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The article argues that the problem of communication, especially between generations, is aggravated rather than ameliorated by university education primarily because of the present state of the disciplines in Social Sciences. The argument, which is based on extensive interdisciplinary research, suggests that the lack of agreement on basic terms, increasing specialization, theoretical indefiniteness, scientific skepticism, and the research orientation of the social science disciplines are translated into classroom exercises which are substantively meaningless and which induce an endless search for value on the part of students.

Calvin A. Woodward*

Diogenes in the Tower of Babel: The Generation Gap and the Role of the University

Different historical perspectives have been employed in an attempt to understand the appearance of generational conflict in North American society. Some scholars have been inclined to see it as an issue-related and temporary phenomenon; others have tended to consider it as being part of an age of protest or as being reflective of a more fundamental historical trend toward a depaternalized, fraternal society.[1] What most of these perspectives share is the assumption that the contemporary conflict is generically typical; that it basically involves a communication gap between an elder generation and its heir and that at fault is an inability to transmit values intergenerationally. The root-cause remains uncertain but what is agreed is that North American society has produced a generation of Diogenes - a youth cohort that is cynical, loath to recognize or respect surrogates and committed to a search for truth and meaningfulness.

What role does the university play in a situation of this kind? Traditionally, it has been a social institution in which "intergenerational confrontation" has been the norm rather than the exception.[2] The university has served, in effect, as a communication centre where values could be discussed, meaningful dialogue achieved, and as a place where the insights of maturity could be brought to bear on the young. The purpose of this paper is to argue that not only does the contemporary university fail in this regard, but that the communication gap there is so severe that the college experience undergone by today's youth aggravates the problem of communication which exists between generations and in society at large. The experience reinforces a negative view of authority, encourages an endless search for value and meaning, and implies the impossibility of productive communication. The reason for this is that academic disciplines are so confused as to their purpose, methods, terms and even their own identity, that they have become veritable towers of babel, hard put to communicate within or among themselves, and much less able to relate meaningfully to students. This is especially true of the social science disciplines to which students have flocked in an attempt to understand contemporary society.

Calvin A. Woodward, Political Science Department, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, N.B.

The Present State of the Social Sciences

While the focus of this paper is on the social sciences, mention should first be made of the academic gap which exists at the university today. The gap stems, in large part, from the increasing specialization of knowledge, a phenomenon described by Norman Birnbaum as the "industrialization of culture."[3] Every discipline has been affected by this development. With reference to the natural sciences, for example, Professor Ritchie Calder of the University of Edinburgh has noted how the "fragmentation of science into more and more branches, each with its own specially invented jargon, is dividing the scientists themselves and making it difficult for one scientist to understand another, much less make himself intelligible to the wider public."[4] In the same vein, the President of the American Anthropological Association in 1967 warned of the increasing compartmentalization of his discipline; more emphatically, Margaret Mead has decried "the development of schools, sects which depend upon an esoteric language, hostility to other schools, shibboleths, and idiosyncratic vocabulary and controversary, which effectively prevent contact with members of other sects within anthropology, and with members of other sciences."[5]

This "cult of the expert," as Harold Cassidy[6] refers to it, has become so vitally part of academic life that meaningful discourse among what had once been conceived of as a community of scholars has become seriously impaired. Among social scientists, in fact, effective communication has become nearly impossible because, partly as a result of specialization, inner-disciplinary consensus is lacking in regard to such fundamental matters as theory, central concepts and basic terms. A prominent sociologist, for example, has alluded to the "perplexing multivariety of basic orientations"[7] in his discipline while another one considers it to be full of "fads and foibles."[8] In a leading introductory text,[9] twenty-five pages are taken up in an effort to define sociology, a nomenclature which Max Weber referred to as "this highly ambiguous term."[10] That problems of this kind are tantamount to an identity crisis is admitted by political scientists. Marion D. Irish, for example, editor of the prestigious *Journal of Politics,* has stated that political scientists "are by no means agreed on what political science *is,* much less on what it *ought* to be."[11] Equally candid is the view of an expert in a sub-area of psychology; psychotherapy, he says, "at the present is in a state of chaos."[12]

The severity of the identity crisis affecting social science disciplines is manifest in terminological confusion and persistent infighting among scholars in regard to questions of definition. In anthropology, for example, culture is a central concept but, among anthropologists, according to one authority, there is "a disturbing lack of agreement as to what they mean by this term."[13] The concept was originally defined by Edward B. Tylor in 1871 and his definition stood unchallenged until the turn of the century. Since then definitions of this crucial concept have multiplied until by 1950 there were 164 different definitions on record. In political science, power is a central concept but, as one political scientist says, "it is difficult to define the word in a way everyone will accept."[14] A textbook on economic growth begins by announcing that "no single definition of 'economic development' is entirely satisfactory,"[15] while Paul A. Samuelson whose introductory text in economics is the one most widely used, warns the student from the start that "Peculiarly in a field where such an everyday concept as 'capital' may have ten or more different meanings, we must watch out for the 'tyranny of words.' "[16] Another scholar has observed that one "of the curses of psychology for more than 2000 years has been the confusion of meanings of important terms."[17] Evidently

the curse will remain. A professor of psychology at Bates College, for instance, maintains that "attempts to define personality are always experimental"[18] and he predicts that "it is not likely that anyone in this century will get the perspective right or define the word in a way everyone will accept."[19]

How did this highly confused, nearly anarchical situation arise? Most academics would agree that it evolved primarily from the attempt by social science to become scientific: to employ rigorous methods of analysis and to formulate empirically validated theory which is the hallmark of the pure sciences. The effect of this has been twofold. On the one hand it desanctified and undermined traditional methods and theory; on the other, it opened the gates to a new age of theory building. The redefinition and refinement of terms, the empirical testing and reformulation of concepts, the employment of various methods of enquiry and systems of analysis are all reflective of a conscious effort to discover scientific laws of human and social behaviour. The "case study" approach, for example, is a direct imitation of a technique developed by the pure sciences. It is essentially a laboratory experiment in which assumptions are tested on the basis of scientifically gathered data. A case study begins by making terms operational, that is, by defining terms and concepts in such a way that they can be used in the analysis of the specific case which a study examines. In the process of operationalization, definitions and concepts of other scholars are cited, criticized and modified. A new terminology is developed and, at the same time, a hypothesis is advanced which undergoes a rigorous test on the basis of a particular researcher's field experience. The conclusion of the study will most often empirically validate the hypothesis and this will then be advanced as a general theory. In this way, theories, concepts and terms are multiplied *ad infinitum.*

The utility of all this is questionable. There are scholars who contend that at an early stage of scientific development terms themselves are important data and that a technically precise vocabulary and clearly defined approaches are a necessary prerequisite to scientific research. Typical of this view is the response of one scholar to the present chaos in psychotherapy; it is not "a meaningless chaos," he says, "but an ocean of confusion, teeming with life, spawning vital new ideas, approaches, procedures and theories at an incredible rate."[20] Contrariwise, there is the opinion that the main purpose of this effort is to professionalize disciplines and to make them inaccessible to the non-specialist. Related to this is the charge that an emphasis on terminology is made to conceal the substantive unproductiveness of most of the effort being spent and to give disciplines the aura of science because the substance of science is lacking. One scholar writes, for example, that "terms which mean one thing at one moment and something else at another moment promote the concoction of theories which seem very impressive until they are translated into terms of less ambiguity."[21] There is also the view that the terminological thicket in which social science disciplines have become entangled is due to the reluctance of scholars to recognize theoretical surrogates. In the case study approach, each scholar becomes ultimately *the* authority; moreover, it has become a symbol of scholarly expertise to compose personal vocabularies. What Margaret Mead says in this regard is the case with every social science discipline. Anthropology, she argues, has become "filled with burgeoning systems of terminology which are used by no one but the originators, each system treated as the unique product of the particular anthropologist's field experience."[22]

What then can be said of the present state of the social sciences? That they have become research-oriented is obvious, but there are certain implications that derive

from the assumptions underlaying that orientation which should be emphasized. At its core is the contention that nothing can be known until refined research techniques make empirical verification of theory foolproof.[23] This means that social science can affirm practically nothing except its goal with any degree of confidence. It operates on the belief, in other words, that while everything is knowable, hardly anything is now known. Social science has thus become a conscious instrument of a contemporary agnosticism which elevates doubt as a supreme virtue. There is this and several other important parallels between the present state of the social sciences and generational conflict in society. The reluctance of social scientists to recognize the surrogate of general theory evinces the same anti-authority posture observable in the attitude of the younger generation toward its elders. Both are essentially protests against an established order considered to be incompetent and incapable of answering the vital questions of man's life. And finally, the claim of the young that meaningless dialogue has replaced real communication among people in society, finds a parallel in the academic gap and with respect to other communication problems that characterize scholarly discourse today.

Teaching and its Effect on Students

The teaching of social science is naturally influenced by these aspects of its present condition. The first problem encountered in teaching is the semantic blockade which exists between the professor and student. Not only must the student learn a new and highly technical vocabulary; he also finds that words familiar to him have been professionally redefined and given such specialized meaning that they are beyond his recognition. That this presents a major problem is suggested by a study done at Princeton which found that the ability of a lay public to guess the meaning assigned by sociologists to both familiar and unfamiliar words was poor.[24] Sociology, one critic has said, has a language "that has to be learned almost like Esperanto."[25]

Teaching the language of the discipline is the main task of most introductory courses in the social sciences. The student is also introduced at this level to the theoretical armature of each discipline; the multivariety of theories, conceptual tools, methods and areas with which a discipline deals. Thus begins a process whose purpose is to influence fundamentally a student's whole way of thinking. As they proceed to more advanced courses in the social sciences, students learn to think and communicate scientifically; to make words operational before substantive matters are discussed and to doubt the validity of knowledge which has not been empirically validated. One obvious result of this is to up-root the student intellectually. "We teach him, by word and deed," says Professor Leonard J. Fein of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, "how to uncouple himself from his native commitments, how to snicker at the sacred."[26] The problem is that given the present state of the social sciences, there is no firmament of knowledge into which up-rooted students can be transplanted. Some, perhaps most, social scientists are not seriously disturbed by this. In his Presidential Address at the Cambridge Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, for example, George Westby refers to teaching in psychology as a "cautious cooperative adventure."[27] He considers the task of teaching achieved "if our own frankness as teachers has been maintained, if we have been confident enough to display our uncertainties and so engage our students in the task of resolving them by the slow process of science. . ."[28]

The important question is whether or not such uncertainties are resolvable and whether the doubts implanted in students can really ultimately be dispelled by scientific enquiry. One of the reasons why social science courses are predominantly methodological in content is because the quantity of information which instructors can transmit is severely restricted by the assumption that knowledge is limited and uncertain. What little information there is to convey usually consists of speculations and generalizations that derive from empirical findings. Most often than not, one such finding will contradict another. Moreover, as a student advances in his studies, he finds that terms and definitions he initially learned in the course of surmounting the semantic blockade around social science disciplines are themselves tenuous and the subject of an on-going debate "among scholars". "To a considerable extent, the classroom lecture itself" is often an exercise in debunking; an academic 'search and destroy' operation in which a great parade of names, concepts, terms and theories is struck up, critically reviewed and dismissed. Consequently, the student is left intellectually stranded. Not only has he learned that knowledge is uncertain; more importantly, he has found that there is no effective, agreed upon approach by which answers to uncertainties can be discovered. Implicitly, many social scientists reinforce the students' perception of this by using an inductive method of teaching. Gradually becoming the norm, this inherently non-paternalistic form of teaching recognizes the priority of individual research and devalues the implantation of knowledge. Effectively, the student is asked to fall back upon his own resources; in form, at least, to return to the intellectual search in which he was engaged before even entering college.

What are the implications of all this in regard to the conflict between generations in society? That the teaching of social science does not make a positive contribution to that conflict seems obvious. Not only does it not help to alleviate the basic problem of communication, there is strong reason to suspect that it may, in fact, aggravate it. Social science also fails to make a fruitful contribution to the students' search for value, meaning and understanding. The assumptions, goals and research orientation of social science disciplines serve merely to rationalize that pursuit and to encourage students to persist in the intellectual quest in which their generation is engaged. That is the effect regardless of whether or not the odyssey is an individual or social good. What mainly is learned by students in their contact with social science is that practically nothing can withstand the critical eye of scientific review; that, in effect, all established authority may have feet of clay since the principles upon which it is founded are or may not be scientifically sound. Suggested by this is the conclusion that the fundamental impact of the social sciences upon students today is to underwrite the depaternalization of authority in almost any form.

Conflict can, of course, be a creative dynamic and that which is at work in both contemporary society and the social sciences may ultimately have beneficial results. Within the latter there is a growing awareness that teaching has become dull and ineffective"[29] and a reaction to scientific research by an increasing number of social scientists is beginning to make itself felt. David Easton made note of this a few years ago when he told the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association that he sensed "a deep dissatisfaction with political research and teaching, especially of the kind that is striving to convert the study of politics into a more rigorously scientific discipline modelled on the "methodology of the natural sciences."[30] That this is the root of the problem in all of the social sciences has been made manifest in the communication gap analyzed in this paper.

Notes

[1] Representative of these different perspectives are Lewis S.Feuer, *The Conflict of Generations* (New York: Basic Books, 1969); Henry Malcolm, *Generation of Narcissus* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1971); Alexander De Conde (ed.), *Student Activism: Town and Gown in Historical Perspective* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971); and Alexander Mitscherlich, "Changing Patterns of Political Authority: A Psychiatric Interpretation," in *Political Leadership in Industrialized Societies,* ed. Lewis J. Edinger (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1967), pp. 26-58.

[2] Christopher Jencks and David Reisman, *The Academic Revolution* (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1968), p. 28.

[3] Norman Birnbaum, *The Crisis of Industrial Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).

[4] Ritchie Calder, "Common Understanding of Science," *Impact of Science on Society* 14 (1964): 179.

[5] Margaret Mead, "Anthropology Among the Sciences," *American Anthropologist* 63 (1961): 478. See also Frederica de Languna, "Presidential Address - 1967," *American Anthropologist* 70 (1968): 469-476.

[6] Harold Cassidy, "The Problem of the Sciences and the Humanities," *American Scientist* 48 (1960):384.

[7] Helmut P. Wagner, "Types of Sociological Theory: Toward a System of Classification," *American Sociological Review* 28 (1963): 735.

[8] Pitirim A. Sorokin, *Fads and Foibles in Modern Sociology* (Chicago: Regnery, 1956).

[9] Alex Inkeles, *What is Sociology?* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965).

[10] Quoted in Inkeles, p. 6.

[11] Marion D. Irish, ed., *Political Science: Advance of the Discipline* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. vi.

[12] Carl R. Rogers, "Psychotherapy Today or Where Do We Go From Here?" *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 17 (1963): 15.

[13] Leslie A. White, "The Concept of Culture," *American Anthropologist* 61 (1959): 227. Ralph Linton notes how "discussions of culture content are hampered at present by a hopelessly confused terminology. . ." *The Tree of Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), p. 33.

[14] R. Harrison Wagner, "The Concept of Power and the Study of Politics," in *Political Power,* ed.Roderick Bell, David V. Edwards and R. Harrison Wagner (New York: Free Press, 1969), p. 3.

[15] Gerald M. Meier and Robert E. Baldwin, *Economic Development* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1957), p. 2.

[16] Paul A. Samuelson, *Economics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, New York, 1955), p. 7.

[17] Knight Dunlap, "Toward a Practical Concept of Neurosis," *Journal of General Psychology* 28 (1943): 99.

[18] John K. McCreary, "The Problem of Personality Definition," *Journal of General Psychology* 63 (1960): 107.

[19] McCreary, p. 111. See also the author's more general discussion in *Science and Man's Hope* (Don Mills: Longman Canada, 1972).

[20] Rogers, p. 15.

[21] Dunlap, p. 99.

[22] Mead, p. 478. That much of this kind of research is of very limited value is widely acknowledged. Ithiel De Sola Pool says that "Any random 100 recent doctoral theses would reveal the energy and skill of 100 young researchers in telling us far more about a variety of small subjects than any of us want to know." *Contemporary Political Science* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), p. vi.

[23] Typical is the view of D.E. Broadbent who writes that we "must be prepared to live with an incomplete knowledge of behaviour, but with confidence in the power of objective methods to give us that knowledge some day." *Behaviour* (London: Methuen, 1961, p. 200.

[24] Frances E. Cheek and Maureen Rosenhaupt, "Are Sociologists Incomprehensible?: An Objective Study," *American Journal of Sociology* 73 (1967): 617-627.

[25] Malcolm Cowley, "Sociological Habit Patterns in Linguistic Transmogrification," *Reporter,* September 20, 1965.

[26] Leonard J. Fein, "Teaching Political Science," *PS* 2 (1969): 304.

[27] George Westby, "Psychology and the Social Sciences," *Advancement of Science* 22 (1965): 482.

[28] Westby.

[29] Jencks and Reisman, p. 531.

[30] David Easton, "The New Revolution in Political Science," *American Political Science Review* 62 (1969): 1051.