How to Sell the Social Sciences ?

by our Special Correspondent

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THE times are propitious for the social sciences to win funds and influence government policy. But how can the customers' good will best be exploited when on past performance the social sciences (economics excepted) have relatively little to offer to the decision making processes of government? The problem of dressing a nearly empty window was, in rather more words, the chief preoccupation of the conference held at the Unesco building in Paris this week on social science policy.

The occasion was made more than purely academic by the presence of several delegates responsible for formulating their country's research policy. Indeed, Mr Andrew Shonfield, chairman of the British Social Science Research Council, was positively optimistic about the part the social sciences have to play in government at some time in the future. Compared with economics, their present influence is on the whole trivial but then the economic indicators which have proved invaluable simply for measuring trends were only developed within the past 40 years. There is no reason why similar indicators should not also be developed in the social sciences, although, of course, the attainment of respectability is not furthered if on the rare occasions when a sociologist's views are adopted as a guide to policy his colleagues "tend to see it in terms of a sleight of hand by which one of their number has managed arbitrarily to capture and use the power of a politician, in the sort of way that Lysenko used Stalin".

An outstanding example of the philosopher becoming king is, of course, the way in which the report on negro family structure made by Mr Daniel Moynihan in 1965, when he was assistant secretary of labour, was adopted by President Johnson as the basis for a whole programme of reform. If the social sciences have so few successes of this nature to their credit, that could be because of the crudity of their theoretical apparatus when compared with the comprehensive embrace of economics. An economist who makes a recommendation on money supply, Mr Shonfield pointed out, is not surprised to be asked how this may affect the level of employment in the building industry in Northern Scotland; but the sociologist advising on a change in structure of primary schools would be unable to say how this might impinge on the operations of authority in the factories.

A different reason for the "lack of popularity of the social sciences among the decision-makers" was suggested by Dr Hemming Friif, director of the Danish National Institute of Social Research; "either the scientists are criticizing the government or they deal with matters which are looked on as esoteric to those grappling with the pressing problems facing their country". Ivory towers also loom tall in the demonology of Professor D. Goldschmidt, director of the Max-Planck Institute for Educational Research, who accused university sociologists, in Germany at least, of being more interested in establishing their subject as an academic discipline than in translating it into

practice, as the student movement are rightly demanding that they should do.

If not in the method, are the reasons for this modest achievement to be sought in the men or the means? The human material was blamed in a discussion between the scientific secretary and the chairman of the Social Science Research Council at the second morning session. Mr J. Mitchell frankly confessed that although the SSRC receives only 2.6 per cent of the total budget for the five scientific research councils in Britain "we none the less have great difficulty in spending this money usefully". No less than 65 per cent of the grant applications made to the SSRC are rejected because of poor quality. Money therefore is not a restraint, but although the SSRC has spent half its budget since 1965 on postgraduate training in the hope of improving supply, Mr Mitchell avowed himself "very gloomy that we will get a substantial supply of competent research workers". His pessimism sprang in part from the belief that there is in the social sciences the lack of a clearly defined research tradition such as distinguishes the natural sciences, nor any consensus as to what is good research and what is bad research.

In response to this public washing, the work of the PEP and the Native School of Anthropology was held up as examples of British linen not being as dirty as was alleged. But Mr Shonfield agreed with his colleagues' diagnosis, at least as a general point that probably affected other countries as well. There has been quite a lot of top talent in the social sciences in Britain, he said. But the vast expansion of recent years had rushed people into professorial chairs at a premature stage in their careers. This dilution of talent was the cost of expansion.

These self-criticisms seemed to appertain to a different world to that described by Dr Henry Riecken, president of the Social Sciences Research Council in Washington, who mentioned that there are about 110,000 social scientists active in the United States enjoying some 800 million dollars of support from federal funds, foundations and other sources.

What use have the social scientists made of this kind of money? Professor A. B. Cherns of Loughborough University, the organizer of the conference, pointed out that federal expenditure on research in the social sciences amounted to an estimated \$333 million in 1968, but that, in response to congressional enquiry, agencies were unable to describe the use made of previous research. But stewardship in the social sciences, Professor Cherns argued, is not just a matter of talent. "Research can only have a specific use if it is conceived as taking a narrow view of the problems it is tackling."

On the showing of the conference it may be hard to define what assistance the policy-maker can legitimately expect from the social sciences, or on what lines social science policy should be planned. But then, as Professor B. Suchodolski of Warsaw remarked, "We have never had any example of state government by sociologists and it might be doubted if such a vista for the future would be a tempting one".