

THE METHOD OF SOCIOLOGY

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P R E F A C E

Every vital science changes continually. Not only are new facts being discovered and new theories constructed all the time, but the ways of searching for facts and the methods of constructing theories undergo a ceaseless evolution. This evolution is always more or less conscious and intentional, which means that it is accompanied by methodological reflection.

Sometimes changes are so rapid and profound as to bring a crisis. The essential principles of investigation and systematization which were universally recognized during a certain period cease to be regarded as valid and other principles must be elaborated. At such times, methodological reflection assumes a leading rôle in formulating new ideals of scientific achievement. It did this for the entire knowledge of antiquity during the period extending from Protagoras to Aristotle. It performed a similar function for all natural science from the middle of the sixteenth to the middle of the seventeenth century. Recently, at the beginning of this century, its influence assisted powerfully in bringing about the radical reconstruction which the physical and chemical sciences have undergone.

Now, sociology is passing through a crisis as deep as any science ever passed through. It was established as a synthetic science of "society" or "civilization," using the results of several other sciences to draw such comprehensive generalizations as none of those sciences could or cared to draw for itself. It is changing into an

analytic science investigating directly and independently particular empirical data, formulating its own results in a vast monographic literature, and not only avoiding hasty conclusions, but often mistrusting generalization more than other sciences do, and more than is good for any science. In this crisis it needs all the light which methodological studies and discussions can throw on its present and future.

Many students absorbed in special research are inclined to undervalue the importance of methodology or even to deny it altogether. Science, they claim, is only advanced by positive investigation. What is the use of discussing how things ought to be done? Go and do them. It is the artist and not the philosopher of art who creates new aesthetic values, the moral leader and not the student of ethics who introduces new standards of conduct, the statesman and not the political scientist who leads political life, the business man and not the economist who makes wealth.

But there is an obvious fallacy in this argument. Art, morality, politics, business are not theoretic pursuits. Theoretic study is not a part of their function: it is at best an instrument which they use in defining their practical aims. Whereas scientific activity is theoretic activity, and methodological reflection is inseparably associated with it. It plays the same part in scientific progress as the conscious expression of new aesthetic ideals in the evolution of art, as the formulation of new moral ideals in the progress of practical morality, as critical and reflective consideration of new political possibilities in statesmanship, as outlining new enterprises and new ways of management in business. A science directed by methodology in contrast to a science proceeding by undirected monographic contributions rep-

resents a stage of intellectual development parallel to modern planful technology in contrast to the trial-and-error techniques of the past.

Among those scientists who realize that methodological reflection is useful and even necessary, there are some who demand that it be always connected with instances showing how certain methods are actually applied in scientific research. The famous collective book, *Methods in the Social Sciences*, edited by Stuart F. Rice (Chicago, 1931), originated in such demands. There is no doubt as to the great value of this kind of critical and constructive analysis of the ways in which scientific problems are really defined and solved in the original work of individual scientists. But there is one function which this type of methodology fails to fulfil. It does not attempt to formulate general scientific ideals for the future. However successful may be a particular scientific achievement, it always and inevitably falls short of the scientist's highest standards of perfection, and it is essential to know those standards as the goal toward which he is striving. However important and original may be an individual's scientific contribution, the use which will be made of it for the advance of science depends on the common or prevalent direction in which the work of other scientists in the same and neighboring fields is moving. In addition, therefore, to critical reflection about methodological innovations as exemplified in concrete studies, sociology (like every other science) needs fundamental discussion concerning the general possibilities and conditions of its future development.

The present book embodies the result of long and strenuous efforts to harmonize ideals with reality, to reconcile the standards of highest scientific perfec-

tion, derived partly from philosophy, partly from the methodologies of physical and biological sciences, with the need for preserving intact those characteristics which concrete social facts possess in our experience. It has been worked out in a continual conflict between the interests of exact analysis and strictly rational systematization on the one hand, and the interests of unprejudiced observation and empirical research with their inexhaustible variety of materials, on the other.

This conflict has driven the author to exclude from the field of sociology all but one specific category of data, in contrast to the more comprehensive ambitions of most sociologists, and while rejecting the "formalistic" views of Simmel and his followers, to conceive of it as a special science, limited to those facts it can successfully cope with. Under the same conflicting influences the author has been forced to emphasize, in opposition to materialistic schematism, the primary and essential meaningfulness of social reality, to accept human values and activities as facts, just as human agents themselves accept them, but to study them objectively and with the application of the same formal principles as the physicist and the biologist apply to material nature. The same conflict has made the author aware that at the present stage of scientific analysis attempts to rationalize social reality quantitatively often sacrifice the substances of valuable knowledge and true discovery for the shadow of mathematical formulae devoid of significant content; but at the same time it made him strive to maintain in his qualitative studies the highest standard of logical exactness compatible with the nature of social data.

The ideal thus reached, as expressed in the present book, will probably be judged by some insufficiently

strict and objective, leaving too much free play to the "subjective" experience and interpretation of the sociologist; while others may think it too scholastic, impossible to apply in actually dealing with the mass of concrete facts. I should answer the first objection by pointing out that no way has been found as yet to eliminate from the study of human facts the individual understanding of the student, without eliminating that which makes those facts real to all men. The second objection ought to be met by showing the results of research carried on in accordance with the principles here laid down. And, indeed, the present book was originally written as a mere introductory part of a large work summarizing the results of the author's sociological studies. It is now being published as a separate volume for several reasons, not the least of which is the consciousness of the author that in his positive work he is far from living up to his own standards. Let, therefore, this abstract expression of a scientific ideal stand by itself, to be followed by a series of more or less imperfect, partial attempts at realization.

My obligations as a sociologist are too numerous to be recorded. But there are two men to whom above all others I wish to express my gratitude at the commencement of the publication of my sociological results. One is William I. Thomas, a long and intimate collaboration with whom was the best possible introduction a philosopher could have had into sociological reality. The other is Robert M. MacIver, whose constructive criticism helped me most in the final formulation of my theories.

F. Z.

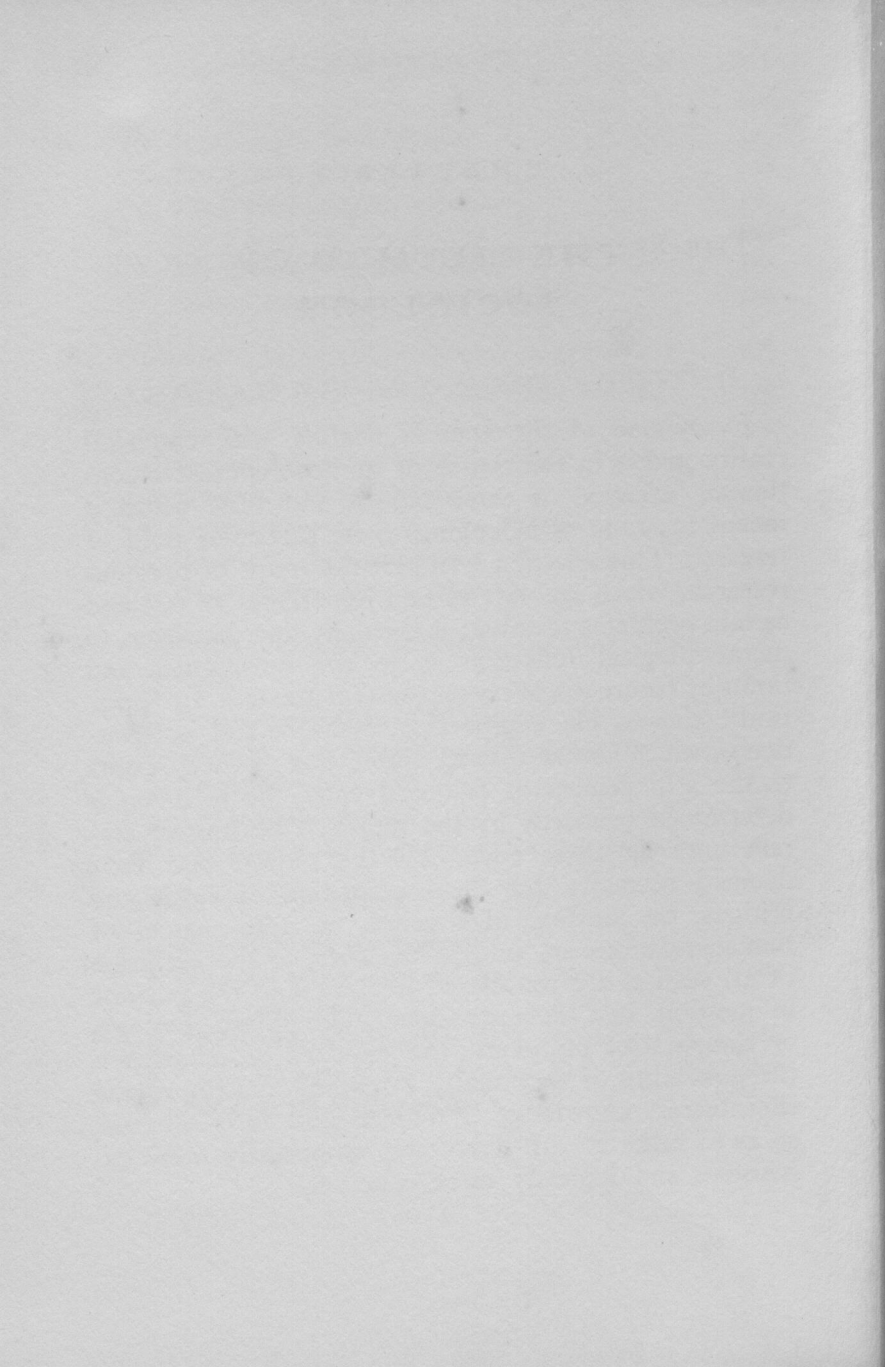
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CONTENTS

	PAGE
PREFACE	v
I. THE SELECTION AND DETERMINATION OF SCIENTIFIC DATA	3
1. <i>Practical Standards of Selection in Sociology</i>	3
2. <i>Concrete Reality Inexhaustible</i>	8
3. <i>The Principle of Closed Systems</i>	11
4. <i>Description of Systems and Elements</i>	14
5. <i>Explanation of Changes</i>	16
6. <i>Historical Knowledge as Opposed to Generalizing Knowledge</i>	21
7. <i>Facts and Theories in Sociology</i>	26
II. THE PRINCIPLES OF SELECTION OF CULTURAL DATA	34
1. <i>The Distinction between Natural and Cultural Data</i>	34
2. <i>The Humanistic Coefficient of Cultural Data</i>	36
3. <i>Values as Cultural Objects</i>	39
4. <i>The Problem of Human Activities</i>	43
5. <i>Experiencing Activities</i>	49
6. <i>Activity, Tendency, and Attitude</i>	57
7. <i>The Duration and Extension of Cultural Systems</i>	69
III. THE DATA OF SOCIOLOGY	90
1. <i>Sociology as Theory of "Societies" or of "Com- munities"</i>	90
2. <i>Sociology as a General Theory of Cultural Data</i>	101

	PAGE
3. <i>Sociology as a Special Science</i>	105
4. <i>The Theory of Social Actions</i>	107
5. <i>The Theory of Social Relations</i>	111
6. <i>The Theory of Social Persons</i>	117
7. <i>The Theory of Social Groups</i>	120
8. <i>General Definition of Social Systems</i>	130
IV. THE SOURCES OF SOCIOLOGICAL MATERIAL	154
1. <i>Inadequate Utilization of Sociological Material</i>	154
2. <i>Personal Experience of the Sociologist: Original</i>	157
3. <i>Personal Experiences of the Sociologist: Vicarious</i>	167
4. <i>Observation by the Sociologist</i>	172
5. <i>Personal Experiences of Other People</i>	186
6. <i>Observations by Other People</i>	193
7. <i>Generalizations Used as Materials</i>	198
V. CRITICISM OF SOME METHODOLOGICAL TENDENCIES	213
1. <i>Preparation of Material for Scientific Use</i>	213
2. <i>Sociology as an Independent Inductive Science</i>	217
3. <i>Enumerative Induction</i>	221
4. <i>The Statistical Method</i>	225
5. <i>The Origins and Difficulties of Analytic Induction</i>	235
VI. ANALYTIC INDUCTION IN SOCIOLOGY	249
1. <i>Abstraction and Generalization</i>	249
2. <i>Structural Dependence and Static Law</i>	262
3. <i>Ontogenetic Analysis</i>	275
4. <i>Phylogenetic Classification</i>	282
5. <i>Causal Changes of Social Systems</i>	295
6. <i>The Problem of Quantification</i>	307

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CHAPTER I

THE SELECTION AND DETERMINATION OF SCIENTIFIC DATA

1. *Practical Standards of Selection in Sociology*

Every one of the sciences dealing with empirical reality makes in the course of its development a continuous selection of those objects and facts which it means to study as belonging to its particular field of research. This selection is in part the result of previous research, which has left certain hypotheses to test and certain problems to solve; it is chiefly due, however, to methodological reflection as to the possibilities and limits of future discovery and systematization. In "practical" sciences, like engineering, medicine and jurisprudence, which aim at a direct application of their results to the achievement of technical ends, the selection is determined primarily by the supposed bearing of certain data on these ends. All the objects and facts deemed necessary for the construction of roads and bridges, the healing of diseases, or state control of human relations are studied together, to the exclusion of all such as are considered irrelevant to the purpose in question. In a theoretic science, like physics, biology, or comparative philology, the standard of selection is the possibility of continually extending and improving the abstract knowledge of objects and facts selected, so as to make it with every step empirically more exhaustive and logically more coherent.

In that part of scientific reflection about human life which since Comte has been called sociology, the standards of selection were originally practical, chiefly political and moral, and they have remained so in a very large measure. Social students are continually selecting and grouping together for comprehensive research the data that seem to them relevant for such ends as the prevention and control of crime, the welfare of the destitute, the promotion of harmonious relations between various races or classes within a territorial community, the substitution of peaceful understanding for military antagonism between states, and so on. For a long time, indeed in Europe nearly up to the present day, purely theoretic interest in social data was kept up mainly by philosophers of history and ethnologists; to most of those absorbed in solving practical problems of the concrete social world, sociology seemed either speculative or dealing with matters almost as remote from their vital problems as the satellites of Jupiter.

The knowledge thus agglomerated for practical purposes is by no means worthless theoretically. We owe to the ethical and political reflection of thousands of years, beginning with popular proverbs and the secret lore of savages and ending with modern works on the conditions and possibilities of social betterment, a store of sociological information which we have not even begun to appreciate. Sociology, like every ambitious upstart, is inclined to consider everything the past has left us in its domain as worthless dross. This is rank ingratitude, for as a matter of fact sociology still lives chiefly on the achievements of former generations; and it is very fortunate for it at its present stage that mankind already knows incomparably more about social reality than it knew about nature at the time

when the physical and biological sciences commenced their tremendous advance.

This vast mass of knowledge cannot, however, become a part of theoretic sociology until it is completely reorganized. For in a theoretic science all knowledge already achieved is deemed unsatisfactory and used only as an instrument to achieve more and better knowledge, whereas a practical science treats the knowledge it possesses as final as long as it serves its ends, and does not attempt to improve it unless forced by practical failure. The knowledge agglomerated in the course of practical pursuits thus remains scientifically unproductive, and nowhere is this more manifest than in the domain of sociology. The bulk of sociological generalizations has, indeed, been growing since antiquity, but only under the pressure of new practical needs and purposes. In those lines in which our conscious practical ends have remained essentially similar to what they were two thousand years ago, such as social control of private relations, education and politics, we have little better knowledge of the means than the Greeks and Romans had. Not until quite recently is a slight theoretic progress in these fields noticeable, and this is entirely due to the beginnings of positive and disinterested sociological research, however hesitating and imperfect these beginnings may yet be.

Since the whole content of a science obviously depends on the data it studies, the first task of those who started to build a theoretic science of sociology in a field where formerly practical science reigned supreme—a task which was and still is rather neglected—should have been to change the standards determining the selection of the objects and facts to be investigated. The attainment of a practical end requires in most cases a

great variety of information which cannot possibly be included within the limits of one theoretic science, but must be dealt with by several special sciences. Engineers who build a bridge use a fund of general information to which physics, chemistry, mineralogy, geology, meteorology, economics, have contributed their respective shares. A physician who wishes to heal a patient must utilize knowledge whose theoretic sources lie within the domains of biology (subdivided into anatomy, physiology, bacteriology, cytology, etc.), psychology, chemistry. An educated farmer wields general truths belonging severally to botany, zoology, organic and inorganic chemistry, geology, meteorology, economics. Judging by these examples, it seems highly improbable that all the knowledge needed—say, to diminish crime or prostitution, to assimilate a foreign population, to raise the cultural or hedonistic level of a rural community, or to prevent wars between states—should pertain to one theoretic science, however comprehensive this science may be.

On the other hand, we find that a theoretic science always furnishes information to several distinct practical sciences, none of which utilizes all the knowledge that might be drawn from the common source. Thus, chemical knowledge is used in the dyeing industry as well as in agriculture, in the production of explosive and poisonous gases as well as in pharmacology and medicine. Similarly, theoretic sociology will be—and even now is beginning to be—used for the purposes of politics and practical ethics, education and business enterprise, peace and war, class struggle and class accommodation, urban and rural organization, etc. However, at every stage of its progress a theoretic science contains much knowledge that is not yet utilized by any practical

science. Some of it will be used sooner or later, but in the meantime theory will have reached new results and again practice will be lagging behind. A certain amount of theoretic knowledge may even remain for ever practically useless, though indispensable as a component part of the total body, the greater part of which sooner or later finds practical application.

No theoretic science can, therefore, afford to have the selection of its object-matter prescribed to it by any practical considerations. It may, indeed, and often does undertake to study problems suggested by practical science, but these problems must lie within its field as circumscribed by theoretic criteria. There is no reason why a sociologist should not at the instigation of a statesman, a moralist, a social reformer, study some of the data involved in peace or war, in contacts between races, in crime, poverty, class struggle or family disorganization, in order to reach conclusions which will help the practical scientist to outline plans for social betterment. But he must have definite theoretic standards to judge which of the innumerable and varied facts bearing on a given practical end belong to his proper domain; and he must limit himself to these. Everything outside must be left to other specialists for study, while the task of unifying and organizing the results reached by the various specialists belongs to the practical scientist, the "social engineer."

Theoretic sociology being still, as its own adherents confess, much less efficient in its research than many older and more developed sciences, it should obviously try to benefit by their example in establishing the standards for selecting its data out of the enormous wealth and complexity of human experience. In this matter the actual process of scientific procedure ought