The Social Sciences and Public Policy

Maturity brings problems of relevance and training.

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The bearing of the social sciences on public policy is a broad but also a treacherous area. It is, in consequence, often and prudently avoided. To examine it risks, among other things, exposing to view past embarrassments that most social scientists would prefer to forget, records of early excesses, sources of controversy so recently dispatched as to seem menacingly current, and evidences of the gap between our aspirations or pretensions and our performance. Small wonder that on most occasions the problem is exorcised and ignored.

Despite our strenuous efforts, however, the problem reappears. The data of our concerns, if not the constructs with which we work, are never far from the arena of public decision. Our own motivations, however dominated by intellectual fascination, are often and not obscurely rooted in an early and persistent interest in the public weal. This fact we may suppress, but we cannot dispose so easily of the prudential consideration that, if our inquiries, which now are strongly though of course inadequately supported by public and quasi-public funds, are not in some increasing measure pertinent to public and governmental decisions, we can hardly expect such support to be forthcoming indefinitely. An art or a science —any science—must be partly, perhaps even predominantly, an end in itself; basic research, however we may agree to define it, is its own first justification. But an art or a science, if it is to be supported and not merely tolerated by a society, also must be, or give prospect of being, pleasing or instructive or useful. Since the social scientists bring pleasure to few beyond our own ranks and since our instructiveness is frequently limited, even among the young, by the propensity for every man to be his own social scientist, we can scarcely afford to ignore the requirement of usefulness.

The problem acquires a current and more serious insistence from the evidence that out of the secondary and tertiary effects of accelerating technological change are emerging many problems to which the social sciences are presumptively relevant. New or altered technologies directly and indirectly challenge the adaptive potential of public policy. What is at issue is not merely whether means can be found to avoid critical dislocations and destructive reactions to change. At issue also is the more fundamental question that has motivated groups such as the Commission on the Year 2000: Can policy be so taken as to provide moral choices among recognizable alternatives? These policies are not the domain of the social sciences, but it is reasonable to expect that these sciences should be able to offer substantial assistance in defining issues, shaping alternatives, and anticipating consequences. An attempt at this kind and degree of involvement in public policy can hardly be avoided.

Meeting the challenge of relevance, however, cannot be reduced to an act of will or to a collection of well-intentioned commitments to the discharge of a public obligation. It is entangled with aspects of the history of the social sciences, especially in this country, and with features of their development as sciences that seriously complicate the form and quality of their participation in the making of policy. These complications may be in the process of becoming more restrictive. If this is the case, then it may be desirable to reexamine the forms and channels of such participation and reasses the allocation of our collective energies.

Background Influences

American social scientists have reason, drawn from the history of their disciplines, for being cautious about assuming the sponsorship of any innovation in public policy. Clear in their institutional memories are events of the first decade or two of this century, when their predecessors, with rare exceptions, were conspicuously overready to claim for particular "reform" programs and policies the authority of their fields of study. These early social scientists were a major reliance of the Progressive Movement in its various forms and, to a lesser degree, of its adversaries. Less close, perhaps, to points of real influence than their counterparts are today, they made up in certainty of pronouncement what they lacked in power.

The civic motivations underlying these involvements cannot be questioned. Nor can one justifiably, even with the wisdom of hindsight, say that all of the proposals the early social scientists championed were unsound or counterproductive. One can reasonably argue, however, that in general the proposals were intellectually premature and scientifically innocent. Inadequately supported by empirical data and lacking, for the most part, any but the most simplistic theoretical foundation, they were relevant, as a newspaper editorial may be relevant, but almost entirely lacking in rigor and in anticipation of consequences.

In the years after World War I what might be described as reaction against this kind of premature relevance developed. Stronger and more needed in some fields than others and often not explicitly acknowledged as a rejection of the earlier movements, since its origins were in fact much more complex, the reaction took the form of an increased preoccupation with the several fields as disciplines and with social science as science. This concern was for a time especially marked in a collective search for stronger data and improved research techniques.

Illustrative of, and important to, the new emphasis was the establishment of the Social Science Research Council in 1924, characterized, especially in its early years, by its concern with *common* problems intrinsic to research and especially with research techniques. This

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was a period in which most social scientists were ready to assume that a joint perspective, relating many disciplines, could be achieved. These years produced at least one seriously regarded manual of methods purporting to cover the whole range of the social sciences (*1*). During these years, also, the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* was conceived, marking a high point of collective and common concern among a large fraction of at least the leaders in most of the social science fields.

Developments between the Wars

If one were to write an adequate history of these disciplines during the quarter century following World War I, he would probably find himself emphasizing at least two significant developments. In the first place, the period seems to have provided the conditions required for rapid and fruitful advances in the social sciences. Looking only at those influences internal to the American setting—probably the most important, though clearly not the only ones of importance—he would note a strong preoccupation with more sophisticated and systematic approaches to problems and data, one aspect of the reaction against the naively based policy involvements referred to above. He would also record an increase in funds available for research, chiefly from foundations. These were small by current standards but substantial in comparison with those of any earlier day. Finally, he would have to reckon with the indications that during this period there were actively at work in the United States a sufficient number of individuals in the social sciences, if not in each discipline, to constitute a community. The frequency and the character of the contacts among the members of this community seem to have provided both stimulus and reinforcement to new developments. The significance of this matter of numbers and relationships can scarcely be exaggerated. These three conditions in the United States in the years after World War I were peculiarly favorable to a "takeoff" by the social sciences and to their achievement of greater sophistication and competence.

The second significant development in this period that probably would be emphasized by a historical analysis would be the increased sophistication that grew from these favorable conditions. The growth in skill and technicality was, of course, uneven. Some fields inevitably developed more rapidly and more fruitfully than others, but the general trend was consistent. Paradoxically, however, as such growth took place it was associated with a decline or shift in the common perspectives that marked the beginning of the trend, and with some reduction in the concern of the several disciplines for public policy.

An increase in intellectual competence hardly could have occurred without many practitioners in each field devoting their energies disproportionately not only to the discipline as such but also to more or less distinct technical segments of the field. A decline in perspectives common to the several disciplines was thus almost inevitable. One may suspect that this natural tendency has been further encouraged by the rapid increase in numbers of social scientists since 1945, so that an influence that earlier seems to have fostered the development of a collaborative community of social scientists assisted, as numbers grew larger, in later segmenting the social sciences into a series of communities. It would not be a complete exaggeration to say that what these "communities" retained in common were chiefly their problems of "external relations"—the form and volume of governmental support of the social sciences, professional problems concerning the privacy of human subjects, and the like. It seems likely that communication on most other matters affecting the social sciences increasingly has been restricted to the segmented "communities." This tendency presumably had something to do with the skepticism that met proposals in the 1950's to compile a new *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*. Although the enterprise was subsequently undertaken and completed, critics argued that these disciplines had outgrown any such unified compendium and that the utility of an encyclopedia would be restricted by the specialized interests of the prospective users.

Decline of Policy Concern

An apparently reduced concern of the social sciences for public policy, despite greater sophistication, is a related but more complex matter. If one mark of a developing discipline is that it sets its own agenda in terms of those things that its members as scientists regard as important, then at least a temporary withdrawal from the area of public policy is to be expected as the social science matures. If the preoccupations that in large part define a discipline are being set by the problems of public policy, then in some measure they are not being set by the problems that confront the discipline itself as an intellectual enterprise. The alternatives are in fact usually not as sharply separable as this statement may suggest, but the tendency and its underlying logic seem perfectly clear. Especially given the inclination in all of the sciences to grant the highest prestige to the theoreticians—those members whose work is most completely oriented to the discipline—a turning away from policy concerns as a field matures is scarcely remarkable.

In a very real sense, moreover, a more sophisticated discipline becomes increasingly irrelevant to public policy. Sciences seem to develop in two ways, both of which contribute to this outcome by confining, in effect, their impingements on policy to segments of their enterprise. In the first mode of development, systematic, theoretically valuable work proceeds by successive abstractions from reality or simplifications of reality, portions or aspects of the phenomenal world being postulated, assumed, or controlled in the interests of precision and manageability. Although in various ways complexity can be reintroduced and phenomena brought back from limbo, the science as science does not reproduce reality. Its bearing on the complex world of public policy therefore remains in some degree segmental. The segment may, of course, be useful in the making of policy, but one suspects that this utility is achieved, when it *is* achieved, through another process that is not science though obviously it is related. Those individuals are perhaps correct who argue that, as a social science reaches a point where its practitioners begin to understand the causal relationships underlying change, pertinent social policy will become more effective. But they seem to ignore or at least underestimate the problems and pitfalls that lie between such sharpened understanding and altered policy.

The second path of scientific development is through specialization and, at least to a degree, through subspecialization. This is a process that is inherently segmental and even divisive. Its segmental character can be seen readily

when a group of specialists are assembled to discuss a policy matter or quasi-policy area that extends beyond any of their individual disciplines. Each participant, following the assumptions and procedures of his specialty, defines the problem differently. If communication is to occur and certainly if any sort of joint effort is to be achieved, either a means of simultaneous translation must be found or one set of participants, drawing on higher disciplinary prestige or on force of personality, must succeed in imposing its formulation on the other. Divisiveness is also illustrated by the difficulty, in this time of rapid growth of information, that the specialist encounters, even if no translation problem is involved, in knowing what is known in closely proximate specialties. His remoteness, together with the waste and frustration involved in rediscovering the discovered, leads to what Margaret Mead, in another context (*2*), calls "a rebellion of the educated man against a new kind of ignorance . . . not the stimulating ignorance of the unknown, but the ignorance of what is already known."

For the public official the sources of these impediments are of less concern than the fact of apparently limited relevance. The social sciences, for the most part, have not become so esoteric and so specialized that even their presumptive bearing on a policy problem is unclear. Perhaps they never will reach such a point. But they are becoming sufficiently segmental and specialized in character that the public official who turns to them risks either hearing little but noise or receiving "fractional advice to deal with whole policy," as William T. R. Fox expresses the problem presented by the natural scientists (*3*).

Some increased isolation of the social sciences from each other and some increased obstacles to a direct pertinence of the social sciences to public policy are clearly unavoidable. A growth in rigor leads inevitably to greater self-consciousness in a discipline, to the setting of priorities and agendas of research in terms of the assumptions and requirements of the discipline (as seen by the practitioners themselves), and consequently to remoteness from each other and from the full, complex reality of problems in the political arena. The contrast, of course, is not between a simpler, less pretentious set of social sciences fully sensitive and pertinent to the range of policy, on the one hand, and a more sophisticated group of disciplines paradoxically rendered socially impotent by an increase in power that is purely scholastic, on the other. It is rather between a set of presciences scarcely distinguishable from the folklore and wisdom operating in the market place and a group of sciences or nascent sciences that have attempted to set themselves intellectually manageable problems by abstracting in various degrees from reality through discarding some of its features, and hence have created the problem of relevance as they have separated themselves from folklore, from each other, and from the totality of the policy complex.

Policy Relevance as a Problem

The problem of relevance remains, however, and if one is justified in projecting the trends of the past two decades, one can only conclude that it will become more visible and probably more troublesome. This relevancy problem, as the foregoing discussion implies, has at least two dimensions. One is the proportion of the research energy of the social sciences that is allocated to the solution of problems that emerge primarily from the needs of the discipline or subdiscipline as an intellectual enterprise. (I use the word *primarily* because I realize that this is a matter that is far subtler and more complex than the flat statement suggests.) The second is the degree of effectiveness in focusing or merging the technical elements of these sciences so that the gap between them and the policy problem as a complex whole is reduced to minimal and, hopefully, manageable proportions. I propose to concentrate my attention on the second dimension of the problem, in part because I should expect that, if solutions to that dimension can be approximated, the first will take care of itself.

In considering this second dimension of the question of relevance—the problem of focusing the elements of the social sciences on a reasonable approximation of the public policy issue—one can usefully employ the distinctions proposed by Don K. Price (*4*) among four broad functions or "estates" in the area of governmental affairs—the scientific, the professional, the administrative, and the political.

Without trying to reproduce his analysis, one may recall that the principal distinction which he makes between the scientific and the professional functions is that, while the former has progressed by cutting itself off from concern with purpose, "except [for] the abstract purpose of advancing truth and knowledge," the latter are "organized around a combination of a social purpose and a body of knowledge, much of it drawn from science." The administrators, on the other hand, although necessarily and deeply involved with purpose and value, somewhat resemble but are not, in this sense, professionals, since, unlike engineers or physicians, they cannot be identified by a particular social purpose distinguishable from the purposes of their political superiors, or by a definite body of knowledge that specifies their training and the criteria for admission to their ranks.

The professions, as Price conceives them, are related almost exclusively to the natural sciences. These sciences, as such, and the professions are both, of course, in varying degrees directly involved in public affairs. Together, however, they provide a wealth and variety in the public concerns growing out of natural science that are almost wholly lacking in connection with the social sciences. For perfectly understandable historical reasons, professions drawing their distinctive knowledge from the social sciences have not yet clearly emerged. Even the legal profession, which comes as close as any, does not yet bear the same relation to economics or psychology that the engineering profession bears to physics or chemistry. Some aspects of operations research may be developing in this direction, but this is not yet clear.

This lack of functional differentiation means that, in policy areas pertinent to the social sciences, the relating of scientific knowledge to political purpose may be attempted by the scientist but is more likely to be attempted by the administrator, unaided. The social scientist's attempts to relate scientific knowledge to political purpose involve an awkward mixture of functions. To be sure, an increasingly sophisticated set of social sciences can contribute to the sharpening of the criteria of judgment and even identify emerging policy problems with increased speed and precision. But these potentialities in themselves are not sufficient to narrow significantly the gap between the sciences and the policy complex. Something more is necessary.

Three kinds of development may provide at least a part of the something more. One is the practice, as yet rather localized, of arranging frequent but ap-

parently largely unplanned interchanges between public administrative positions and university positions. This alternation of roles is valuable and probably should be explored and encouraged on a systematic basis. It has limitations on both sides, however. On the governmental side, it brings into the policy arena in any particular instance only one scientific specialty. A merger of specialties, often desirable, is not provided for. Further, such in-and-out arrangements may sacrifice a continuity of administrative experience that may be important in itself. On the science side, prolonged absence from the research arena may retard or even block the scientific accomplishments of the man who attempts to interchange roles. A second device is the partial interchange of roles that may be accomplished through regular seminars or conferences between social scientists and administrators, in which each agenda is a carefuly designed combination or an alternation of presentations of scientific developments and policy problems, which is unlike the normal consultant relationship. Imaginatively used, these seminar devices can avoid the wasteful limitations of most conferences, with which all of us have had too much experience, and they may help to meet the problem. They are likely, however, to fall short of achieving an effective fusion of specialties. The third device is the familiar multidisciplinary team characteristic of the nonprofit institute working on contract. It clearly can provide flexible combinations of specialties and can, at least under some circumstances, occupy a portion of the gap between scientific knowledge and public purpose. It may, however, depending on qualities of staff, on management, and on contract arrangements, risk losing its gap-narrowing potential if it moves toward a preoccupation identical with that of either the policy maker or the scientist, and its distinctiveness may, at least in the area of the social sciences, place it at a crippling distance from both.

Training the Public Administrator

The limitations on all of these devices, plus the essential absence of pertinent professional structures, thus indicate that the problem of making social science relevant to public policy is peculiarly a burden on the public administrator, whether he recognizes it or not. Who he is, what he knows, and what skills he possesses, therefore, not only are matters of general public consequence but also need to be serious collective concerns of the social sciences.

These concerns the social scientists seem to be neglecting. In fact, there is considerable danger that the very trends that have led to the strengthened competence of the social scientists as such have encouraged and contributed to that neglect. Ironically for a set of disciplines operating primarily from institutions of higher education, the seat of the neglect seems to be in the educational process and particularly in the college and university. The ability of the administrator to give social science an appropriate relevance to public policy will depend heavily on his education.

This is one aspect of the general problem of determining how to train governmental administrators, one far broader than that under discussion. Appropriate to the narrower focus, however, is Price's proposition that the education of the administrator "cannot be reduced to a specific discipline or a restricted field"—a proposition that follows from his conception of the function. If this is the case in general, the proposition surely pertains no less accurately to the education of administrators to make effective and relevant policy use of a set of increasingly specialized and technical disciplines.

The general features of such an education certainly would involve a broad acquaintance with the theories, methods, and problems (including ways of stating problems) that characterize the several disciplines. If it is to be a training that is to be not *about* social science but *in* social science, it must also involve experience sufficiently advanced to include doing some scientific work, as part of a collective enterprise or as an individual. It is most unlikely that one could acquire a critical understanding of the difficulties, limitations, and pitfalls of work in any social science without really doing some.

Divergent Tendencies in Education

These are reasonable and, one suspects, acceptable objectives. The difficulty is that they are not highly compatible with each other, with what appear to be the requirements for a career in one of the social science disciplines, or with the tendencies of current practice. The visible signs and the underlying pressures overwhelmingly indicate that, for all students, the second objective, technical proficiency in a discipline, is dominant and increasingly so.

Students—especially able students, who are always in short supply—become essentially the property of a department or even an individual professor, not only at the graduate but even at the undergraduate level. The requirements of the major at the undergraduate stage and the departmental Ph.D. program in the graduate years take an early and often almost preclusive priority. At its most defensible—and it is defensible—this pattern is aimed at the entirely reasonable goal of bringing the able and motivated student to the highest possible level of technical proficiency with minimal loss of the time, energy, and imagination that are the rapidly wasting assets of those years. This pattern serves, and presumably well serves, the purpose of advancing the discipline and the competence of its practitioners. It is at least questionable, however, whether it meets the need for training public administrators and, incidentally, whether it constitutes good education.

It is perhaps appropriate to suggest that influences other than promotion of the discipline also contribute to this pattern of training. A desire to reproduce one's specialized self in one's students is at least unconsciously influential. Appearances suggest also that the rate of production of young specialists is one of the key but unacknowledged counters in the genteel rivalries between departments, institutions, and even individual teachers that are obviously a part, and not necessarily an unhealthful part, of the academic climate.

Collectively these influences gain strength from the inclinations and dilemmas of students themselves, especially at the undergraduate level and particularly among able undergraduates. Despite the considerable amount of nonsense that is being uttered about them, it does seem clear that a large fraction of the ablest feel the need for a kind of closure, for the certainty of a clear objective in a world of multiple options. This many of them can find in a complete preoccupation with the major discipline. They are encouraged in this direction, moreover, not only by approving responses from their instructors but also by their own estimates, as they contemplate the competition for entrance to a Ph.D. program, of what will do them good in the eyes of a de-

partmental admissions committee. For the graduate student this kind of specialized commitment is not only natural but almost certainly necessary. It also is desirable in some degree at the undergraduate stage, but in what degree? The prospects for training an adequate number of competent generalist-administrators are likely to turn on the answer to that question.

Another tendency that deserves mention in this general connection is the interdisciplinary competition implicit in most efforts by social scientists to alter the curricula of the secondary schools. Such efforts are not to be deplored. They are long overdue, and they have not gone far enough toward correcting the dilution of quality that followed the society's commitment half a century ago to mass education through the high school. What is questionable about these undertakings is that for the most part they have been a matter of each discipline for itself; the effort has been not merely to improve the quality of teaching materials but also to stake out a new or enlarged claim for each discipline in the limited time-budget of the secondary school. In the assertion of these claims little or nothing is asked or said about their proper relations with cognate disciplines. Reconciliation tends to be left to chance, to bargaining, or to the peculiar qualifications of professional curriculum makers.

One should be careful not to exaggerate the seriousness of these problems for education in general or for the training of administrators. The ability of students to educate themselves and one another in spite of the system, and in so doing to devise programs of training nowhere recognized in the catalogs, should never be underestimated. It may even be the case that such informal, chance factors constitute the only way to produce the administrator types that we need. Experience indicates that it is one way. But the suspicion remains that something more deliberate is needed.

A more deliberate effort will require from active academics a serious, explicit, and continuing concern for education. One gets the impression that departmental and professional gatherings, except as they discuss a particular discipline, are the last places, not excepting general faculty meetings, in which to encounter serious thought about education. Presidents and deans are expected to pontificate on such matters, and the talk of professional educationists is tolerated if they keep to themselves, but an impression is conveyed that such concerns are not quite respectable for serious scholars. The impression is not accurate, of course, but circumstances give it some appearance of validity.

A Proposal

Experience leads me to conclude that a fairly large number of academics retain a more than residual concern for education over a reach broader than the individual discipline. If this conclusion is correct, then what is characteristically lacking is an appropriate setting in which such concerns can be focused. Especially in the social sciences, which in recent years have concentrated heavily on the development of individual disciplines and consequently have given encouragement to segmental preoccupations, it is understandable that such settings have not been contrived. But perhaps a stage has been reached where it would be possible and fruitful to give some formal consideration to such joint concerns.

An interdisciplinary commission in the social sciences could, if the questions it examined were radical enough, contribute not only to the training of administrators capable of making the social sciences more effective in the formation of policy but also to education in a broader sense. In fact, in order for it to deal effectively with the one, its mandate probably would have to encompass the other. This is not the place to attempt to outline its agenda. It seems clear, however, that such an investigation should look at the patterns of exposure to, and immersion in, the social sciences at least over the span of the undergraduate and doctoral years. What can or should be the distinctive functions of each of these stages? How early and in what measure is disciplinary specialization essential? How early and how continuously can interdisciplinary problems, including those growing out of policy issues, be confronted without inviting superficiality and the irrelevance of a groundless certainty? How can they be identified?

In the years ahead the problems associated with the bearing of the social sciences on public policy are likely to become more difficult and more complex. That prospect suggests that these disciplines have some joint policy problems of their own. Chance unquestionably will play a major part in whatever solutions or accommodations are reached in both areas. How much is it necessary or wise to leave to chance?

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