.

TO the thousands who have seen and heard Dr. Heiser, especially since his "Odyssey" has become so widely known, he seems in movie parlance to have everything—even umph! No wonder that everywhere he goes—and he goes everywhere—his envious listeners pursue him with the invariable question, "What's your recipe, Doctor?" They have observed that I, a man in my mid-sixties, am hale and hearty, able to match rackets with many younger than myself, fond of swimming and riding, certain, no matter how hard the bed, to sleep soundly and to awake with pleasant anticipation. . . . Here then is the answer to the question—and a whole lot more. Another "doctor book," to be sure, but since on every page there is something of the author's own ripe and vigorous personality as well as of his forty years of health research among the ailing of practically every land in the world, it was bound to be hygiene with a difference.

The chapter subjects proved to be the familiar ones despite the arresting headings; "How Now, Brown Cow," is of course our old friend milk. But themes for writers on personal hygiene, like plots

for fiction and drama, are necessarily limited, and "You're the Doctor" illustrates once again how knowledge, experience, and imagination can inject brand new interest in even the hackneyed topics of diet, exercise, recreation, sleep. Since he ascribes most middle-aged unhappiness to over-eating and improperly balanced diets, a large portion of the book is devoted to the subject of nutrition. For sports and all relaxing fun he has the enthusiasm of an athlete and a highly

civilized "mixer." Shoes, houses, beds, and a "merry heart" are important to our individual well-being, as water and milk supplies are to that of a community, and on all of these and much more, Dr. Heiser discourses always sensibly, often amusingly. But what gives his book outstanding charm in the family of "doctor books" is the manner in which Dr. Heiser uses his great reservoir of associated material provided by his

unique opportunities for observation. In an effortless, almost rambling style, he wanders about in his storehouse of memories, producing incidents that give color and conviction to a vitamin or a vital statistic. Even corns and common colds make interesting reading in the light of Lindbergh's upper-air plant spores, and the Doctor's own lively experience with a chiropodist.

Here then is a book about health that belongs not on the first aid shelf, but on the library table.



Victor G. Heiser