

# LAND & LIBERTY

Editor V. H. BLUNDELL

APRIL & MAY, 1969

TWO SHILLINGS

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JOURNAL OF THE UNITED  
COMMITTEE FOR THE TAXATION  
OF LAND VALUES LTD.

177 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London, S.W.1.  
Tel. 01-834-4266

Annual Subscription:  
U.K. and Sterling Area: £1  
U.S.A. and Canada: \$3

Established: JUNE, 1894  
VOL. LXXVI.  
Nos. 899 & 900

APRIL & MAY, 1969



## The Failure of our Social Scientists

A RECENT CONCLAVE of British social scientists at Loughborough sadly concluded that social scientists in general were a useless lot, not at all influential, and that they could rarely point to definite consequences of their work.

It does seem curious that in an age when social problems have reached a crescendo, social scientists should be passive, even helpless, bystanders. Why should this be? Scientists in other fields are very much into the thick of things. They are needed to launch space missiles, build marvellous computers, and transplant hearts.

Is the ignoring of social scientists the fault of the public, or perhaps of the politicians? It is true that the latter are usually guided not by science but by the pressures put upon them, and the people demand legislation according to their prejudices and fears rather than according to scientific principles. Governments do not call in social scientists to help frame social policy in the way they call in physical scientists to help build up armaments. Clearly, social science does not enjoy the same confidence that other sciences do.

Granting all this, what share of the blame can be laid at the door of the social scientists themselves? What might they have done wrong to forfeit the trust and reliance that should be due to them?

When we study the works of social scientists—in sociology, economics, political science, etc.—we find few guidelines to sound social policy. They alternate between high-flown theories that are beyond the ken of ordinary mortals, and statistical surveys on matters trivial or otherwise, but which always relate to the past and given hardly any guide to the future. Especially in economics, complicated mathematical formulae are

erected on premises that are unproven or concealed, or taken for granted, and such have only the appearance of being scientific.

Social scientists also tend to talk to one another rather than to the public. Indeed, they make themselves inaccessible to ordinary people. Scientists in other fields can usually explain their ideas fairly clearly when the occasion demands, but social scientists have made up a private jargon that is incomprehensible to the interested lay enquirer. "Speech disorders," the sociologist Pitirim Sokorim aptly terms this jargon.

After an era of increasing specialisation, the social scientists are showing an interest in getting together to create a common umbrella that will unify their diverse studies. But even this effort has rapidly succumbed to elitism, scientism, and jargon. They are still talking to one another, and have invented another new jargon, supposedly to bridge their different subjects, and in fact have merely created a new specialised subject.

While the social scientists are weaving their webs, the world is moving from crisis to crisis. And these crises are met in willy-nilly fashion, piecemeal, haphazardly, or settled by bowing to those with the most money, influence, power or votes.

In cases where a thoughtful analysis of a social problem has been worked out, it has usually been by persons outside the ranks of professional social scientists. In America, it was an outsider, Ralph Nader, who shook the nation with his revelations of how unsafe were the automobiles being turned out on Detroit's assembly lines. Another outsider, Rachel Carson, gave the country a jolt with her critique of the way the natural environment is being polluted. These charges were at first angrily denied, then, grudgingly admitted little by little.

In Britain the Wolfenden Report, dealing with the reform of laws concerning sexual offences, was produced with the collaboration of clergymen, policemen and public officials—but where were the social scientists? Where, indeed, are they when any grave question has to be decided? Apparently, they wait for somebody else to perform the action, then they come in and make statistical studies of the results.

A cry goes up from the people but the social scientists do not hear. Wars destroy human lives and they study



tribal rituals in the South Sea islands. Traffic and pollution choke our cities and they make statistical surveys on which families own what cars. The people ask for

bread and the social scientists give them a mathematical formula.

The unscientific attitude of people and politicians to social policy is deplorable, but so is the failure of social



scientists to be "where the action is."

The one outstanding case where a modern economist has decidedly influenced public policy has been Lord Keynes, and even he was not a professional social scientist, and had uncomplimentary things to say about them. Unfortunately, his is also the outstanding case of building mathematical formulae on shaky premises. His theories enable our politicians—and politicians and professors throughout the world—to keep the show going with dazzling juggling acts, to disguise economic problems and to postpone fundamental issues.

Social scientists seldom tackle fundamental issues. At another conference of these intellectuals (at Princeton, U.S.A.), it was said that the classic disputes of the free economy versus state economic planning, private enterprise versus state control, and the touchy matter of the distribution of wealth, were all "old hat." The new thing is technology, and social science will henceforth concentrate on making this a more technically perfect civilisation. Never mind who gets what—that is irrelevant.

No wonder these people are a self-confessed "useless lot!" A great pity, for if we are going to get our problems solved permanently and solidly, it will have to be in some kind of scientific way. It is high time that social scientists became what they are supposed to be—scientists for society.

R.C.

### ***Their Daily Bread***

**W**ANT TO MAKE DOUGH? One recipe: take a couple of seedy mid-Victorian streets and a handful of rundown shops within ten minutes of the West End. Clean and slice as necessary. Add the yeast of an uninhibited business approach and watch the mixture rise. In this case the main ingredients are Portland and Princesdale Roads in Holland Park where, in some cases, property values have already doubled in the last six years. And be sure to get stuck in while the district is still half baked.

*London Property Letter, March 22*