

Man as the Object of the Social Sciences

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Article abstract

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MAN AS THE OBJECT OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

HONOURABLE ANTONIO BARRETTE

We are pleased to publish an address presented by the Honourable Antonio Barrette, Minister of Labour for the Province of Quebec, on the occasion of receiving an honorary doctorate in Social Sciences, at the University of Montreal, the 28th of May, 1948.

"Many scientists of the modern era", writes Prince Louis of Broglie, "victims of a somewhat naïve realism, have adopted almost without realizing it, a certain metaphysics of a materialistic and mechanistic character and have considered it as the very expression of scientific thought."¹

How encouraging it is to have one of the greatest of living physicists ready to liberate the sciences of the iron collar of materialism which so long has surrounded them. In this Institution we are in a particularly good position to estimate the value and the scope of such a liberation, we who cannot conceive that the social sciences might be based on other premises than those we know to be Revealed Truth itself. For we found our research on what we profess in our lives, that is to say, that it is a human being, in the sense which the Church teaches, who is present in each of the members of the social body. It is in terms of such a human being that we will try to understand social phenomena; it is in terms of him that we will utilize the results of our knowledge for action; it is for him that we will build the world of to-morrow. And, just as the tree is judged by its fruits, and the calculations of the engineer by the solidity of the bridge which he builds, so also we will propose to our brothers the world over that they judge the value of our postulate by the harmony and happiness of our society. We will tell them that the happiness of our families and our social peace, imperfect as yet, no doubt, but how much more real than elsewhere, are the fruits of a social science whose fundamental premise is in profound accord with the Revelation, better still, is drawn therefrom. Perhaps then, with God's help, the eyes of certain amongst them will be opened because we will have tried, in good faith, and in all humility, to play to the full our role of charity our role which is to bear witness.

Having thus affirmed our purpose to see the human being in the very centre of the social sciences we will do our best to define precisely the meaning of these two words.

Man is revealed to the sociologist as a concrete fact which must be accepted and understood. Among all the human phenomena presenting themselves under a thousand aspects, which demand study, how shall we choose and, above all, how shall we classify? According to the words of Henri Poincaré, "Science is build up of facts as a house is made of stones, but an accumulation of facts is no more a science than a heap of stones is a house."²

It is then for determining how human facts permit the reconstitution of man that the postulate is necessary. And the result will be different according to whether we define conscience as an emanation of matter, corruptible and perishable to the same extent as it, or as a spiritual, reality, free and immortal. Choosing then to take the Revealed Truths of our Faith as basic postulates for our science, we shall be led to distinguish, in sociology as in economics and political science, the three realities whose hierarchy forms the unity of the human being — biological reality, emotional reality and spiritual reality.

Biological Reality first of all! For we believe that man is an incarnate spirit and we believe also in the resurrection of the body. It is easily observed that some of the most complex problems encountered in economic life and consequently in the science of economics, arise from the commonplace requirements of the biological reality. Some of these requirements are the following. *Food*, which to reach modern dietetic standards, should be healthy, adequate and appetizing. *Clothing*, which fulfils a purpose that is simultaneously moral, hygienic and aesthetic. *Housing*, which must afford protection against extremes of temperature, as well as furnishing ventilation and light. *Rest*, an exhaustive study of which carried out in industrial relations research have shown it to be a highly important element in both health and productivity. *Security*, Labour's most acutely felt need, whether it be security in case of sickness or security in old age. Finally, the need which results from the very fruitfulness of human love itself and from whence comes the will to found a family. All these requirements of the biological reality demand a detailed study. This has largely been done by the disciplines concerned and it now rests with the social sciences to utilize the resulting synthesis.

Emotional Reality next! At the border-line of the flesh and the spirit we find sensibility which is the origin of so many family and social problems. It is *feeling* that tyrannizes and excites in a fashion profoundly physical and yet remains clearly spiritual in its enthusiasms and hopes! The need of affection, the need to be loved and appreciated not only in the family but also at work have been established as of preeminent importance by the recent studies made in industrial relations. Again, there is the need of beauty, so deep-seated that to scorn it for any length of time may actually degrade the spirit! There is the need of justice, particularly acute in labour disputes, whose study must be attempted in a thoroughly down-to-earth fashion!

Spiritual Reality, finally! Obviously, it is under this heading that the introduction of the human being

(1) Prince Louis de Broglie, *L'Avenir de la Science*, p. 28.
 (2) POINCARÉ, *La Science et l'Hypothèse*, p. 173.

as a hypothesis for the interpretation of social phenomena should prove the most fruitful. No-one disputes the existence of the biological and emotional realities although some may use different words to designate them. But to affirm the spiritual reality of the human being! There is something that will draw on all the social sciences for the service of the spirit as the biological sciences are set up for the serving of life! To affirm the spiritual reality of the human being is to affirm the autonomy of conscience and of will, it is to affirm an original aptitude for knowledge and action. It is therefore, to affirm the metaphysical liberty of choice, — man's free will.

Some will think, perhaps, that it is daring thus to put the human being at the heart of the object of the social sciences while so many sociologists have said and repeated that social facts were specifically different to individual facts. It is nevertheless on good grounds that, like many others, we come back to this point precisely because we believe that Emile Durkheim's penchant for the studying of social facts "as things" has had no other result than the elimination of liberty as a factor explaining social facts thus rendering sociology perhaps theoretically attractive but certainly making it sterile in practice. On the other hand, starting with the human being, it would seem that the sociologist should be able to discover and interpret, in an orderly and satisfying fashion, the whole of social reality.

First of all *family reality!* It must be admitted that certain sociologists have gravely obscured the idea implied here. One has, for example, Durkheim going so far as to write, "The clan is the family "par excellence." Such abuses of language are not to be feared if we build up the sociology of the family on a clear understanding of the human persons who contract marriage ties. It is in the province of sociology to determine what loosens such ties and what draws them closer. How can it do this if it accords the same value to the clan, to free union and to indissoluble marriage?

In the same way, *professional reality* presents an entirely different aspect according to whether it is studied as a mere phenomenon or as one involving the dignity and destiny of those composing it. In this respect, how significant it is to see modern industry come up against this problem of the human personality without being as yet, clearly aware of it. In the United States, the importance of specialists in "human relations" has been increasing in extraordinary proportions from day to day for the last ten years. For about the same number of years, many private ventures and various movements pursuing a similar purpose, have developed in France, one of them bearing the significant name of "Economy and Humanism". And we could multiply the examples.

Again, *national reality* will be presented differently according to the categories in which we interpret it. This problem, also, is a burning one. Whether he tends to conceive of political liberty in a restricted manner, or whether, on the contrary, he interprets that liberty rather loosely, the sociologist, describing the very same facts with a method equally exact, will interpret them differently and will call for different solutions. A Marxist and a "Liberal" explain differently the determinism of phenomena over the contents of which they are probably in accord. A precise appreciation of the human being will prove to be a very accurate rule for understanding political reality.

The sociological explanation of the human community taken as a whole — the family of nations — can be fruitful only when it admits that all men throughout the world are human beings. Obviously, failure to accept this allowed the hitlerian sociologists to describe a reality which correspond perfectly with their government's lust for domination. How many other distressing problems of the day would be on the way to solution, if, in all the countries of the world, Christian or not, students of society would listen only to this magnificent postulate, where we Christians recognize our very nature as revealed to us by God, the "*human being*".

These few ideas but serve to condense the thoughts of a man, who, though unable to follow closely the activities of the disciplines he has evoked, knows by experience what is expected of them by administrators fully aware of their responsibilities. One cannot but rejoice at the thought that it is these very sciences, the acquisition of which is so important in the world of to-day, that our French-Canadian universities have started to build up. It is therefore our vocation, we other Canadians, to define what we intend to be so as to live it more profoundly each day and to reveal to all men what they are and what they ignore. For this task we have at our disposal a rich country, a generous people and an enviable economic situation. It rests with us to prove that we can build a world where the machine will be for man and not man for the machine, where production will be for man and not man for production, where the economy will be for man and not man for the economy. What chances have we then to see among us, and then all around us, the growth of a civilization which protects and guarantees the individual? Because the venture is daring shall we call it reckless? In any case, the task devolves upon us. And the world we shall build can no longer be in the stature of man because man himself, to-day, is of the dimensions of the universe. The world we must build should be up to the measure of the Prince of Peace, He Who said, "Without Me you can do nothing."

But with Him we will attempt all things.