

## What happened to social science?

*Paradoxically the social sciences remain under a cloud when governments and their electors are more worried by social problems than for many years. Should not the social sciences exert themselves?*

ONCE upon a time, just a decade or so ago as it happens, there was a small but quickly-growing army of men and women persuaded that it should be possible to help make the world a better place not simply by making it more wealthy but by enabling it to understand its objectives and its motives. For one reason or another, the once-growing army has been shrinking for several years, and has also fallen into silence when vociferousness used to be its habit. Those concerned were called social scientists, people who at the academic level were differently recognizable as economists and psychoanalysts and who, otherwise, worked at tasks as different as management consultancy and probation officers. The curious circumstance is not so much that they have fallen so silent but that they have done so when the need for people with their pretensions is, if anything, greater than ever. Why should this be?

No doubt there are special circumstances. In Britain, for example, the citadel of the social sciences used to be the Social Science Research Council, rechristened against its will in 1983 as the Economic and Social Research Council by Sir Keith Joseph (now Lord Joseph); it became unpopular with its sponsors for a variety of reasons, some of them political. (To be fair, the council never really had the resources to be a citadel; it was a turret at best.)

Perhaps the most serious charge that can be laid against social scientists with ambitions in research is that it is even harder in their arid fields than in the natural sciences to demonstrate a link between what they spend on their projects and the welfare of the nation whose taxpayers happen to be supporting them. Part of the trouble is that even when social science research is oriented towards the improvement of public policy, government officials have both a vested interest and the right to overlook the implied advice — and then to complain that their rejection shows the projects to have been ill-conceived. But it is not over-malign to guess that the more serious damage has been done by changed demeanour towards the introspections of the social scientists effected in the past few years in most Western democracies, reflected in the matter-of-fact impatience of the governments they elect.

### Paradox

The consequence is a curious paradox: governments are more than ever alarmed about newly emerging social problems, but are inclined to deal with them empirically, by trial and (often) error. In the United States, for example, the abuse of drugs is on everybody's mind, and may yet be an election issue, but the government is inclined to turn towards the military, not the social scientists. Some people are worried sick by the quality of public education, but the preferred solutions tend to be organized around the qualifications of teachers and their salaries. Elsewhere (but also in the United States), the spread of AIDS is at the head of most social agendas, but easier access to a source of condoms is the most common nostrum. In Britain, where soccer hooliganism is threatening to turn what is called the "national sport" (at which the nation concerned is not especially successful) into a television spectacle only, the remedy seems to

be that hooligans (and others) should be issued with identity cards. Alcohol abuse, belatedly acknowledged as the social burden it is, is as likely in the prevailing mood to be dealt with punitively.

The obvious risk in the widespread adoption of these mechanistic solutions for accurately perceived social problems is that, as with all remedies that are directed at the removal of symptoms rather than of causes, they may not be solutions at all. Requiring those who attend football matches in Britain to be equipped with identity cards will probably do more to put struggling or marginally successful football teams out of business than to get rid of hooliganism, for which there are many other outlets still not exploited. Would it not be better, in the circumstances, at least to attempt to understand why these tribal rituals persist and even flourish in prosperous societies, and to look for ways of diverting the energy they consume into more constructive activities? Would it not be useful, and perhaps even beneficial, to know more about the reasons why people choose to take drugs? Or to drink too much? In short, is this not a time when the apparently vanished social scientists should be riding high?

Unfashionable though it may be, that view deserves more attention than it receives in the present climate. The practitioners and their academic colleagues will be quick to blame governments for indifference and insensitivity, and there is much force in that complaint. But it is also fair to say that the practitioners themselves, but especially their academic colleagues, have been slothful in seeking to demonstrate their potential usefulness at this time of unprecedented prosperity and uncertainty for most of the societies in which they used to be entrenched. Governments are fond of blaming the natural sciences for having failed productive industry, but are not in a mood to blame social scientists for failing society. But others will if they do not exert themselves. □

## Cambridge independent?

*Trinity College's generosity towards its university should offer hope to other British universities.*

THE striking feature of the decision by Trinity College, Cambridge, to set up a trust fund for the benefit of the university of which it is an autonomous part is not the amount of money (see page 93) but the mechanism involved. The objective is to provide a university largely dependent on public funds with an independent income, however small by the yardstick of its annual need. Many at Cambridge (and elsewhere) will now be busily calculating just how much more would be needed to secure complete independence. The answers will be depressing — on the assumption that present rules still apply. But what if the government were to change the rules, letting students carry with them the cost of their tuition? That would neatly get the universities off the British government's back and the government off the back of the universities. Should not the government give that a try? □