SOCIAL SCIENCE, CRIMINOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

Social Science and Social Pathology

By Barbara Wootton, assisted by Vera G. Seal and Rosalind Chambers. Pp. 400. (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1959.) 35s. net.

THE discrepancy between the brilliant achievements of the natural sciences and the slow progress of social science is one of the most disturbing features of our civilization. Recently there has been a good deal of stocktaking among social scientists. What is the scope of this field of study and what are its methods of research? Is there only one social science or are there several social sciences? What ought to be the relationship of social science to the two fields of study most closely concerned with human behaviour, that is to say, psychology and psychiatry? Lady Wootton tries to answer some of these questions in this book written in anger and without pretence of scientific detachment. It is addressed to the interested lay person.

The work falls into three parts. The first presents a critical survey of contemporary research into the origins of crime. Twelve hypotheses are listed and found wanting. Theories about the role of the broken home and the lasting effects of maternal separation or deprivation on behaviour come in for special criticism. Many of the strictures are justified, but none of them is new. Lady Wootton believes that criminological research has achieved very little and that progress is unlikely unless social science rids itself of evil influences. She regards the rise of psychiatry as its greatest danger. Her book can be viewed as a desperate attempt to halt this threat.

Lady Wootton detests imprecision and uncertainty. She insists on clear boundaries, especially between the bad and the mad. Unfortunately, such boundaries do not exist in Nature. She blames the psychiatrists for the existing confusion. In Part 2, which is entitled "The Contemporary Attitude to Social Pathology: the Social Implications of Psychiatry", Lady Wootton sets out to show psychiatrists up for what she thinks they are, namely, unscientific, ignorant and power-hungry empire builders. She deplores the intrusion of psychiatric concepts into social science. She has nothing good to say about psychiatry, except that it has had a humanizing influence. She takes a great deal of trouble to show that the concepts of mental health and mental hygiene are ill-defined and influenced by ethical premises and value judgments. She is particularly severe on the notion of adjustment.

All this amounts to the statement that there is no clear boundary between mental health and mental illness. Lady Wootton presents this as if it was a discovery which ought to disqualify psychiatry from having a say in the study of antisocial behaviour. The reader is led to believe that those uncertainties are specific to mental health and illness. In fact, they also exist in physical health, which is a concept equally elusive of definition and no less 'value-soaked' than mental health.

The intelligent reader will take heart from the knowledge that medicine has not done too badly even without such a definition. Nor has the scope of physical medicine remained static. Many conditions which are now treated by the physician were not so

long ago outside the scope of medicine. Lady Wootton has a simple explanation for the widening of the scope of psychiatry. Moral problems have been incorporated into medicine "for no other reason than that doctors have decided to enlarge their empires so as to include territory formerly regarded as belonging to morality rather than to medicine, and so as to make a place for psychiatry in the medical curriculum". This statement shows a lack of historical insight which is most disturbing in one so eminent. Lady Wootton has not taken the trouble to find out why psychiatry is no longer confined to the 'insanities' but has become the study of abnormal behaviour. If she had given some time and thought to this problem, she would have learned that this change of the scope of psychiatry was due not only to psycho-analysis but also to the discoveries of the effects of brain lesions on behaviour.

Lady Wootton is alarmed about the vagueness of the concepts of psychopathy and mental deficiency. It is, of course, true that moral and medical judgments often overlap and are difficult to disentangle. There are still very few objective criteria of mental illness, and often the first and only indication of its presence is social failure. A considerable time may elapse in an individual case before other signs of illness can be demonstrated. All this is rather confusing, and sometimes the doctor, by introducing his own uncertainties, makes it difficult to administer the law; but this is an inevitable complication where knowledge is incomplete.

Lady Wootton is ultra-conservative concerning the safeguards against conviction for offences committed in a state of mental disorder. She does not think that the McNaghten rules, which reflect the medical knowledge of 1843, can be improved upon and she is opposed to the concept of diminished responsibility. She resents the 'privileged' position of the medical profession. It is a pity that Lady Wootton has not heeded her own warning that "in social research generally, constant vigilance is necessary against the risks of prejudice". Her attitude against the medical profession has a Shavian flavour, without being entertaining.

Lady Wootton condemns the emphasis on personal relationship in social work. The social worker ought to concern himself only with economic and not with personal difficulties, which, she believes, can be kept apart. The chapters dealing with the role of the social worker appear the most unenlightened of the whole book, probably because here the author speaks as an expert.

The concluding chapters make gloomy reading. Lady Wootton re-states her poor opinion of social pathology in its present immature state. Like everybody else, she wants more facts and more sophistication in the formulation of hypotheses. She believes that for some time to come the destruction of myths is going to be the chief pre-occupation of the social scientist.

It has been said that the main characteristic of the scientific attitude is the scientist's devotion to the detection of his own errors. Scientists must also undertake the task of proving others wrong. Lady Wootton has dedicated herself to the latter, but in doing so she has neglected the former, which is the true test of the scientific outlook. This is why this book gives a distorted picture of the state of social pathology.

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