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PHILOSOPHY, SOCIOLOGY AND THE THEORY OF SOCIAL WELFARE:  
A CONCEPTUAL STARTING POINT<sup>1</sup>

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In this paper I want to explore and<sup>2</sup>begin to elucidate a fundamental problem in social welfare theory.<sup>2</sup> The problem centers on the conception of the relation between individuals and social structure. Before proceeding with this task, it is important to note the senses in which the term "social welfare" will be used. The term has two basic senses, deriving from two more or less distinct intellectual traditions. In one sense the term refers to the provision of goods and services to needy individuals, either through government "transfers" or private philanthropy. In this comparatively narrow sense social welfare is a characteristic of industrialized societies (see Wilensky, 1975, for an empirical investigation of the determinants of welfare spending) and has to do with social workers, welfare institutions and the poor. In the second, broader, sense social welfare has to do with all the members and institutions of a society. This sense derives from the concerns of moral and political philosophers about the structure of society and the production and distribution of basic values (such as wealth, power, liberty, equality and happiness). Moral-political philosophy asks what values are desirable and how can they be justified, and, given a set of values, what kind of society and what kind of individual is most likely to lead to the fullest realization of those values.

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<sup>1</sup>Paper originally presented as "Philosophy, Sociology and Social Welfare: Some Issues, Problems and Possibilities," at the annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, San Francisco, California, August 22-25, 1975.

<sup>2</sup>The problem derives from and pertains to sociological, or preferably social, theory more generally, though going straight to that locus is beyond the scope of this paper.

Until recently social scientists<sup>3</sup> had little interest in social welfare conceived in the broad philosophical sense. One apparent exception is that branch of economics known as "welfare economics." This exception is more apparent than real since economists and other social scientists have generally accepted Arrow's (1951; 1963) demonstration that a socially optimal income distribution cannot be derived from individual utility preferences ("wants"), unless it is assumed that such preferences, and the satisfaction derived from their fulfillment, are the same across all individuals. Since this assumption cannot be justified and the empirical evidence contradicts it, welfare economics has degenerated into a set of "proofs" that, given the assumptions underlying the theory of perfectly competitive markets, capitalism guarantees the attainment of maximum social welfare (see, for example, Ferguson, 1966). Because "welfare economics" takes as settled what is problematical and is uncritically based on a particular philosophical conception of the individual-social structure relation (i.e., utilitarianism), I will have little more to say of it. I bring it up here only to indicate that it has been one approach to the broad issue of social welfare.

Other than the moribund "welfare economics" approach, modern social science<sup>4</sup> has had little interest in the philosophical conception of social welfare. Such disinterest can be traced to the philosophical foundations of modern social science--to logical positivism and its impact on the character of the social sciences. Very briefly, "progress" in the social sciences has been seen as dependent upon the collection (design, methodology) and analysis (hypothesis testing and theoretical inference) of theoretically relevant data (collection of data is guided by hypothetical statements deduced from fundamental axioms) where the results of such activities are publicly disseminated and eventually help to<sup>5</sup> clarify the theoretical structure and build an explanatory system. Though historians (Kuhn, 1970) and philosophers of science, including logical positivists, have explored and continue to explore a number of problems in this foundation, most practicing social scientists learn (?) that this is the foundation, the only foundation, of public, intersubjectively verifiable knowledge. Such a foundation and its consequences for social science have precluded any investigation of social welfare theory that is not "narrowly" empirical and based upon positivistic rules. Any non-positivistic investigation of social

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<sup>3</sup>I use the terms social scientist and social sciences deliberately to emphasize the general (rather than the discipline specific) nature of the problem. The reader, however, should be made aware that, as a sociologist, much of the paper draws on and is directly addressed to sociology.

<sup>4</sup>Marxism, which has always had a tenuous relation to "mainstream" social science, is something of an exception to this statement. The Marxist view of social welfare will be briefly examined later.

<sup>5</sup>This summary is not intended as an adequate or complete account of logical positivism. A number of widely available books (e.g. Nagel, 1961; Kaplan, 1964; and Hanson, 1971) contain clear presentations of logical positivism.

welfare, while it might be praised by social scientists, is labeled, "normative," "subjective," or "philosophical," which implies that such an investigation is non-scientific and thus not a reliable guide to knowledge. There are increasingly obvious signs that many social scientists are experiencing heightened doubts about their enterprise and its importance to humanity, and corresponding doubts about logical positivism as the foundation of the social sciences.<sup>6</sup> What are the intellectual, as distinguished from the psychological or social, sources of these doubts and the accompanying disquiet?

Most simply, the social sciences entail the relativization of perspectives (Zaner, 1970), a proliferation of ways of viewing, of knowing. The relativization of perspectives extends to all other social things. One can view or "know" a thing from the "sociological" point of view, from the "economic" point of view, from the "practical" point of view, etc. No doubt this relativization has had some useful consequences, but the deeper consequences have only recently been receiving widespread attention. The deeper consequences started to be noticed when the relativizing weapons of the social sciences were turned inward, upon the social sciences and social scientists themselves. As sociological studies of sociology began to accumulate and "sink-in," the conclusion had to be faced that the sociological point of view and the knowledge it produces is socially determined, and thus uncertain, relative and suspiciously arbitrary. In short, the social sciences have eliminated the possibility of reason from human experience and action, including that experience and action called social science.

Those familiar with phenomenology will recognize that this discussion of the relativization of perspectives taps the same basic issues as Husserl's (1970) concern with the "crisis of European (Western) sciences." According to Natanson (1973) there are several facets to the contemporary crisis of science. Of these the deepest is that the sciences deny the centrality of reason in understanding human experience. This characteristic of science

. . . manifests itself less in programmatic utterances than it does in refusal to recognize the possible legitimacy of eternal truth, of essential knowledge, and of universal science. In place of the ideal of what Husserl called 'rigorous science,' primordial apodicticity, there is proclaimed the superiority and even the desirability of patchwork analysis, limited questions posed in restricted ways, in order to achieve partial results. Circumscription is elevated into a new ideal. No indictment of science is intended here, for the problem is not the adequacy of

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<sup>6</sup>For a highly readable presentation of the critique of logical positivism as the foundation of sociology see Friedrichs (1970:135-222). For a philosophical critique of the foundations of the social sciences see Zaner (1970:51-78).

concrete procedures and results in the various sciences but the philosophical nature of the scientific enterprise. (Natanson, 1973: 41-42).

Returning to social welfare, the "crisis of scientific relativization" is seen in the abandonment and disparagement of formulating a general theory of social welfare. The fragmented, partial and highly contingent nature of "knowledge" in the social sciences, in conjunction with the normative/descriptive dichotomy derived from logical positivism, have prevented any attempt to formulate a general (i.e. philosophical-scientific) theory of social welfare. Instead, we have a vast collection of positivistic studies of particular social welfare "problems" (in the narrow sense). These studies have attempted to either describe the dimensions and extent of a particular welfare problem (e.g., malnutrition, economic insecurity, child abuse, or drug dependency) or to investigate the causes and consequences of a particular social welfare problem. Many studies also ventured to propose "solutions" to these particular problems. The justifications, beyond that of scientific validity, are principally of three kinds. One is to adopt the values or political views of the organization, if any, sponsoring the research. The second is to justify the proposed solutions by predicting the negative (as defined by established social values) consequences of failure to do otherwise. The final kind of justification for proposed solutions is to invoke what are uncomfortably recognized as more or less arbitrary (since they cannot apparently be derived from science) personal values. These kinds of justification are often found in various combinations. Of course, many studies of welfare problems do not propose solutions, arguing that solutions must be based on values and values are outside the realm of science. The notion that the social sciences are, or can be, "value free" is widely debated today, and many have concluded that they are not and cannot be. The debate over the place of values in social science is part of the larger crisis of the social sciences.

Interestingly, though, one finds little explicit recognition of the crisis in the social science work (as opposed to the commentary) published in the leading journals. Perhaps the disciplinary elite and their gate-keepers are unwilling to accept the conclusion that there is a crisis and thus work that attempts to build upon a new foundation. On the other hand, there may be little or no work based upon a new foundation being submitted, and there is no consensual basis for evaluating any that is. While the case for the inadequacy of the value-free, "objective" logical positivist foundation of the social sciences is strong, how to and with what to "replace" that long-standing foundation is not at all clear. In the absence of an alternative foundation that is intellectually justified and widely accepted it may be reasonable to continue work founded upon, and wholly within the prescripts of, logical positivism. Phenomenology has been receiving increasing attention as a new foundation for the social sciences, though many problems remain both within phenomenology itself and with regard to the relation between phenomenology and sociology (see Heap and Roth, 1973). Though many of my remarks in this paper have been "inspired" by phenomenology, this is not an attempt to work out a phenomenological sociology. Rather it is an attempt to develop an alternative conceptual

basis for a general theory of social welfare. As such the paper is concerned with social theory directly and not with foundations, though the conceptual basis is "inspired" by the phenomenological critique of science.

The critique of logical positivism and the possibility of phenomenology as a new foundation is the more distant and fundamental source of my concern with the relation between sociology, philosophy and the theory of social welfare. The more immediate and direct source of this concern is derived from the recent attention of sociologists to moral-political philosophy, in particular with the attention Coleman (1974a) and other social scientists (e.g. MacRae, 1973; Hart, 1974; and Harmon, 1974) have given to John Rawls's (1971) A Theory of Justice. As Coleman (1974A) notes the last decade or so has witnessed, after the accumulation of vast numbers of research results on inequality and poverty, a resurgence of interest in moral-political philosophy and the attempts to join traditional sociology to moral-political philosophy (Coleman, 1974a; 1974b). That is, there is a developing interest in joining sociology and moral-political philosophy at the level of theory, as opposed to the interest in philosophy (epistemology) as foundational.

More exactly, Rawls (1971) has resurrected in sociology a renewed examination of the linkage between moral-political philosophy and sociology. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to review the intellectual history of sociology, I think it can be safely said that sociology's "founding fathers" (Marx, Weber and Durkheim) addressed and their work built upon moral-political philosophical issues. As Atkinson (1971) shows the fundamental contribution of the "founding fathers" was, despite other differences, the solidification of the sociological perspective that human behavior (in a broad sense) is socially determined, is subject to laws or rules or social facts that inhere in the supra-individual social structure. Though the work of both Marx and Weber contained elements of a voluntaristic, non-deterministic, conception of human behavior, that much smaller part of their work has not, by and large, been incorporated into modern sociology (Atkinson, 1971). In short, from its beginnings, sociology has adopted a "descending" view of the relation between individuals and the social structure. The social structure has been conceived as prior to and determinative of individual level behavior. In simplest form this basic conception holds that the social structure, the collectivity, creates concrete individuals (or "natural" persons as Coleman, 1974b, puts it) with their complex combinations of skills, values, lifeways and behaviors. Clearly this conception runs the risk of conceiving of individuals as completely socialized, completely socially determined. Wrong (1961) long ago pointed this out, though more to argue for the inclusion in sociological theory of a biological-psychological determinism than to argue for non-deterministic element. Such a program has recently received renewed attention (e.g. Tarter, 1973; Van den Berghe, 1974). This conceptual basis, which I have termed (following Coleman, 1974b) the "descending" view is similar to the "normative paradigm" discussed by Wilson (1970).

This basic sociological conception has never been completely dominant as the continued vitality of symbolic interactionism and the "interpretative paradigm" (Wilson, 1970) attests. Symbolic inter-

actionism and other interpretative perspectives reflect, to a certain extent and often only implicitly, an "ascending" view of the relation between individuals and social structure. Symbolic interactionism and other interpretative perspectives hold that human behavior, in any situation, cannot be accounted for except through the meanings that the participants give a situation. Such accounts may utilize classification schemes and be related to deductive theoretical statements. The account or explanation, must be built upon the meanings, the interpretations, that the situation has for the human beings involved. Thus, interpretative perspectives imply that human behavior is not entirely determined, and that institutions (the social structure) are based upon and continually re-created and modified by the behavior of numerous concrete individuals. As far as I have been able to determine the interpretative perspectives in sociology do not work out or explicitly address the intellectual and social theoretical consequences of the "ascending" view. Those consequences are more clearly and more fully expressed in moral-political philosophy, and it is to the moral-political philosophy of Rawls (1971) and Coleman (1974a; 1974b) that I now turn.

Coleman's book, Power and the Structure of Society (1974b), which preceded his review essay (Coleman, 1974a) on Rawls (1971), is an analysis of the social structural consequences of the emergence of those new persons before the law, corporate actors (e.g. business corporations, government agencies, voluntary organizations). After tracing the emergence and legal recognition of corporate persons, Coleman (1974b) presents his chief thesis: That, at least in Western societies, corporate actors exist separately from natural persons and have usurped more and more of the power available in society with damaging psychological consequences for natural persons (see also, Coleman, 1973). In effect, Coleman is offering a new dichotomous conception of social structure, in place of bourgeoisie/working class or elite/mass we have natural/corporate persons. This distinction is offered as fundamental and capable of organizing and guiding research on the social structure of modern society. Coleman (1974b) also offers some proposals whereby natural persons may gain restitution from corporate persons and some advice on learning to live with corporate persons. The book contains a number of useful points, though I think it dangerously close to reifying corporate persons and overemphasizes the notion that the fundamental social division is between corporate persons and natural persons. While clearly in the realm of moral-political philosophy, in the book (1974b) Coleman does not explicitly connect his views to the moral-political philosophy tradition.

Coleman does connect his views to traditional moral-political philosophy in his review essay (1974a) on Rawls. In that review Coleman contrasts Rawls's (1971) two principles of justice<sup>7</sup> with the

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<sup>7</sup>Briefly the two principles are: (1) "Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all." (2) "Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both: (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the just savings principle, and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity." (Rawls: 1971:302) Of the two, the first principle is prior.

results of sociological research on educational inequality and with Parsonian social theory. On the bases of these contrasts Coleman concludes that the principles, but especially the conceptual basis, the starting point of the theory must be modified. As Coleman (1974a) sees it, there are two basic conceptual bases for moral-political philosophy and the theory of social welfare: utilitarianism (Smith, Bentham) and social contract theory (Hobbes, Rousseau). Rawls theory is based upon the social contract view as is Coleman's modification. The principles of justice are, for Rawls, the "basic clauses" of the social contract that individuals would choose in an "original position" (where all are ignorant of what social position and possessions that will eventually have). As Coleman (1974a: 746) correctly notes the content of the social contract does not necessarily follow from the original position. While plausible, it is an a priori psychological assumption. Coleman goes on to suggest that this assumption could be subjected to empirical test. I think not. Any empirical test would have to be conducted with real, already socialized individuals and not with imaginary individuals in an imaginary original position. At any rate there could be no clear-cut, unambiguous empirical test of the assumption.

For both logical and sociological reasons, Coleman concludes that Rawls starting point must be modified. Coleman does not reject the social contract notion. Instead he argues that, rather than positing a single social contract, we should conceive of individuals as establishing, through the rational investment of individually created resources, multiple social contracts. This is an important modification for it connects the social contract and utilitarian schools of thought, retaining what seem to be the most reasonable and desirable aspects of each--the ability to account for the creation of "independent" and powerful "corporate persons" (including the state) from the social contract viewpoint and the emphasis on choice, rational self-interest and individual rights from the utilitarian viewpoint. That this modification reinforces and restates the pluralist conception of society is recognized by Coleman (1974a: 760). Though Coleman seems to assume that pluralism is an accurate description of the contemporary structure of U.S. society, there is a good deal of theoretical work (e.g. Gamson, 1968; Bachrach, 1967; and Pateman, 1970) and empirical evidence (e.g. Hamilton, 1972) that raises very serious questions about the validity of pluralist theory. That Coleman's developing<sup>8</sup> moral-political theory can be used to further justify and legitimize capitalism and unrepresentative democracy (see Gamson, 1968) is also obvious and objectionable.

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<sup>8</sup>As Coleman notes in the review essay, the details of his moral-political ("Normative") position is not presented there, though it will, apparently, be published in some form soon.

<sup>9</sup>I am not suggesting that this is Coleman's intent, but only that, regardless of his intentions, others may so use it.



It is objectionable because social contract, as well as utilitarian, theories are based upon the "ascending" conception of social structure. In particular, both the social contract and utilitarian theories conceive of rights and resources as inhering in individuals. Both the social contract and utilitarian theories developed in a period when the "divine right" of monarchs and other totalitarian "descending" concepts of social structure were being challenged. As such they are important and valuable ideational elements in the historical development of civil liberties. What is objectionable about these "ascending" conceptions of social structure is that they assume that individuals in some "natural state" (which cannot be observed, which can only be imagined) are "naturally" (i.e. without having been influenced by anything other than their biological-genetic endowment and physical environment) egotistical, entirely and narrowly self-interested, but rational, knowing what they want and stopping at nothing to effectively and efficiently obtain it. No one today would claim that the "natural state" ever existed empirically, and all recognize the Hobbesian question and its assumptions as "fictions". In the face of anthropological and sociological evidence that individuals do not exist independently and prior to a social system, the perpetuation of these fictions--fictions which unreasonably justify inequalities--is objectionable. Thus, any attempt to base a general theory of social welfare solely on analytical individualism, on the "ascending" conception of the relation between individuals and social structure, must be rejected.

Does this imply, then, that we must adopt the "descending" conception? What are the welfare theory implications of a decision to put the collectivity prior to real individuals, to conceive of rights, resources, and achievements as inhering not in discrete individuals but in social relations, in a collectivity? Perhaps the easiest way to answer these questions is to consider Marxist theory,<sup>10</sup> where the implications are clearly discernible. In capitalist societies the knowledge, beliefs, interests and behavior of individuals are seen as an expression of class interests derived from (determined by) an individual's social structural relation to the means of production. In the struggle to overthrow capitalism the welfare of real individuals is secondary to the "welfare" (politicization, revolutionary potential, etc.) of the working class as a social entity, a corporate actor, itself. In capitalist societies individuals, due to the mode and relationship production, are alienated, estranged from themselves. In the struggle to overthrow capitalism individuals must be and are subordinated (alienated) to the interest of the party or movement. Of course, this is inevitable, necessary and justified by the notion that only when and after a pure communistic society is established, where classes and the state have disappeared, can individuals be truly free and full, and authentic individuality realized. Be that as it may, in those societies where capitalism has been overturned and a "dictatorship of the proletariat" established, as a necessary transition to the pure

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<sup>10</sup>Of course, there is no such thing as "marxist theory," only several varieties. My interest here is not in the details of the complicated labyrinth of Marxist theory, but in the basic and broadly shared starting point.

communistic society, most real individuals continue to be subordinated to the interests, the welfare, of the collectivity.

All of this flows from, and is reasonable, given the basic conceptions of Marxist theory.<sup>11</sup> Without addressing the question of the adequacy of the Marxist structural categories and the analysis of the dynamics of social change, is the basic premise, the "descending" conception of the relation between individuals and social structure viable? In a word, no. The "descending" conception must be rejected for the reasons advanced earlier in the discussion of the "crisis of reallitivization." Any "descending" conception, whether that of academic sociology or Marxism, faces a "platform" problem. If it is true that human actions and the meanings that human beings give to those actions are determined by social structural "laws," then how--what platform is available?--can it be that those human actions and meanings called social science or Marxism are any different? Either one must assume some variant of the "free-floating intellectual" notion, or one must assume that the "methods" of social science (whether of the "bourgeois" or Marxist type is immaterial) are fundamentally different than the methods (to knowledge) of ordinary people. Neither assumption can be substantiated for lack of a platform.

If a general theory of social welfare cannot legitimately be based on either an "ascending" analytical individualism or the "descending" priority of the collectivity, what remains as a starting point? Since the only two alternatives must be rejected, it is time to justifiably assume, as Fromm (1941; 1955; 1965) has long urged, that humanity occupies an unique place in nature (including society). We are both part of nature, and thus subject to the "laws of nature," and we are (potentially and variably) aware, through reason, of this. This conception implies that social "laws," social relations, can be "changed" as a consequence of awareness and reason. No doubt the structure of society, and one's place in that structure, differentially limits, and to that extent determines,<sup>12</sup> an individual's opportunities for developing and exercising reason. To recognize that behavior has antecedents and is limited by a variety of social forces, is not the same thing, and does not entail, the assertion that all behavior is ultimately caused by social forces and events. It is not that some behavior is random or non-determined. Rather, sometimes individuals are their "own causes." That is, individual beliefs and behaviors can be due to reasons (intellectually determined) rather than to motives, reinforcement histories, internalized role expectations and social positions. This

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<sup>11</sup> The same basic implications, though employing different structural categories and terms, could be derived from any other theory based on "descending" conception of the relation between individuals and social structure.

<sup>12</sup> Under this conception the notion of selective determinism becomes logically meaningful. As Hollander (1973) argues, selective determinism is inconsistent with a sociology founded exclusively on the "descending" conception. His argument also clearly, though unintentionally, demonstrates the crisis of the social sciences and the necessity of bringing reason back in.

conception retains the possibility of choice and creativity in social behavior (which if we but look are evident), but drops the assumption (common to "ascending" conceptions) that such choice and creativity is necessarily based on narrow self-interest, and the resulting implication that existing social institutions in capitalist societies, by controlling and channeling this anti-social self-interest, are, on balance, the best thing for everybody.

If we accept, as I believe we must, this voluntaristic and humanistic conceptual starting point, three broad implications for a general theory of social welfare can be noted. First, what place does social welfare, in the narrower sense, have? Many, no doubt, are amazed and indignant that so much time, thought and paper have been given to philosophical and abstract theoretical concerns when social welfare is under increasing attack and when the welfare of many has been even further degraded. Though this paper has not been addressed to these real and immediate problems, the analysis presented here does have three fairly specific implications for social welfare, in the narrower sense. The least important of these is that the conceptual starting point proposed here in no way obviates the need for social welfare efforts in the narrower sense. The conceptual basis proposed here recognizes that large numbers of people are systematically put (or kept) in oppressive socio-economic circumstances as a consequence of the social structure of industrial capitalism. The conceptual basis proposed here is consistent with efforts to strengthen and increase the benefits derived from traditional social welfare programs. A second, and more important, implication, of this voluntaristic--humanistic conception is that it provides a rationale, an intellectual rationale, that justifies efforts to strengthen traditional welfare programs and create new ones. This justification derives from the claim that traditional welfare programs must first provide for a minimum standard of living and then, on that basis, provide opportunities for those whose lives are, compared to others, highly and oppressively determined to really exercise choice and reason. Finally this conception implies that social welfare, conceived as based on the opportunity for choice, for being one's own cause, must be seen as both a characteristic of the collectivity and of individuals, and not something that applies only to an aggregation of individuals at the bottom of the present stratification system.

Closely following that narrower implication, the second broad implication of this starting point concerns the conception and measurement of social welfare. As Gross and Straussman (1974) argue the "social indicators movement," which began as an alternative to, and challenged, the exclusive reliance of governmental policymakers on economic concepts and data, has, by and large, become highly "economistic." Present economic and "social" indicators (see, for example, Social Indicators, 1973, Executive Office of The President: Office of Management and Budget, 1973), based primarily on data aggregated across individuals, measures levels, and to some extent the distribution, of such social system "outputs" as income, health, education and crime. Such data are important, but they are incomplete. A voluntaristic-humanistic theory of social welfare would also look to the extent and distribution of opportunities for choice and creativity which, at the least, are

consistent with (and at best strengthen or create) such opportunities for others.

Clearly must remains to be done, both on conceptual and measurement levels in further developing this conceptual basis into a general theory of social welfare. By way of the third and final broad implication, let me note that recent theoretical work on industrial and participatory democracy (e.g., Pateman, 1970, 1975; Garson and Smith, 1975), which deals with the same fundamental problem addressed here, clearly points the directions in which a general theory of social welfare must go. While the argument presented here reinforces and strengthens the conceptual foundation of the case for participatory democracy, work in that tradition provides both an immediate and relatively concrete "program" as well as a set of concepts and empirical methods for developing the voluntaristic-humanistic conceptual foundation of the general theory of social welfare.

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