The New Sorcery

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"Incantations remain more effective for manipulating crowds than logical arguments . . . sorcery continues to be stronger than science."

THE OLD ADAGE tells us that the pen is mightier than the sword. The implication of this is that the pen is a more honourable instrument for human advancement than the razor-edged weapon. Today, I believe, that no longer holds true. Words are the crucial tools by which men extend the boundaries of freedom; but they are also the most subtle means of repressing men into servility and ignorance, and all too often that is how they are now being used.

For we live in the age of pseudo-scientific knowledge. Tons of volumes are produced annually - each one allegedly pushing the horizons of our objective understanding of man and society a little further out. Sadly, the brave man who ventures into the plethora of new books, theses, papers, is more than likely going to lose his way, and end up either misinformed or totally cynical, particularly where the social sciences (the major academic growth industry) are concerned.

Anybody wanting to keep his bearings before venturing into the field of the social sciences would be well advised to read these two books by Andreski and Popper* - beacons of light in tempestuous seas.

Stanislav Andreski is professor of sociology at Reading University. His is a masterful exercise in iconoclasm. He condemns pseudo-scientific theories which are merely exercises in obfuscation, using long words to conceal personal prejudices (like "dysfunctional" instead of the value-laden word "bad"). He attacks his academic colleagues who measure success by verbiage rather than quality. And he exposes the crypto-conservative stance of the sociologist and political scientist who have dishonoured the original aims of their disciplines - who have lost interest in the fact that "the social sciences have developed as an offshoot of reformist strivings in step with the growing realisation that the knowledge of causal relations is a prerequisite of effective action."

Andreski is vicious in his denouncement of the motives of the academic set, and alarmed by their calculated effect on society - that of glossing over defects in order "to exude an aura of optimism reminiscent of a public relations man's office. Its chief message is that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds and that (as in a Hollywood film) everything will turn out right in the end."

The old conservatives like Burke were a stimulus to the advance of knowledge: they constructively attacked utopian theories, but did not deny contemporaneous shortcomings in society. Today's crypto-conservative, argues Andreski, has vested interest in surreptitiously propagating the virtues of the existing order - *any* order which happens to exist - through scientific propositions and definitions allegedly free of subjective values.

No one denies that the task of the social scientist is tougher than that of the student of nature. For man has a free will, one of the variables which make precision of description and projection a hazardous exercise. For instance, if a person knows that he is forecasted by the Institute of Know-ology to behave in manner X, he will take this prediction into account - and may, through rational assessment or simple cussedness, behave in manner X1.

Nobody can insure against this behaviour; no-one should want to, since this is what helps to make man the superior animal. It also implies the need for humility in the social scientist. But far from recognising the huge question marks hanging over his every piece of research, the social scientist — armed with the favoured questionnaire upon which theories will be woven — tramples onwards:

"Possessing only a very approximate and tentative knowledge, mostly of the rules-of-thumb kind, and yet able to exert much influence through his utterances, a practitioner of the social sciences often resembles a witch doctor, who speaks with a view to the effects his words may have rather than to their factual correctness; and then invents fables to support what he has said, and to justify his position in the society."

The methodological problems facing the social scientist rarely receive attention; and yet they constitute key barriers to the advancement of knowledge of man. For instance, there are elements of self-negation and of self-fulfilment surrounding a well-known social scientific theory. Take Marx's theory of the stages of human society culminating in the collapse of capitalism and the evolution of communism. To what degree has knowledge of the theory led people to conform to the prediction where they otherwise would have not done

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* Stanislav Andreski, *Social Sciences as Sorcery*, Andre Deutsch Ltd £2.95
Karl R. Popper, *Objective Knowledge*, Oxford U.P., £4.50.

so? And to what extent has the theory been a warning to elites, stimulating them into taking preventive action, so thwarting the prediction? These are the kinds of thoughts which don't bother the natural scientist: cook up a theory about the weather, and one reasonably concludes that this will make no difference to the behaviour of the clouds and rain and sun. . . .

Incantations, says Andreski, remain more effective for manipulating crowds than logical arguments, so that in the conduct of human affairs sorcery continues to be stronger than science. Repeatedly he laments the social scientist's lack of training in philosophy, which would equip him with a more sensitive understanding of the meaning and use of words. Karl Popper the philosopher is a paradigm case in point.

Popper rightly regards the theory of knowledge in philosophy as having been dominated by the Cartesian mind : body dichotomy, and by Descartes's view that knowledge is within the mind and acquires the status of certainty when, introspectively, we can "see" the knowledge as clear and distinct.

Most subsequent philosophical work has been aimed at extricating us from this position, notably the efforts of the eighteenth century British empiricists like Locke. They held that information acquired through the use of the five senses could be relied upon; and that the criterion of commonsense, discerned through an examination of ordinary language (our unquestioned thoughts) could be taken as a reliable guide to knowledge.

The difficulty with this position is that our ordinary language ascribes the status of certainty to knowledge. And philosphers have been, and are, engaged in defining the criteria by which we can justify the claim "to know" something.

Popper wants to undermine this. In examining the principle of induction, he argues that all knowledge should be regarded as having no more than conditional status; that is, conditional on its continuing to be useful and the best possible available hypothesis. One counter-example would be sufficient to demonstrate its falsity. Where falsity had not been demonstrated.

the theory or law would have to be treated cautiously: it *may* be absolutely true, but there again it may not be. No number of verified cases would be sufficient to conclusively prove an hypothesis absolutely true. Our body of knowledge, therefore, must be regarded as composed of these hypotheses (such as "the sun will

rise tomorrow") which have withstood, hitherto, tests. But no piece of knowledge could claim the status of certainty.

This scientific approach, of advancing hypotheses and subjecting them to tests indefinitely, has, it seems to me, a paradoxical effect which I cannot resolve satisfactorily.

On the one hand, it destroys dogma, and stimulates an open, enquiring mind. There would be none of the crypto-conservatism which Andreski writes about; and no-one could afford the complacency arising from well-entrenched positions.

But on the other hand, something very important would be lost if the individual in society was denied the certainty hitherto identified with ordinary language. Can we tolerate the constant qualification of our thoughts? Induction, says Popper - the formation of a belief by repetition - is a myth. But he correctly perceives the powerful need for regularity in the lives of men. Language is a crucial means for ordering our environment; hence the certainty associated with it, and the regularity which it helps us to project on the environment. That regularity may be bogus, but it will have served a function.

Hence the quandary. We need the scientific method to ensure the acquisition of a body of objective knowledge which is independent of the human mind. Yet to use that method in everday social intercourse would impose an intolerable strain. We seem to need the certainty of subjective knowledge. The two, then, have to subsist side by side, giving rise to curious results, such as the eminent natural scientist who abandons his work-a-day methodology so that he can claim a belief in, say, God - the existence of whom he cannot demonstrate, but for whom he would probably sacrifice his life.

The virtue of Popper's book is that it points clearly to the defining features of the scientific method and to knowledge as objective as any can be. But it offers no complete system for the person who has to survive in an imperfect society with imperfect knowledge.