

SOCIAL RESEARCH AND THE ADMINISTRATOR

J. A. Mack

Professor Myrdal¹ has called attention to the rise in the prestige of the social sciences in the last generation. This is not because of any great theoretical advance or outstanding new social invention within the field of the social sciences. It is simply that they are becoming more necessary. The accelerating tempo of social change, the dislocations and emergencies of total war and its aftermath, the increasing scale of political and economic organisation, create problems which go beyond the experience and improvising powers of the available administrators. These problems demand a more comprehensive and studied approach, a scientific approach. As a result the influence of social and economic research on practical administration, always important in a long range and indirect kind of way, is steadily becoming also direct and immediate. There are profound frictions and difficulties in the working out of this union of theory and practice, and the new social technologies, if they can so be called, are stumbling affairs. But the pressure of events is pushing strongly in the direction of the increased involvement of social scientists in the tackling of practical administrative problems, large and small, ranging from United Nations and World Bank projects to the marketing or recruitment problems of comparatively small private undertakings.

There is an obvious and close connection between the rise of sociology and the increasing scale of political and economic organisation. 'It is difficult to escape the impression,' says Mr. G. L. Arnold,² 'that sociology and collectivism are inherently related to each other. The tendencies making for a collectivist order also make for an attempt to elucidate the functioning of such an order—i.e. they encourage the growth of sociology.'³ But what exactly is the relation going to be? Is sociology to be the intellectual wing of collectivist planning? This is roughly the role prescribed for the social sciences by the Webbs and repeated by the inheritors of their

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tradition to this day.⁴ The same general view is implied by the philosophical sociology of Max Weber, who tried to formulate the broadest and most general trends of modern industrial society in terms of increasing scale of political and economic operation, increasing rationalisation, increasing secularisation, increasing bureaucracy.⁵

This trend, Weber held, would have profound reverberations in personal life and in religion. He liked to quote Schiller's phrase, the 'disenchantment of the world.' Mr. C. S. Lewis, when he speaks of the 'unchristening of the West' is saying much the same thing.⁶

The same general implication is to be found in the works of Ferdinand Tönnies.⁷ Tönnies' great distinction is to isolate very clearly a second pervasive principle of social organisation that runs counter to the trend towards greater uniformity and anonymity, the principle of community or *Gemeinschaft*, exemplified in the small-scale face-to-face groups where human relationships are non-purposive, non-reflective, non-economic, personal and spontaneously co-operative. But Tönnies' general conclusions are like Weber's—that in the general development of modern society the large-scale bureaucratic impersonal type of social relationship (*Gesellschaft*) is superseding the small-scale and intimate types of relationship which he identifies with pre-industrial society.

Karl Mannheim⁸ gave the findings of Weber an optimistic twist, as Mr. Arnold points out. He sees in the trend of society rationalisation without depersonalisation, planning without bureaucracy. Socialism is identified with collectivism and both are disguised by the term democracy; democracy is identified with planning⁹ and there are several agonising and unintelligible essays on the question posed and left unsolved by Plato—who will plan the planners? But the general drift is that a special corps or élite of sociologists will maintain liaison with dedicated élites in every branch of the planned organisation to keep the planning as free as possible.

Mannheim is the last considerable exponent of the view that the sociologist is the grey eminence of the planner. And Mannheim is no longer the influence that he was. On the one hand the more general type of sociological thinker, those who think in terms of trends, inevitable or otherwise, have reverted to the pessimism of Weber.¹⁰ They see planning coming inevitably and deplore it, or they see it as a distinct probability and warn against it. On the other hand, the more specific type of sociological observer, described by

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Mr. Arnold as the modern, hard-headed, non-utopian sociologist, is as he says far from hopeless about the human pattern disclosed by large-scale organisation.¹¹ The more bureaucratic it is, in Weber's sense, that is the more it tries to operate a policy planned at the centre in specific terms by means of standardised instructions which deprive the operating agents of initiative and responsibility, the less it is likely to work well. Any large-scale organisation which is effective over a long period of time is likely on inspection to be much more like a confederation than an autocracy. Again to quote Mr. Arnold: modern industrial undertakings develop 'forms of co-operation which leave considerable scope to personal and team initiative.'¹² He is referring to the technical and executive staff at a variety of levels. They can have a share in responsibility because they share with the men at the top common technical knowledge and interests. A different picture is usually disclosed at 'floor level.' A well-known study¹³ by the Harvard team disclosed how groups of workers adhere with great tenacity to their own production norms in the face of management pressures and incentives. In one case the co-operative forces fostered by the small group in the large undertaking work with the management: in the other case they work against it. But both show that the kind of relationships described by Tönnies as *Gemeinschaft* are not necessarily weakened by the growth of large-scale organisation. On the contrary they appear to be a condition of personal and social well-being in any type of society.

This suggests a more adequate conception of the relation between the sociologist and the administrator of large-scale social and industrial enterprises, and indeed of the place or role of sociology in industrial civilisation. It is to draw the attention of the planner and the administrator to those vital needs and relationships proper to human groups which are neglected or frustrated by the modes of organisation and control inherent in the rational-technical conduct of large undertakings. Taking a broader view one can see the rise of sociology as a reaction against the developing structures and relationships of large-scale, impersonal, and uniform social controls. Pioneer figures in this development are Le Play and Durkheim.¹⁴ Durkheim's study of suicide, supplemented by the work of Halbwachs, argues that the development of industrial society is accompanied by a growing deficiency in personal stability indicated by a distinct correlative growth in the rate of suicide. Thus his general conclusion tends to fall into the classical pessimistic canon.

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He sees on the one hand the aggrandisement of the State: on the other hand the relentless grinding down of the many and varied groups and configurations of traditional society, families and villages and local and occupational groupings, into a 'dust of individuals.'¹⁵ But he saw also the possibility that new centres of stability might be established, for example, in vocational groupings. The 'hard-headed and unromantic' sociologist of the present day looks at the opposing forces—on the one hand the collective pressures of State, economic monopoly, and mass-conditioning agencies, on the other hand the substance of multiform society—and he sees through the dust and heat of the struggle that the big battalions are not having it all their own way.

A good example is to be found in recent studies of British social policy towards the family. The outstanding feature of the past decade has been described by Dr. Bowlby as the rediscovery of the family. Previously social policy in this country had conformed broadly to the Durkheim model. It had tended, in a mild and gentlemanly way, to work in alliance with the mechanisms of industry and bureaucracy to reduce existing social groupings to a dust of individuals and then to reclassify the dust, in the manner of Mr. Boffin (Dickens' Golden Dustman) into categories appropriate to a rational social system. The social and educational services have been organised to provide for the needs of insured workers, elderly people, children at school, children in trouble, and so on. The State, it seemed, could ameliorate the condition of the people only after it had broken up the natural family group into a scatter of individuals.¹⁶ In the special services for the treatment and protection of delinquent children, deprived children, maladjusted children, and so on the assumption was evident that statutory and voluntary agencies should take over the work of the incompetent or unfortunate or negligent parent. The intention was limited only by the means. Even to this day the Children's Act makes it easier to split up and disperse a crippled family than to keep the family together.

The redirection of general policy began in 1948 with the inclusion for the first time in the statutory health services of the housewife, and with Family Allowances payable to the mother. But the social and economic balance is still tilted against young parents.¹⁷ More important if less easily visible is the growing consensus of opinion among those who work the children's services that they should work in and through the family and not merely for the children. As one

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Children's Officer said some years ago, 'It's better to put up a fence at the top of the cliff than send an ambulance to the bottom.' And this is of course the guiding principle of voluntary movements such as those of Marriage Guidance and Family Welfare.

A variety of studies have helped to produce this newer realism, and to dispel a good deal of the general gloom about the alleged decay and demoralisation of family life. There is the work of Bowlby himself on maternal care and mental health.¹⁸ All of the new first-hand studies of elderly people in working-class neighbourhoods indicate that where they have families the great majority of them are not being neglected.¹⁹ Professor Titmuss in his study of the War, *Problems of Social Policy*, concludes that the family group stood up very well to the shocks of evacuation and separation. Very few children were abandoned by their parents.²⁰ More recently still the account of the first year of Newcastle-upon-Tyne 1000 Family Study has found that over this true urban cross-section of families with young children the standard of mothering has improved throughout the century.²¹ All in all this constitutes a striking reversal of the naïve confidence of the 1920's, among the exponents of what one might call social workers' sociology, that the last person in the world who should be trusted with the proper care of a child are its own parents.

These examples suggest the respective roles in the co-operation of sociologist and practitioner. The sociologist has no experience of administrative decision and of maintaining a large-scale organisation; but he has a general knowledge of the forces which make for health and well-being in human organisation, and he is trained to ascertain all the relevant facts. Take the family for example. Statistics of divorce and delinquency, and the daily experience of social workers concerned full-time with pathological family situations, support the general case for the idea that family life is breaking down and requires some kind of administrative substitute. But an examination not merely of pathological families but of all families good and bad²² gives a different picture. A comparison of children brought up in institutions and children of the same type brought up at home²³ demonstrates that the older method is not only less expensive but gives the children a better chance. Hence the growing tendency to revise our methods of social administration to-day.

This opens up a big field of potential co-operation between scientists and administrators in the deliberate alteration of administra-

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tive methods and attitudes. But in the 'family services,' as in public and industrial administration generally, there is as yet only a tentative development of such an applied social research. There are of course a number of minor research techniques which have become incorporated into routine administration in such fields as marketing research, (using opinion poll and sampling techniques) and selection and training (using tests of various kinds and interview and discussion techniques) but these have become fairly run-of-the-mill practices and are not used for the tackling of new and emerging problems. There is also a good deal of co-operation of the kind in which the public authority or the industrial concern grants the researcher access to data which the latter needs for his own purposes without in any way affecting the policy or organisation of the undertaking. The researcher frames the specific problem he wants to tackle: the civic authority or the firm provides material and facilities: both parties then go on with their separate and distinct activities: and papers are eventually published in the appropriate scientific journals. This is of course the orthodox division of labour and it results in the gradual development of important general hypotheses which eventually impinge indirectly on the practice of general administration. But the development of what has sometimes been called operational research, (a term which is best reserved for technical engineering problems) or more generally action research, (which covers the social aspects of organisation) is still very slow. This would be designed to enlist the active co-operation of scientists and practitioners in the framing and tackling of problems which have arisen in the actual administrative situation, and would involve a deliberate series of changes in methods of operation in the ordinary real-life conduct of the sponsoring body.

The difficulties in the way of action research are only too obvious. There is first of all the natural reluctance of the executive director to co-operate except in his own terms.

'You always get one or two requests' (says one cynical scientist) 'to show that some policy the executive has already decided on is badly needed: or to show that some policy the executive is already employing is working well . . . ' The administrator 'uses social science the way a drunk uses a lamp post, for support rather than for illumination.'²⁴

More seriously the practical man does not know what to expect of social science. It is all too new: there are no precedents. The

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researcher is in the same boat for much the same reason. He does not know how it will work out.

There are other difficulties on the side of the research department or University. There is the feeling that to circumscribe research to the practical needs of administration is unduly limiting, tying the hands of the scientist. There is the view that it is scientifically unsound to undertake operations which will deliberately change the process which is being investigated, since it is usually impossible to isolate and control the process on the model of laboratory investigation.

Both of these objections are caused by a premature scientism. Action research on social and administrative situations is valuable precisely because it adopts a realistic criterion of problem selection. Instead of selecting one's own problem-situation from the whole range of theoretical possibilities, the selection being guided by the promptings of a primitive and undeveloped general theory (or of personal preference), action research is guided by the experience of those who are already involved in the process and who are up against real difficulties. This real problem-situation may well be the growing point for scientific development.

The second objection, that the scientist should be an observer and not an experimenter, that he should refrain from intervening in the situation, is more easily answered. Either he is disguised and anonymous, a 'participant observer' whose objects are concealed from those being observed, or he moves among them in his capacity of observer, making his purpose clear to them and seeking their help by the ordinary means of persuasion. This first role is permissible only in exceptional circumstances, such as a recent study of anti-Semitism where the investigator acted as a barman and later as a student interested in housing. Here the justification is that a direct explanation would have silenced the people under observation. Here too the load on this observer's conscience was profound.²⁵ But in industrial situations or in the general study of local communities, this disguised observation is neither right nor prudent. I think of one mass observer of dockers during the war who was under close observation by the observed during the whole period of the investigation. In the second case where the purpose of the investigation is made plain it becomes itself a considerable new factor in the process being investigated. The situation is changed anyhow.

The most considerable difficulty in the way of action research is

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its tempo and the sheer amount of work involved. It is slow: it works out its problems and its methods as it goes on: and it involves consulting with and seeking the agreement of all of those who are engaged in the undertaking: i.e., in the case of community research, not only the public authority and the administrators and the local officials who service a neighbourhood or local community but the informal leaders and representatives of the residents and any of the residents who are interested.

Let me develop the most important of these points—that the problems to be investigated and tackled are worked out in the course of the research. I have good authority here. H. R. Leighton describing his remarkable work in a Japanese civilian war prisoners' camp in U.S.A. concludes—Social science directs attention away from the question 'What to do?' to the prior question 'How to find out what to do?'²⁶ This is the key point. One cannot simply accept the rough formulation of the problem given by the administrative heads or by the whole complex of groups concerned. They can help to define the problem-situation—the general situation inside which the series of problems to be tackled will emerge—but the specific investigations and experimental projects can only be shaped after one is involved in the process. This involves not only a clarification of the situation and an analysis by the researcher but also the interpreting back of the situation to all the groups concerned. It involves also the incorporation in the action research team of some of the executive staff of the undertaking. The process is well described by Jaques²⁷ in the special setting of a highly receptive industrial firm.

An example of this process of involvement may be given from the proceedings which inaugurated the current social project in Bristol. These proceedings involved a long series of consultations with local administrators, educators, medicals, Magistrates, and social workers, followed by a three day residential conference of group discussions. There had been in existence for a year and a half a widely representative committee discussing what to do about juvenile delinquency. They were all quite certain at first that juvenile delinquency was not only the sign or symptom of social disease but was the disease itself. In the individual discussions the emphasis was slowly shifted from delinquency, which was in fact comparatively mild in Bristol and has since diminished considerably, to the reason why this wide cross-section of Bristol people were so concerned about it. It became gradually agreed that the concern about the young offender was

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primarily caused by the feeling that the services providing for the needs of families in various districts of Bristol were deficient. The three-day residential conference was accordingly designed to examine the working of the local social services which come into direct contact with families. Here at this stage the hypothesis was that what was wanted was better family services, or more integrated family services: it was thought to be primarily a matter of training and improving social workers. But this further discussion shifted from the family as a centre, and from the social workers who visit families, to the social deficiencies of the neighbourhood and the wider local community. It was suggested that these were not deficiencies to be made good by changes in formal social administration. The main trouble was an apparent lack of cohesiveness, and of local public opinion, and of local pride, and of common standards of behaviour. It was noted particularly that in one new housing estate which showed all of these defects in an extreme form no social leadership had developed from within the community itself.

The Bristol project was inaugurated to study this problem-situation, test the suggestions about lack of cohesiveness, etc., and if these were confirmed to find out what could be done to stimulate local leadership and initiative: the underlying hypothesis being that an area which was encouraged successfully to take responsibility for local activities and to develop its own leadership would become a better place for families to live in. The definition of specific problems and methods are the present task of the team concerned in the project in co-operation with the local residents, churches, schools and other social agencies.

It should be added here that old habits die hard. Many of those concerned in the original discussion could not rid themselves of the idea that delinquency was the root problem. Delinquency is in fact a symptom or index of a great variety of social and personal problems. But the project was held back for some time by the resentment of local councillors and of one of the project neighbourhoods at its being labelled a delinquent neighbourhood. It should never be forgotten that delinquency is always something that happens to other people. And in any case the root problem here was not delinquency.²⁸ Delinquency was merely *one* of its occasional manifestations. The problem²⁹ was the failure of people living in the same area to develop the social structure of a local community.

It seems to me that this Bristol enquiry has already thrown up

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some fruitful suggestions for further action research in the field of local government, city or county government, in relation to local communities—and particularly to local communities or potential communities in new housing areas. Professor Simey³⁰ has drawn attention to the challenge to sociologists presented by the paradoxical history of local government in the last seventy years—the contrast between the hopes and expectations of political philosophers and local leaders alike and the actual course of events. They expected two things, that the main utilities and services would be locally administered and that over and above the service of elected representatives local residents would take an interest in their own immediate neighbourhood and would take on various responsibilities for the conduct of local affairs. But as we all know some of the more vital services are no longer locally administered: and although the tasks of local administration are still very heavy, since they involve health and housing and education, there is a general lack of any feeling of responsibility among local residents. It is a bad thing that this should be accepted with apparent complacency by the major political parties. If the city loses its autonomy, says Professor Simey, that of the citizen may quickly follow suit.

The general problem-situation centres not so much in the local community itself as in the structure of local government administration. That provides the starting point of a possible action research. It would be formulated in co-operation with elected representatives as well as with administrators. The discussion might produce agreement to undertake an experiment in local government in one or more areas designed to associate voluntary organisations and informal associations with the social administration of the area: to promote closer ties between the administrative departments and the local neighbourhoods: and by encouraging local responsibilities to develop a vigorous community of good citizens.

These suggestions may be thought to be scientifically undesirable, since they would involve value judgments: and practically impossible, since they would come up against political obstacles. Let me take these objections in order.

On the moral issue, I quote Myrdal: 'Value premises should be introduced openly. They should be explicitly stated and not kept hidden as tacit assumptions. They should be used not only as premises for our policy conclusions but also to determine the direction of our positive research . . . This is our only protection

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against bias in research, for bias implies being directed by unacknowledged valuations.³¹

On the issue of politics, I paraphrase Arnold:³² The temptation of sociology, in alliance with social psychology, is to flatter the democracy which gives it room to develop, by over-emphasising the ultimate harmoniousness underlying all the conflicts. This leads to an emphasis on descriptive sociology, or on something nice and safe like Pareto on élites. But politics are taboo: perhaps they are vulgar. The question—what pressures operate to make politics vulgar?—is itself in bad taste. The sociologist must not frame his research projects in such a way as to avoid coming up against political opposition: otherwise he might be tempted to underestimate the weight of the forces making for conflict and this would invalidate his conclusions and taint his recommendations. If we concentrate too much on the relation between social research and the administrator, ignoring the politician behind the administrator, we will produce bad social research. If on the other hand we frame our research projects so as to comprehend the total situation, and as a result are led to study the political as well as the administrative configuration in all of its sociological detail, we shall be involved in unprecedented difficulties. But the risk of obstruction is worth taking. There are greater risks involved in avoiding obstruction.

University of Glasgow.

¹ Gunnar Myrdal: 'Relation between Social Theory and Social Policy,' *British Journal of Sociology* IV, pp. 210-242.

² G. L. Arnold: 'Collectivism Reconsidered,' *British Journal of Sociology* Vol. VI, pp. 1-15.

³ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁴ Cf. D. V. Glass: 'The Application of Social Research,' *British Journal of Sociology* I, pp. 17-30.

⁵ Bureaucracy in this usage is not a term of opprobrium but a synonym for the large-scale administration, controlled and directed by rational planning, of individuals classified according to their function in the undertaking.

⁶ Inaugural Lecture in Chair of Mediaeval and Renaissance Literature, University of Cambridge, 1955.

⁷ F. Tönnies: *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, 1887.

⁸ Mannheim: *Man and Society*, 1940.

⁹ Arnold: *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹⁰ Schumpeter, Hayek, Burnham, Demant.

¹¹ Arnold: *op. cit.*, p. 5.

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- ¹² *Ibid*, p. 6.
- ¹³ Roethlisberger & Dickson: *Management and the Worker*, Part IV, 1934.
- ¹⁴ Cf. Mayo: *Social Problem of an Industrial Civilisation*, 1945.
- ¹⁵ Durkheim: *Le Suicide*, 1897, (last chapter).
- ¹⁶ Cf.: *Report of Royal Commission on Population*, 1949. H.M. Stationery Office (Cmd. 7695), Chapter 14.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*.
- ¹⁸ Bowlby: *Maternal Care and Mental Health*, Geneva, 1951.
- ¹⁹ National Council of Social Service: *Over Seventy*, 1954, p. 25.
- ²⁰ Timmuss: *Problems of Social Policy*, 1950, p. 437.
- ²¹ Spence et al: *A Thousand Families in Newcastle-on-Tyne*, 1954, p. 175.
- ²² Spence et al: *op. cit.*
- ²³ Bowlby: *op. cit.*
- ²⁴ H. R. Leighton: *Human Relations in a Changing World*, 1949, pp. 127-8.
- ²⁵ J. H. Robb: *The Working-Class Anti-Semite*, 1955.
- ²⁶ Leighton: *op. cit.*
- ²⁷ E. Jaques: *Changing Culture of a Factory*, 1952.
- ²⁸ It never is: v. J. A. Mack: 'Juvenile Delinquency Research—A Criticism,' *Sociological Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1, New Series. University College of North Staffordshire, July, 1955.
- ²⁹ as provisionally defined.
- ³⁰ T. S. Simey: 'The Contribution of the Social Services to Public Administration,' *Public Administration*, 1952.
- ³¹ Myrdal: *op. cit.*, p. 241.
- ³² Arnold: *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.