

# THE TECHNIQUE OF SOCIAL INVESTIGATION

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*Publishers*

HARPER & BROTHERS

New York and London

1934

## PREFACE

Who are the "middle classes"? Where did they come from? What are their characteristics? What effect have they had on the tide of human affairs? What of lasting value have they contributed to civilization? What is their status today? Where will they be tomorrow?

No one book could hope to answer such comprehensive questions and certainly this volume makes no pretense at being a detailed and exhaustive history of the bourgeoisie. Indeed, before such a work can be written, a vast amount of documentary material will have to be evaluated, many contributory books, pamphlets, and periodicals will have to flow from the presses. The present volume attempts only to serve as an historical introduction to the study of the middle classes by giving a brief, simple, factual account from the earliest times to the present. It is the hope of the writer that this preliminary investigation will pave the way for more intensive research and additional publications on the same subject or specific divisions of it.

A chronological and political, not a functional and economic account of the part played by business men in the development of Western civilization, this book is not predicated upon any preconceived personal idea of historical interpretation or social evolution, but is based simply upon the general thesis that our modern society, with its political, social, and economic institutions is dominated by the great middle classes, whose genesis, ascendancy, and place in European history constitute a story so far largely untold. *The Middle Classes*, therefore, is an attempt to fill the gap.

Much material is available, dealing with the middle classes directly and indirectly. Novelists, poets, essayists, and other literary craftsmen drawing inspiration from within themselves have penned compositions shedding oblique light on the bour-

geoisie; and though such material can not be accepted as history, nevertheless its value is such that it ought not to be excluded and therefore the author has incorporated in the text four chapters on "Literature and the Middle Classes," chapters necessarily sketchy but otherwise indicative of the possibilities for further elaboration. In this connection it should be clear that a complete account of these people would include a discussion of bourgeois influence in painting, sculpture, music, and the sciences.

Of direct material, perhaps the first volume purporting to give a history of the middle classes was a book, published in 1833 by an English journalist and muckraker, John Wade, and entitled *History of the Middle and Working Classes*. Despite the author's intention to trace and account for the "origin and progress" of these classes, he merely offered a digest of facts culled for the most part from Hume's *History of England*. It is significant, however, that the term "middle class" got into the title of a book at that early date. A few years later (1838) a work was published in Paris bearing the same title: *Histoire des classes ouvrières et des classes bourgeoises*. Written by Granier de Cassagnac, a French journalist, romanticist, and conservative, it consisted for the most part of a highly doctrinaire elaboration of the thesis that the first free workers and burghers were descendants of emancipated slaves.

In the light of our present knowledge on this topic we may well realize that a satisfactory study of the middle classes was not possible until Marx and Engels wrote their works. Certainly they were the first to develop the idea of the class struggle and to define the position of the bourgeoisie with relation to the other groups. Moreover, Marx made men "middle-class conscious" by showing how the Industrial Revolution had created a *new* middle class—"the petty bourgeoisie." Inspired by these concepts, such scholars as Werner Sombart in *Der Bourgeois* (Duncker and Humblot, Munich, 1913) and Thorstein Veblen, in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (The Macmillan Co., New York, 1899) brought out especially well the economic importance of the middle classes.

Recently, a number of excellent works have appeared to

testify to a rising interest in the bourgeoisie. Of these, Joseph Aynard's *La bourgeoisie française* (Perrin, Paris, 1934); N. A. Berdyaev's *The Bourgeois Mind* (Sheed and Ward, London, 1935); John Corbin's *The Return of the Middle Class* (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1922); Lewis Corey's *The Crisis of the Middle Class* (Covici, Friede, New York, 1935); R. W. Gretton's *The English Middle Class* (G. Bell and Co., London, 1917); W. B. Pitkin's *Capitalism Carries On* (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1935); Evelyn John Strachey's *The Coming Struggle for Power* (Covici, Friede, 1933); E. C. Wingfield-Stratford's *The Victorian Tragedy* (G. Routledge and Sons, London, 1930); and Louis B. Wright's *Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England* (University of North Carolina Press, 1935) are especially suggestive.

To facilitate further investigation a formal bibliography of the middle classes is contemplated by the author. No attempt has been made, therefore, to list all the material used in the preparation of this volume. For the present, the reader will find quite helpful a short, well-selected bibliography at the end of Alfred Mesuel's excellent article, the *Middle Class*, in the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (The Macmillan Co., New York, 1933) volume X, page 415.<sup>1</sup>

In the preparation of this book the writer takes pleasure in acknowledging the assistance rendered by certain members of the younger generation to whom the fate of society is of more consequence than to those of the passing age. First and foremost must be mentioned Theodore Ginsburg, without whose valuable aid in the improvement of matter and style this volume would not have been published at the present time. Victor Norman read parts of the manuscript and the proofs and made many pertinent suggestions. William Chaiken, Carter Jefferies, Mary Ross, Albin Anderson and Beverly Fisher also examined various chapters, and enabled the author to detect minor slips, errors, and omissions. Gordon McWhirter and Edward Willis read the proofs and saved the author from many pitfalls. Yet

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Middle Classes*, especially in chapter XX, "The New Revolution," the author has incorporated material from his *Europe Since Napoleon* (written with the assistance of F. E. Graham) (Ginn and Co., Boston, 1934).

none of these friends is to be held responsible for any of the defects of the book. For mistakes the author takes full responsibility.

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## FOREWORD

THIS volume attempts to describe and to illustrate concretely certain elementary but basic issues connected with the task of making a dependable social study. It is intended primarily for the use of investigators who, like most graduate students, have had little or no experience with the actual problems of social inquiry. The discussions may also prove useful to executives who are interested in having investigations made for them and who want, therefore, to appreciate the chief issues involved.

The book is organized around the specific problem of initiating and carrying to completion a reliable inquiry. The treatment grows out of the first-hand experience of the Institute of Social and Religious Research which has spent several million dollars since 1921 supervising and financing scores of researches including the American village inquiries made under the direction of Dr. Edmund deS. Brunner; the city church studies of Dr. H. Paul Douglass; the investigation of "Middletown" by Dr. and Mrs. Robert S. Lynd; and the Character Education Inquiries of Doctors Hugh Hartshorne and Mark A. May. These and many other studies afforded an unusual opportunity for observing social investigators at work.

To broaden the scope of the book, the experiences of many other investigators and research agencies were tapped, but the volume does not pretend to be in any sense an exhaustive treatise on research. It is hoped, however, that the numerous references to standard texts

and especially the rather elaborate annotated bibliography at the end will enable the student to pursue further any special phase of the subject.

Many people cooperated in the preparation of this book, but the author feels a special sense of gratitude to Professor Robert E. Chaddock of Columbia University and to the staff of the Institute of Social and Religious Research for their suggestions and encouragement. He also wants to acknowledge his indebtedness to Mr. Charles Krevisky for his excellent research assistance and to Miss Marian Lucius of the University of Rochester who took complete charge of preparing the index and seeing the volume through the press.

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University of Rochester,  
January, 1934

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*Chapter I*

## · PLANNING A STUDY

WHEN you are faced with the task of making a study in the field of human society a whole series of problems present themselves. What kinds of information are already available bearing on the proposed investigation? What new bodies of pertinent data should be collected on the subject? How gather and analyze them? Will such an inquiry be worth the time and effort involved? These are the kinds of questions treated in this book.

The discussion is organized around the concrete problem of carrying to completion a dependable study. It starts with the importance of careful planning and then, after dealing with the major difficulties connected with the collection of social data, proceeds to treat a few basic questions that arise when analyzing and presenting the findings.

The various stages of a social investigation are so closely interrelated that it is difficult to discuss one step until you appreciate the others that follow. How plan a study until you know what bodies of data are available on your subject? It follows from this that the different chapters of this book cannot be considered as separate essays but rather as parts of a single unit. Indeed, the last chapter might well have served as an introduction rather than a conclusion to the volume, but it was put

at the end because it seemed wise to discuss certain general considerations only after a number of actual research problems had already been presented.

The subject matter of social inquiry is so varied that it may seem a hopeless task to treat problems of investigation in general. Research studies show the greatest diversity. One criticizes the contributions of certain European sociologists, another deals with the interrelationships of migration and business fluctuations, a third presents an agricultural survey of Siam, a fourth investigates immigrants and their children, and so on. Despite this variety, all investigations have fundamental elements which you need to appreciate before starting any particular study.<sup>1</sup>

#### INTELLECTUAL HONESTY

What, then, are the chief factors to keep in mind when embarking upon a reliable inquiry? A prerequisite is the need for common honesty. Back of all objective investigation is an attitude of mind: a desire to face facts no matter where they lead. Throughout this discussion it is taken for granted that you are sincerely anxious to undertake a valid inquiry.

A genuine study of any subject demands gathering, classifying and analyzing all the facts; nothing can be taken for granted. To skim over a subject—"hitting the high spots"—is not enough, no matter how important these high spots may appear to be. Often the really significant materials are not the startling or obvious ones and to get the "whole truth" requires persistent

<sup>1</sup> Pearson, Karl, *The Grammar of Science* (London; Adam and Charles Black, 1911), p. 12.

digging. Facts must first be accurately observed, measured and recorded. Impressions, opinions, guesswork and casual conversations may, when properly analyzed, turn out to be important but you have to test them to make certain. Conclusions cannot safely be based on a few reports; usually it is necessary to make many observations. Always the facts must be arranged and verified, not merely added one upon another indiscriminately.<sup>2</sup>

A good example of a pseudo-scientific investigation has been described by an advertising expert who read book after book by dental authorities, not to learn about the care of teeth but for the sole purpose of "putting over" a certain tooth paste. He searched the literature until he found a reference to "mucin plaque" which gave him the idea of advertising his dentifrice as a creator of beauty by removing film or "mucin plaque." Obviously this is propaganda—not bona fide research.<sup>3</sup>

To be reliable and objective a study must be of such a character that other competent observers undertaking the same investigation will come to the same conclusions; that is, it must be open to verification by others. As a matter of fact, objectivity in many fields is difficult of attainment. A group of specialists may all concur in observations that turn out later to be false. There was a time when many intelligent people were positive they had seen witches but today we refuse to give credence to such "testimony." Even experts, tend-

<sup>2</sup> Giddings, Franklin H., *The Scientific Study of Human Society* (Chapel Hill, N. C.; The University of North Carolina Press, 1924), pp. 41-42.

<sup>3</sup> Kallet, Arthur, and Schlink, F. J., "Quackery in the Ads," *Advertising and Selling*, Vol. XIX, No. 9, September 1, 1932, p. 13.

ing to view a subject from fixed, sometimes false, premises, will "agree" on wrong interpretations. This is a danger that you must constantly guard against.

### IMPORTANCE OF PLANNING

Assuming that your motives in undertaking a study are, like Caesar's wife, above suspicion, what, then, are the various steps to be followed when initiating a piece of research? The first is to visualize so far as possible all the major aspects of the study. Just as an architect prepares his blueprints before erecting a building, so you should develop detailed plans before commencing a study. Time spent in this way yields large returns. Weaknesses which arise from lack of thorough planning frequently cannot be corrected without retracing the whole research process.

Thus, some years ago a study collected opinions from hundreds of individuals who at the time were not adequately identified. When analyzing the testimony it became increasingly essential to know the experience and background of the different witnesses. As a result weeks were spent going back to get additional information about every person interviewed. Had the need for these identifying data been visualized from the start, this whole wasteful process could easily have been avoided.

### NEED FOR PURPOSE

There are many elements to be considered when planning a study but possibly the most essential is the need for a definite purpose. A constructive guiding aim is basic to intelligent inquiry; without it there is no

real research. The clearly defined purpose determines everything else—the method of approach, the data to be secured, the course of procedure. The more specifically you can visualize your objective the more direct your investigation is likely to be and the more evident your goal when it is reached. If your purpose is indefinite, broad and rambling, you have not sufficiently analyzed your problems and there has been a lack of clear thinking.<sup>4</sup>

Some people feel that since research is exploration, the journey should not be determined too precisely in advance. The obvious reply is that the man who sets out to do too many things or who is vague about the things he wants to do is unlikely to do anything well. The successful explorer settles upon his destination in advance and then lays his plans accordingly.<sup>5</sup> A concentrated attack upon a definite objective decidedly increases the probability of success in any investigation.

The importance of starting with a definite aim does not mean that your original purpose must be slavishly followed without a change. Often it will grow naturally and develop with the progress of the inquiry. In other cases you may find it necessary, as the study proceeds, to modify your aims. For instance, Doctors Hugh Hartshorne and Mark A. May embarked some years ago

<sup>4</sup> Allen, E. W., "Need for Specific Objectives in Economic Research," *Journal of Farm Economics*, Vol. VIII, No. 1, January, 1926, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> The same idea was expressed by John T. Merz when he pointed out that the successful scientific explorer is the man who can single out some special thing for minute and detailed investigation; who can retire with one definite object into his study or laboratory and there unravel its intricacies. *A History of European Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (London; Wm. Blackwood & Sons, 1896), Vol. II, p. 554.

upon an inquiry into character education. They soon discovered a disheartening lack of techniques for carrying on their study and decided, therefore, to delimit their inquiry to devising adequate methods of investigation.<sup>6</sup>

The mere fact, however, that the original aim may be modified does not obviate the need of clearly defined objectives. At every stage of your study you should know where you are going and why.

Purpose helps to determine virtually every aspect of any inquiry. Even the simplest facts and figures cannot be gathered intelligently until you appreciate the way in which the information will be used. For many years the Interstate Commerce Commission had been accustomed, as part of its other administrative duties, to collect information about various classes of railroad workers. Shortly after our entrance into the World War the Railroad Labor Board took over the function of regulating wages and working conditions and turned to the files of the Interstate Commerce Commission for necessary information. It was found that the materials so laboriously gathered were not applicable to the new situation, largely because the classifications employed were not sufficiently detailed. As a result the Railroad Labor Board had to collect its own figures on an entirely different basis.<sup>7</sup>

One form of purpose is expressed by the working hypothesis, which is simply a tentative generalization based upon observation or possibly upon a mere

<sup>6</sup>Hartshorne, Hugh, and May, Mark A., *Studies in Deceit* (New York; The Macmillan Company, 1928), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup>Wolman, Leo, "Fact Finding," *The New Republic*, Vol. XXXII, No. 407, September 20, 1922, p. 97.

“hunch.” An hypothesis is the common starting point for an investigation although many significant social inquiries have begun without any particular theory to prove or disprove. For example, Dr. and Mrs. Robert S. Lynd made no attempt either in their field work or in their final report of *Middletown* to substantiate a thesis. Rather their object was to record observed phenomena as accurately as possible, thus raising fresh questions and suggesting possible new points of departure in the study of group behavior.<sup>8</sup> It should be noted, however, that although they had no single hypothesis to prove, they did have a carefully outlined objective.

Hypotheses and working theories must be used with caution. They may guide, but they must not dominate the study; otherwise you are likely to find yourself tipping the scales in favor of your thesis. You must learn to hold your theories lightly, to admit alternatives and to treasure exceptions. A classic example of the illegitimate use of hypotheses is afforded by Herbert Spencer who evolved social “laws” from his inner consciousness and then set research assistants to find concrete examples of the truth of his assertions.<sup>9</sup> They were able to find large numbers of illustrations supporting his positions but since the evidence on the other side of the argument was not examined critically the so-called proof is virtually worthless. By Spencer’s method one can “prove” almost anything.

Remember that in most social situations you can easily find what you are looking for. Indeed, the very

<sup>8</sup> Lynd, Robert S. and Helen Merrell, *Middletown* (New York; Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1929), p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Goldenweiser, Alexander A., *Early Civilization* (New York; Alfred A. Knopf, 1922), pp. 21-22.



form in which you conceive your problem may pre-determine the results of a study. This danger has led Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Webb to the conviction that an inquirer should not merely seek answers to specific queries. Rather, questions should be considered only as suggestions for investigating a whole social institution or situation. Patiently seek all available facts concerning the segment of experience being studied. Only after you have done this can you hope to answer specific questions. Often you will find in retrospect that initial inquiries deal with unimportant or irrelevant situations.<sup>10</sup> This danger does not do away with the need for clear-cut purposes, but it reinforces the view that hypotheses and questions must be flexible, tentative instruments rather than rigid dogmas.

#### PROBLEMS OF METHOD

No field of knowledge lies outside the legitimate scope of social inquiry but in the present rudimentary state of the social sciences there are many issues that cannot as yet be handled adequately by existing research techniques. Thus the plan of an investigation must be formulated with a full appreciation of the possibilities and limitations of the methods available for carrying it forward.

There are, of course, many aspects of the social fabric that can be studied in strictly objective measurable terms. You can count the number of people living in a given area, plot their distribution, ascertain their rate of growth or record their standards of living, and if the

<sup>10</sup> Webb, Sidney and Beatrice, *Methods of Social Study* (New York; Longmans, Green & Company, 1932), Chap. II.