THE "FREE COMPETITION OF THOUGHT" - A CRITIQUE

"The truth of philosophy - what philosophy really is - is discovered in politics. Philosophical ideas - views of the world, of society, and of man elaborated by philosophers - have always been related in some way to political issues and goals."[1]

Henri Lefebvre's challenging statement takes us beyond the scope of most of what was written in the previous issue of this magazine. I would agree with much that P. Heelas has to say in his exposition of the problems of "comprehending" societies and "translating" between one culture and another. However, only once does he touch upon what I believe to be a question of prime importance in the social sciences today. He writes:

> "At least on certain issues, the anthropologist faces a moral decision in deciding between basic theories of man and society."[2]

And even this sentence is qualified:

> "I do not think that such considerations ... bear so heavily today."[3]

Here I am at odds with him, and more so with statements such as the following by Winch and Wittgenstein respectively:

> "Philosophy is uncommitted enquiry."
> "Philosophy leaves everything as it was."

Winch takes the extreme position of the uninvolved academic:

> "It is not (philosophy's) business to award prizes to science, religion or anything else."[4]

The implications of such a view are that scholarly writing becomes another "game" - a sort of art for art's sake - with no responsibility to the rest of the world, and of no more social relevance than a game of chess. Yet what must be questioned here is whether a subject of such potentially explosive subject-matter as sociology or social anthropology can abstract itself to this degree. Maybe archaeology or botany can be safely left to the eccentric, and perhaps even a professional philosopher can do little harm. But any theory of society, and even the most innocent ethnography, contains elements that may have a practical effect, outside the university walls either in action or in ideology. This effect, of course, may not be intended.

Let us now take a few examples, from different periods, and see how two particular problems apply. I shall label them, for convenience (a) moral and political implications, and (b) distortion processes.

One of the earliest "comparative sociologists", Montesquieu, came up against ethical problems in a striking manner. His main thesis is a sort of ecological determinism.[5] Large countries, hot climates, the existence of navigable rivers, the supply of domestic animals - all these condition what he calls the "esprit general" of a nation (e.g. hot weather makes people either lazy or excitable, and thus unamenable to democracy as a political system.). For a religion or a form of social organisation to take root, a certain "caractere commun" or "principe" is required (e.g. "point de noblesse, point de monarchie").[6]

This principle, once established, rules, and many times, Montesquieu asserts that it is virtually unchangeable: it comes from "la nature des choses":

> "Dès que le ton est donné et reçue, c'est lui seul qui gouverne."[7]

And more important, he claims that we must in many cases accept the status quo, even perfect it. For example, the Chinese being by nature a lewd race, there is no point in attempting to introduce Christianity with its emphasis on chastity!

However, his problem is that he cannot maintain this moral relativity. Christianity for him is the true religion. Slavery is repugnant to him, as is the Spanish Inquisition. He begins to retract. His final position is an uneasy compromise. There are some regions, he claims, where true morality (Christian, of course) can combat physically-determined morality (e.g. in Ethiopia). Some races, because of their "lachete", will always remain slaves, but in intermediate cases, perhaps slow moral pressures can change the general spirit. His final position on slavery is summed up in the sentence:

> "Il faut borner la servitude à de certains pays."[8]

Thus, even in a man who was continually claiming a disinterested scientific objectivity ("Je n'ai point tiré mes principes de mes préjugés, mais de la nature des choses"[9]), and who himself avoided any political involvement, preferring his library in Bordeaux to a position of power (conferred by his title), we still find the inescapable need to make (political, moral, practical) judgments and recommendations. The same applies to the "philosophes" who followed him - Diderot, Voltaire, d'Holbach, Maupertuis, d'Alembert, Condorcet, etc.

In some ways, luckily for them, most did not live to see the French Revolution, when to write meant to take sides. Many, in fact, were either nobles or comfortably off, and ultimately, one could say, they represented a leisured class playing with philosophy - there is the famous story of Voltaire's dinner party, where he cautioned his companions, "Ssh, not in front of the servants!" Nevertheless, this secret society atmosphere - for philosophers only - had its advantages, in that they had nearly a century in which to experiment fairly harmlessly. Views ranging from those of Montesquieu to those of de Sade found expression, but had little immediate effect on society.

The difference today, though, is that the "servants" do hear what the philosophers say, and so do the politicians. With privileged isolation no longer the case, academics must now rethink their position vis-a-vis the real world. To demonstrate this, let us take our second example from a post-war social anthropologist/psychologist.

I refer here to Dr. O. Mannoni's book, "La Psychologie de la Colonisation" (first published in 1948, translated in 1956,[10] reprinted in 1964). His theory is interesting and much of what he says about colonials rings true. Yet I would condemn the book as ethnocentric, (virtually racialist), in tone, and, worse, an excellent weapon for interested parties in Madagascar. To take the first criticism first (this is my (a) moral and political implications from p.1.):

The assumption underlying the whole theory is that western man has escaped from the "pre-logical" or "primitive" (the fact that he puts these terms between quotation-marks does not remove the value-judgement) and has entered the "maturity" of the "scientific spirit". Phrases like "heroic attitude", experimental spirit", "more advanced", "civilised", etc., abound, contrasted with "regressive", "infantile", "primitive", "fetishism", and so on. In a nutshell:

> "The characteristics of the scientific approach to reality are in fact the same as those of democratic society and of the highly-developed personality."[11]

His main regret is that colonials "revert" to a primitive father-child relationship once in contact with an "un-scientific" people

(here the Malagasies). He has the vague, idealistic hope that the colonials, and ultimately the Malagasies, will be weaned to his sort of liberal wisdom. Yet in 1964 he confesses:

> "The administrators, military officers and even missionaries who dealt with practical problems of colonial life, adopted the book in order to exploit it, and extracted from it methods and gimmicks to use in the pursuit of their own ends - a development I might have forestalled had I expected it."[12]

I doubt it. The whole tenor of this book is ready-made for racist propaganda. What hypocrisy to write, for example:

> "It would perhaps be better for the authorities to remain in ignorance and for disinterested research to continue",[13] (c.f. Voltaire?)

and then continue to endorse new editions of this big-selling book! It seems to me that Mannoni simply wishes to cover himself against legitimate criticism. For instance, and I noticed this only by chance - the Introduction (p.34, 1964) emphasises that this is only a personal document:

> "I became preoccupied with my search for an understanding of my own self ... my study of social relationships coincided with my research into my own personal problems",

and yet, 29 pages earlier, in a small footnote, we find:

> "The end of the Introduction from the bottom of page 33 to the bottom of page 34 has been rewritten for the English edition."

We can relate this to an admission in the 1956 preface:

> "I rashly employed certain theoretical concepts which needed more careful handling than I realized at the time. I must frankly admit that I am now disturbed by the obvious weaknesses of the book in this respect ....On the whole, what I regret is not so much these weaknesses in my book as the fact that I have not produced a much more personal study."

Clearly, then, he has felt guilty about the impact of his book, yet has not the courage to withdraw his main thesis. Instead he tries weakly to proclaim that at the time he was indulging mainly in self-examination. This is nonsense. The book itself is dogmatically and "objectively" written, as if these psychological conditions are given reality. This then is another very good example of moral and political issue clouding. In his chapter headed "What can be done?" he sounds liberal, but is virtually saying that the French have a duty to remain. This is clear from sentences like:

> "If the once-subject peoples were to revert to political systems of which we disapproved, we should feel uncomfortably responsible for letting this regression take place."[14]

At the risk of a cliche, I would compare this to American rationalisations for remaining in Vietnam, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, and so on. Yet it follows closely upon an insistence that "all peoples, even the most ignorant and backward, are capable of governing themselves, provided of course, that they are left to choose their own methods."

Mannoni cannot have it all ways. He has an empirically-based theory which he later claims is a "personal" document, and a justification of French presence mixed with a wish to see enlightened self-government. "The Communists," he laments, "denounced the book as an obfuscation". And, in this case, they are absolutely right!

My third example is the most modern. In two leading articles in February this year, the Sunday Times examined the views of Professor Jensen of the University of California. These are based upon an investigation of the relative I.Q.s of racial groups within the United States, and the implications are, very strongly, that Negroes, Indians and Puerto Ricans have an inherited intelligence lower than that of the average white child. To cover himself (I quote the Sunday Times writer, Bryan Silcock):

> "Jensen acknowledged that the evidence upon which he was working was not strong. Nevertheless, he did say that the possibility that the intelligence gap derived from inheritance was 'worthy of further consideration'."

Silcock continues:

> "And within days of publication, his paper was being cited in law-courts by white Southerners battling against racial integration of the schools."

I hope no further comment is required here. I do not see how Jensen can possibly escape the charge of playing his part in the segregationalist cause.

Another example from America is a book called "Race and Reason" published by the "Public Affairs Press", Washington D.C. (1961), endorsed by two leading Senators and a host of academics. It quite openly argues that the Negro is "uncivilisable", and, unlike Jensen, is absolutely sure of its "evidence". The preface proudly proclaims:

> "There is logic and common-sense in these pages: there is also inescapable scientific validity."

My reason for quoting this is not to suggest that such openly expressed poison is widespread, but that the idea is by no means dead that the social sciences can produce incontrovertible empirically-based "scientific" theories on the old model of the natural sciences. The high prestige of academic theories outside Universities has, I think, much to do with this belief, still alive within them. Although Kuhn, Heisenberg, and others have challenged even chemistry and physics as purely empirical sciences, in the sense of elucidations of a given reality ("... When examining normal science, ... we shall want finally to describe that research as a strenuous and devoted attempt to force nature into the conceptual boxes supplied by professional education."[15], in the social sciences the tradition of Comte, Radcliffe-Brown, Merton, Parsons, etc., remains difficult to combat. B. V. Street (last issue) discussed the way in which academic theories filter (via popular works, fiction, newspapers, etc.) into the general conciousness. (He is interested chiefly in the "scientific" myth behind racial stereotypes in the nineteenth century). It is also true that the politicians take note of the reports prepared by scholars, particularly if accompanied by impressive statistics substantiating them. An obvious example of this is the present concern with "immigrant birth-rates". What is forgotten is that our books and essays are no more than inspired guesses - "models" in the current terminology - and no matter whether the original writer pays lip-service to this (c.f. Mannoni's "personal" examination, Jensen's "weak evidence") or whether he (like Montesquieu and Putnam) himself claims scientific validity for his ideas, in the present climate of statistics-worship the chances of more weight being put upon a work than it deserves are very great.

I use, then, Mannoni's chapter heading: What can be done? First of all, I believe we can do something about my problem (a) the moral and political implications of a theory. The more individual writers question all assumptions behind their own works, the better. Books on "social cohesion", social change", "culture contact", might include a clear statement of whether or not the "cohesion" entails suffering, whether the author approves of the direction the change is taking, whether "contact" is a euphemism, and so on. I am in favour of some form of self analysis by the writer, and possibly of more personal anecdotes in ethnographies. (If, for instance, the anthropologist intervened in native politics at all, he should tell us.) Again, other writers should not hesitate to apply "sociology of knowledge" techniques when criticising works. That is to say, to put the use of certain types of model and the employment of key words into a historical framework, to see to which main theory it explicitly or implicitly subscribes, and to bring out the social, ideological, and political implications of that theory. Marxists, of course, have been doing this for a long time, although too often spoiling their credibility by overgeneralisation and crude jargon. Liberal academics have been late to see the importance of such study, and even then, tend to miss the political point. In 1929, Clarence Irving Lewis took at least some steps in this direction.

> "I suppose it must be admitted, in the last analysis, that there can be no more fundamental ground than the pragmatic for a truth of any sort ..."[16]
> ..."Any set of basic concepts has vested interests in the whole body of truth expressed in terms of them, and the social practices based on them. The advantage of any change must be considerable and fairly clear to overcome human inertia and the prestige of old habits of thought."[17]

However, he, like Kuhn[18] tends to think more in terms of <u>academic</u> pragmatism in vacuo and the needs of "<u>knowledge</u>", rather than considering the social and political theories and interests involved. Although no doubt some scholars are <u>relatively</u> unaffected by events outside the university, it is virtually impossible to avoid the influence of dominant "schools", which, particularly in social studies, can hardly help being concerned with what are generally seen as the main problems of the time. Sociology delves into "juvenile delinquency" (already a passé term - subsumed by "deviance" or "social conflict"), "race relations" ("ethnicity"?), "education", "business management" and so on - presented, as it were, by society (or, maybe, by a certain group ideology within that society) with an object of study, which it then takes as real. The same applies, perhaps less obviously, to anthropology, where "kinship", "religion", and studies in "equilibrium" have given way to "social change", "plural societies", "classification", and, of course, moves towards other disciplines. The origins of the first two concerns are fairly clear, and the last reflects the idea (fact?) that "primitive" societies are on the way out. "Classification" (Douglas, Needham, Beattie, Leach, etc.) is more difficult to explain, but no doubt an historical explanation could be made for the present interest in this field.[19]

If it then be convincingly suggested to e.g. an "empiricist" collecting "facts" on "ethnicity" that the reality he is dealing with has been defined for him by a certain, temporarily powerful ideology, one can hope at least for a re-questioning of his assumptions. This may be the only effective way to attack certain American political scientists,[20] who have persuasive defenses if questioned only within their own terms. James E. Hansen, an American dialectician, puts this succinctly:

> "Inquiry is value-laden, not only because it is one of many possible inquiries into 'data', but also because it is grounded in specific historically-generated needs ... Since all science utilises caeteris paribus experimentation, and since the

> particular experimentation conducted depends upon the value-orientation of the experimenter, what was once 'objective' may no longer be taken as such (e.g. witches, phlogiston, aether)...History determines facts, not facts history."[21]

Does not this make nonsense of the unrealisable ideal which Popper, in a highly revealing phrase, calls the "free competition of thought"?[22] Surely the notion of free individuals competing in a free market of ideas involves the same sort of errors and omissions as those made by the proponents of the pure laissez-faire capitalism model!

So much for the theoretical implications of individual works. Finally, however, we have to consider how to deal with (b), what I called "distortion processes". It is arguable how much effect academics have upon, for example, the formation of official ideologies or the formulation of policy, but we must still face the question: how is it possible to avoid use being made of one's work which utterly distorts its original purpose? Mannoni could deplore "a development I could have forestalled had I expected it", but he does not tell us how. Jensen finds himself quoted by segregationists. The original proponents of the American Dream, the theoreticians who influenced Robespierre, the lovers of the German State, from Hegel to Spengler, - most would have been horrified at the reality into which their ideas were incorporated. There are no doubt western writers on Nigeria who have witnessed the same sort of process. Or, on a different tack, what of the detailed ethnography which provides excellent information in, say, a subsequent war or an eager business enterprise? Several analyses of "primitive economy", for example, have indicated precisely where an entrepreneur could make a fortune (e.g. Barth on the Darfur, Epstein on the Tolai of New Britain).[23] Anthropological knowledge can be useful, too, for projects such as "settling" nomads or "assimilating" rebellious groups.

I am not arguing the paranoid case for ceasing to write anything in case "they" get hold of it! (although in sciences like genetics, this is indeed the conclusion that one or two men have been forced into)[24]. In fact, anthropology may one day be in the reverse position, of being denied access to information. Several ex-colonial countries, with a perfectly justified dislike for white anthropologists, have refused entry visas to ethnographers - indicating that I am not alone in my fears. What steps can we then take to avoid such a situation? First, we can encourage a healthy mistrust of words like "pacification", "integration","assimilation", "aid", and "development" in general, as well as a reluctance to work as an anthropologist for any government, without very careful thought. Secondly, there might be more study devoted to understanding the main ways in which academic pronouncements influence ideas and events. The development of ideologies in general, is an important subject which few but Marxists[25] have tackled (a notable exception being Leach's Political Systems of Highland Burma).

However, in the end I am sure that prediction could not be accurate beyond very general level. Ultimately I do not think there is much one can do about misuse, except to denounce it as such. In fact, if anthropologists fail to make their motives and allegiances (or lack of allegiances) clear, it may not be long before so many countries will be closed to them that they will have to either join the professional sociologists or return to the armchair and rework Malinowski.

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References:

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2. P. Heelas, "Meaning for Whom"; Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford, March, 1970.

3. Ibid.

4. P. Winch, The Idea of a Social Science; 1958.

5. Mostly expounded in "L'esprit de Lois"; 1748.

6. Ibid, III,11.

7. De la Politique, 1728.

8. L'Esprit de Lois, XXV, VII.

9. Ibid, preface.

10. Prospero and Caliban; Praeger, New York, 1956.

11. Mannoni; 1964, p. 195.

12. Ibid, preface to 2nd edition.

13. Ibid, p. 169.

14. Ibid, p. 174.

15. T. Kuhn; The Nature of Scientific Revolutions; 1966, p. 5.

16. C. Irving Lewis, Mind and the World-Order; New York, 1929., p. 266.

17. Ibid, p. 269.

18. Kuhn, op. cit., particularly pps. 147-50.

20. e.g. Hook, Lipset, Bell, Bendix. Chomsky exposes the evils of such writers in his frightening book "American Power and the New Mandarins".

21. James E. Hansen, A Dialectical Critique of Empiricism; University of Buffalo, offprint, 1969.

22. K. Popper, The Poverty of Historicism; p. 159.

23. Barth in A.S.A. 6; Epstein in Firth and Yamey.

24. e.g. the American geneticist who recently announced that he was giving up research into the isolation of genes.

25. cf. Louis Althusser, For Marx; 1970, or Ossowski, Class Structure in the Social Conciousness; Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963.

19. As Althuser puts it, "the meaning of a particular ideology depends ... on its relation to the ideological field and on the social problems and social structure which sustain the ideology and are reflected in it". (Althuser's underlining). 2 Althuser. For Marx. (Allen Same, the Penguin Press, 1969, p. 62-3).