

# NATURE

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## THE SOCIAL SCIENCES IN GREAT BRITAIN

ON what may perhaps be the eve of real measures of social reconstruction, the conclusions of the Committee on Scientific Research on Human Institutions appointed by the British Association are welcome. For if, as Mr. Churchill has said, it is a definite part of the duty and responsibility of the National Government to have its plans perfected in a vast and practical scheme to ensure food, work and homes after the War, research into the most efficient plans to form into such a scheme must be started forthwith. This research itself must be "vast and practical" and must integrate the work of natural and of social scientists. Representatives of both persuasions were members of the Committee, which consisted of Prof. P. Sargant Florence (chairman), Mr. L. J. F. Brimble (hon. secretary), Mr. H. J. Braunholtz, Prof. G. Catlin, Prof. C. H. Desch, Mr. A. Farquharson, Prof. J. C. Flugel, Prof. Morris Ginsberg, Prof. Lancelot Hogben, Dr. Julian Huxley, Prof. Harold Laski, with the President and General Officers of the British Association. Thus the Committee included a chemist, three biologists, a psychologist, an economist, an anthropologist, two sociologists and two political scientists. The detailed terms of reference point straight at the close connexion of social research and governmental plans. The committee was "to consider how the results of scientific research on human institutions and human needs and their interrelations can best be co-ordinated and brought to bear on the formation of public policy".

Any committee of the British Association, with its sections devoted both to the natural and to the social sciences, must start by dealing clearly with the differences and similarities in the research of these two groups of disciplines. The difference is seen in the fact that the recognized natural sciences, including even physical anthropology, do not deal with the contact of man with man. To study these essential contacts the report envisages a sociology dealing with types of human association and organization and their functioning through the "operation of law, morals and religion in society and of other forms of social sanctions and control, including the economic price mechanism".

But the similarities of the two groups of sciences are greater than is usually assumed both in the method employed and in the material it is employed upon. "Both natural and social sciences", to quote the report, "are concerned with qualitative as well as quantitative methods. . . . Both employ deduction, classification and induction and take no account of values", except in so far, presumably, as the origin of values is a proper topic of scientific interest. The similarity of method is indeed becoming more evident now that both natural and social sciences are making wider use of statistical techniques. Economists are becoming less content to rely on deduction from self-evident axioms. They summarize factual data into index-numbers and 'multipliers', and are applying precise measurement to the national income. Occasionally even political scientists

indulge in realistic surveys such as casting the proportion of public school men in British Cabinets. Social psychology in its studies of vocational selection, industrial fatigue and the like has always employed statistical methods, and social biology and demographic studies such as the measurement of the localization and structure of the industrial population are statistical in very essence.

Though the subject-matter of the social and natural sciences is different, there are many lines of research on the border of the two, in the pursuit of which workers both sides the border should co-operate. Social medicine, dignified by the recent creation of chairs at the Universities of Oxford and Birmingham, is a case in point; and the translation of new engineering techniques into the plans and planning organization of a factory should be another borderline study linked to the demographic problem of industrial location. A third borderline picked out by the Committee is that of social biology and social psychology. These deal with (1) the genetic basis of human behaviour, the influence of the quantity and quality of the population on social structure, and the converse influence of the social structure on the quantity and quality of the population; (2) the needs and wants of man, his preferences and aversions, motivation and educability in various types of social organization, the distribution of abilities and problems of recruitment.

The new emphasis on training of teachers for school biology with a view to national health, sponsored by the Central Council for Health Education and other official or semi-official bodies, points to another direction in which our universities will have to make provision for closer contact between naturalistic studies and social statistics.

The post-war problems discussed by officially appointed committees have been grouped into the physical lay-out of homes and of industry; and social security, either by providing the conditions for work and health or, at second best, compensation for unemployment and disability. All these problems, against which the Government is presumably making plans, require research for their successful handling and, in particular, co-ordinated research among the natural and social sciences. An efficient physical lay-out involves knowledge of geology, geography and engineering as well as the economic characteristics of industry. A successful plan for social security calls for knowledge of food values, vital statistics and the possibilities and limitations of the political and administrative set-up; and both a successful home and a successful security policy involves a knowledge of people's habits and ways of thinking that is by no means given to the individual sociologist and psychologist without systematic and objective research among the masses.

Clearly the interrelation of the natural and social sciences and their application to public policy are a two-way traffic. Greater knowledge of natural phenomena makes its impact on social organization; but the needs, wants and abilities of man require that human institutions make—in reverse—their own impact felt. It is a commonplace that new

applications of natural science without appropriate social controls have led to mass unemployment, monotonous labour, derelict industrial areas and concentration of economic power detrimental to community values.

What, then, are the practical measures that should be taken to implement the social research that is required as a basis of public policy?

First and foremost, more importance should be attached to the social sciences in the form of endowment of certain branches of social research. It is sometimes thought that social research can be carried on cheaply because little is required in the way of apparatus and laboratories. This is a profound mistake. The major expense even in the natural sciences is made up of salaries for research personnel; and the social sciences, if they are to base conclusions on a sufficient field of objective observation, statistically measured, will certainly need a large skilled staff. Natural scientists are justifiably contemptuous of the armchair type of thinking by social scientists. But if the sociologist is to leave his armchair for the field he must have trained armies at his command. He cannot, in the complex situation that social life presents, rely on a few select observations. He cannot reduce expenses by controlled experiment under laboratory conditions. So far from being cheaper, effective social research is likely to prove more expensive than research in the natural sciences. There is, of course, some justification for the economist who complains of the uninspired collection of facts of trivial importance without guiding hypothesis. Much expense can be saved by armchair thought, and co-ordination of working hypothesis with statistical fieldwork is a prime necessity. But however happy the marriage of theory and statistics, the family budget is likely to run high.

Next to endowment, research on human institutions needs, it is clear, close co-ordination.

It is mainly for this purpose that the British Association Committee proposes the setting up of a Council for the Social Sciences. This Council would co-ordinate the direction of research and the disbursement of funds, would initiate and supervise practical training and advise the Government on the preparation of official statistics in a fruitful form. For it is on data collected by the Government that factual social research must often rely; and all too often such research is frustrated by ill-conceived or inconsistent classification and tabulation. If and when the necessary expenditure is forthcoming, such a Council might well carry with it the responsibility for planning co-ordinated inquiries of social importance within the framework of a university development council.

Finally, social research needs the means for publicity if it is to be brought democratically to bear on public policy. For this purpose, the Committee proposes the formation of a society for factual social research in addition to the co-ordinating Council. Such a society would be formed on the lines of learned societies in the natural sciences, thus again illustrating the importance of mutual help and advice between the sciences, social and natural.