The Social Scientist In a National Emergency

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Social scientists in this country have been reflecting about their specific function in this world crisis ever since the crisis becamo obvious, but especially since America's participation in the war created a national emergency. Some of the leading sociologists have thrown considerable light upon this matter.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Nevertheless, many social scientists are still uncertain and full of questions concerning the duties and opportunities of their profession. And their questions are significant: significant for *us*, if we find that we cannot be of much use, because this will mean that our profession has falled in its supreme and critical test; significant for the *nation*, if it proves that our services can be really valuable. More discussion is needed and will be needed in the future, not to prepare for some work to be done at an indefinite time but to clarify the meaning, improve the quality, broaden the scope of whatever actual work has been started or may be started at any time.

Every social scientist is aware that the future of American society depends upon its present. Wether we win the war and how we and our descendants will live after the war is being constituted not only by *what* we do collectively as a nation but also by *how* we do it. And since our national war effort is fundamentally a *social* process, since the very production and use of material implements for physical defense and attack is achieved by the action of various social groups, it would seem that social scientists should have at least as important a part in this collective endeavour as physical or biological scientists.

And here we meet the most important difficulty on the way to a peaceful world-order. For, however absurd and irrational it may seem to many a moral philosopher, jurist, political scientist or statesman trained in logical thinking but not in sociological observation, mere differences between cultures are the oldest, the most wide-spread, the most persistent sources of hostility between human societies.

The more people are attached to their own culture, the more they tend to mistrust and dislike those whose culture differs from their own. And these attitudes are not proportionate to the relative importance of cultural differences as compared with cultural similiarities. Nine years ago, an ethnologist investigated two Ruthenian communities living in neighboring valleys of the Carpathian Mountains. There was no competition whatsoever between them, no conflict of economic or political interests. Yet the people of each community regarded the others as foreigners, socially inferior and untrustworthy. The investigator was puzzled, for he found no significant differences between them: their language, religion, customs, mores, material techniques were the same. When asked why they regarded the others as different, the people of each community answered: "Look at the clothes they wear on Sundays." In fact, though similar in cut, their traditional holiday costumes differed in pattern and color of embroidery.

I was reminded of this case two years later when at an international congress, I met one of the leading educators of the Nazi régime. He emphatically asserted that the national societies of the Western world were essentially, irreducibly different. I spoke of their common cultural heritage coming from classical antiquity - he did not think much of their common Christian heritage. He answered: "But don't you realize that Plato and Sophocles have an entirely different meaning for the Germans than for the French or the Poles?" He did not say how incomparably superior was the German interpretation of Plato and Sophocles to any other, but the inference was obvious.

Such attitudes are not merely a matter of personal prejudice. They are collective phenomena and exert a powerful influence on group activities. When Society *A* regards its culture as supremely valuable, the fact that Society B does not share this appreciation but shows a preference for its own culture is apt to be interpreted as an insulting profanation of the values that are sacred to *A*. Society *A* may be too weak to do anything about it; but if *A* is strong enough act, it can follow one of the various ways of repressing the offending attitude expressed by *B*.

Society *A* may consider its people so superior and its culture so sacred that nobody who is not born into *A* can be allowed to share these culture, that the very fact that some foreigners do not share it seems to be a danger and an offence. The simplest solution of this dilemma is to exterminate the foreigners. This is what the Nazis are doing to the Jews, whose very existence is an offence and a danger to the sacred culture of the Aryan "Herrenvolk". Or it may be enough to destroy the foreign culture, exterminate those who resist, and turn those who are too weak to resist into slaves: slaves are no longer a danger, while their toil is useful. This was the method used by ancient Assyrians, by the Mongols of Ghengis Khan, by Pizarro in Peru, and by Nazi Germans in dealing with the Poles. A more difficult, but more rational method is to allow the foreigners to preserve their culture, but keep them under control, utilizing their products for the benefit of the ruling society. This is the traditional method of colonial empires, now used by the Nazis in France.

Sometimes, however, the stronger society has a missionary spirit and is willing to grant to foreigners the supreme privilege of being admitted to share its culture. If they do not appreciate this privilege, they must be made to do so by force or by positive inducement. The simplest way to make them accept the benefit which is offered to them is to give them a choice between conversion ana extermination. This was the method of the Knights of the Cross, used in Christianizing pagan Prussians and Lithuanians, and of the Spaniards under the Holy Inquisition in dealing with recalcitrant Moors, Jews, and heretics. Less radical forms of coercion were employed in the nineteenth century, when culturally foreign subjects of the Tsar were forcibly Russified and foreign subjects of the King of Prussia were forcibly Germanized.

Positive inducement was resorted to by the Arabs: any member of a conquered society who embraced Islam was accepted as a member of the conquering society. Similar methods were used by the French in spreading French culture in its colonies.

In short, while every society wants freedom to live its own cultural life and is ready to defend its culture against foreign interference, many - perhaps most - national societies harbor tendencies to dominate or to assimilate peoples of different cultures with whom they come into contact; and when such tendencies come into action and encounter active resistance, the struggle can result in an aggresive and defensive fanaticism rivalling that of the most violent religious wars and persecutions.

What can be done about it? A sociological law points the way. Antagonism between social groups can be effectively counteracted only by positive active cooperation for common goals. Are there any common goals toward which the various culture societies of the world can be induced to cooperate?

There could be none, if each of them were only interested in preserving its own culture unique and intact. But modern national culture societies, besides tending to expand at the cost of foreign peoples, are also interested in developing their cultures by their own creative effort. Such creative effort formed the very source of their growth. Tracing back the origin of any culture - for instance, the Italian, the French, the Chinese - we find that it began in creative activities of social and religious ideologists, poets, historians, artists, educators, jurists, scientists, technologists, economic organizers. Their activities built a new and higher culture, over and above the existing folk cultures; and as this culture spread, many folk groups became merged into one inclusive national society.

This process can be continued on a world scale. Indeed, it has already started, though interrupted by the present crisis. Mankind has begun to create a super-national culture to which some leaders from diverse national societies have been contributing. Logic, mathematics, astronomy, physio-chemical and biological sciences, medicine, much of technological invention, some music and painting are already super-national in scope and significance. Though little has been done to organize active cooperation between national societies for the promotion of this process, yet cooperation can be stimulated by diverting the energies of every nation from expansion at the cost of others to the development of its own cultural possibilites. Indeed, with the enormous increase of man's crative power in modern times, it has become not only safer but more profitable for every nation to increase its mastery over nature than to struggle against other nations for mastery over men. And with the present speed and facility of international communication, every nation can utilize for its own creative growth any new cultural contributions made by other nations.

But such creative cooperation between nations will not develop automatically. Great institutions must be organized for this tremendous task, including many thousands of leaders in every field of culture, drown from all cultural societies of the world. These institutions must have aid and support from whatever kind of political association may be formed after the war. If we are to have a world order of free peoples, we must have a world culture as the supreme common goal of all free peoples.

1. We need only mention: Robert H. MacIver's presidential address to the Thirty-fifth Meetng of the American Sociological Society, "Some reflections on Sociology during a Crisis," *Am. Sociol. Rev*., Feb. 1941; Stuart A. Queen's president's address to the Thirty-sixth Meeting of th American Sociological Society, "Can sociologists face reality?" *Am. Sociol. Rev.*, 1942; Louis Wirth's address to the Meeting of the Midwest Sociological Society, April 1., 1942. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)