The myths of 'value-free' sociology

SOCIOLGISTS STILL CLING to a definition of reality which assumes that causal connections can be made from a base definable in purely empirical terms. It is this myth of objectivity and scientific value-free precision which guides much sociological theorizing. In 1744 Vico placed these assumptions in doubt when he argued that mathematics did not record the inner nature of things but was rather the product of the human mind and was, in effect, true only of itself and not beyond itself. He argued that mathematics bears no one-to-one relationship with physical or 'natural' systems, as these have their own rationale independent of the actions of men and unknowable in human cognitive terms. This does not imply that humans may not efficiently order physical units to produce desired results, which obviously can be done, but emphasises that 'efficient use of' does not constitute knowledge of nature.

Vico also argues that what man makes is, or can be, understood by man because he himself makes it. Thus history is, in principle, knowable with a much higher degree of accuracy than is any system

Steve D'Alton is a lecturer in sociology at the University of NSW. This article is the slightly amended version of a paper delivered at the Congress of the Sociological Association of Australia and New Zealand held in Brisbane in July. Due to a misunderstanding, only Steve D'Alton's name appeared on the article "Ideology — a Static Definition of Reality" which was published in the last issue of ALR. The article should also have carried the names of co-authors Marika Muhlen-Schulte and Michael Bittman. The error is regretted.
studied by the physical scientists. A significant implication of this approach is that the use of mathematical reasoning which is appropriate to natural sciences is, when applied to the understanding of society, absolutely inappropriate. Here mathematics implants a method geared to partial understanding and efficient manipulation onto a subject of study which may be fully understood and all embracing. It is the methodology which distances the analyst from the system to be analyzed and thus makes opaque what is potentially transparent. Mathematical precision, therefore, serves as a mystification that prevents real interaction of the social observer in society and affirms the separation of society and man.

This guiding myth, which also finds expression in economics and psychology, serves to force irrelevance onto what are vital human subjects. Objectivity divorces the observer from the thing observed and precise mathematical formulation of the thing observed divorces the abstract formulation from its own active expression. Thus, the whole enterprise is one which alienates, is grounded on alienating principles and affirms alienated methods. It is the distancing that divorces the observer from his own social environment and permits the reification of social processes by making them static entities. Static entities which are related to the observer in much the same way as physical objects are related to the dispassionate research chemist. Thus 'social engineering' may be manipulating methods for organising humans as machines for abstract ends like 'high production' rather than for human ends which might be 'to hell with work like this'. 'Value-freedom' is, in this context, the value of a specific ideological context, one which affirms the status quo — capitalism and the accompanying property ethic.

The alienation inherent in this process allows much of what is socially significant to be ignored as 'non-empirical' or 'value-oriented' and enables the sociologist to avoid criticising or even attempting to understand the society in which he operates. The questions of man's meanings and purposes, his construction of reality, beliefs and values can thus be ignored in favour of microcosmic studies of abstracted model-men. Present technology with its danger of ecological destruction and atomic catastrophe, and over-population force a revision of the accepted principles of academic endeavour, and the ideological ground on which present social theory rests is being criticised with increasing vigour. It also highlights the responsibility of the individual social scientist for the maintenance of particular constructions of reality, since the criticism emphasises the essentially voluntary nature of all theorising. That is, the relationships to be understood do not permit of a
single, unambiguous formulation of an inherent truth but require a projection of order if they are to be made meaningful to the observer. To the extent to which sociologists are iconoclastic and dynamic, they are socially relevant in pointing to the gap between what are socially prescribed possibilities and what is man's potential. To the extent to which sociology is conservative and static/descriptive, it is limiting as it affirms a past condition as the present condition.

All academic disciplines owe their existence and maintenance to arbitrary distinctions constructed socially and maintained voluntarily. The boundaries of the disciplines are not givens to be discovered but are affirmations by practitioners calling themselves by the name of the discipline. Thus, the boundaries of sociology are, in effect, what 'sociologists' choose to make them; they are not prescribed beyond the practice of men. Sociology is not a unitary perspective independent of sociologists but is a series of perspectives each dependent on the individual so that each individual is responsible for his own formulation of the meaning and relevance of the study. The discipline exists in our consciousness, our actions and our structuring of the universe. Of course each individual sociologist has available to him a range of writings, and his own construction of the subject matter is, in part, dependent on his particular experience of the contents of previous works. But his totalisation of them is his own and he is uniquely responsible for answering or attempting to answer the questions as to what this totalisation is based on.

The view that suprapersonal forces are the deterministic arbiters of man's actions, arbiters which have an absolute, knowable construction that can be empirically verified is, in effect, an anti-heroic myth. This side of empirical positivism negates man's voluntarism in favor of 'natural' or 'social' forces that are independent, autonomous and omnipotent. The myth implicit in much sociological theorising is not man the heroic, but society the heroic 'super-force'. In contrast to this, sociologists should take as their proper sphere of concern that of man, man-in-action, the praxis of material men acting to produce their environment in a reflexive interdependent complex, the resultant of which is man's historical affirmation of himself. Concern should therefore be with the actions of man, his meanings and the context in which he lives.

Basic to this approach is concern with meaning. Rickmann states: "In perception expressions are not given to us as expressions —we only realise that what we perceive is an expression when we grasp that it has a meaning". It is on this level of meaning that man constructs his universe, consequently the relevant epistemolo-
gical conditions for understanding are concerned with the attribution of meaning. It is a relative epistemology rather than an absolute one which is congruent with understanding in the social sciences. This approach does not deny that objects exist, but rather stresses that it is the ordering of the meanings of objects which is the proper sphere of social theories. These are essentially theories about the way man relates to his social and object universe and to himself. Of itself, data is meaningless until acted on by man, and the attribution of meaning is the basic act of man projecting himself and his construction onto his environment.

In this context, meaning and ideas are posited as an active ordering of the universe. Vico, and later Marx, see ideas not as clear and distinct mental definitions but as tools and weapons (thus, for Marx, a theory can prove itself in action), as instruments through which man gradually comes to himself and achieves his humanity both individually and historically. Vico criticises the abstract analytical method advocated by Descartes and suggests that thinking, as it is experienced, follows a highly complicated path of meaning, context and relevance and that analytical method is not the form of thought but only a rare form of thought. Understanding gained through this method is, consequently, a partial understanding corresponding to the partial formulation of the real as rational. Categorisation and rigidly oppositional thinking has been criticised by a wide range of writers as making a static, abstracted, partial, exclusive, unambiguous formulation of what is a dynamic, holistic, ambiguous, inclusive reality. Categorisation requires that time be held as a constant, yet the attribution of meaning by man is the active expression of man-in-the-world, a world where space and time are not independent unities but are fully reflexive and interdependent.

The alternative approach emphasises the constant creation and recreation of individual and social meaning through action on the environment, so that history may be seen as ‘the advent of meaning’. The present, in which individuals act, is always becoming. It is not an unambiguous given, but an actively created project, grounded in its own past and oriented to its own future. In this process, it is the activity of man which is the constituting and integrating element. It is in this sense that Marx can say ‘man makes history’ and, together with Sorel, suggest that ‘the man who draws up a program for the future is a reactionary’. That is, the program is drawn up in terms of its own past which will inevitably be transcended in its active becoming. History is a human creation and is the inescapable responsibility of humans because they themselves have made it. It is what man has added to nature, it is specifically human and can be blamed neither on God nor
on the impersonal forces of nature. These are precisely Sartre's points when he argues that the dialectic is the mode of reasoning most appropriate to the dynamic nature of social reality and his formulation of the dialectic as totalisation, de-totalisation and re-totalisation is an attempt to come to grips with the problem of expressing a non-linear process in linguistic form, of providing a mode of understanding appropriate to the process to be understood.

Both the perspectives of teachers and the conventional methods of analysis in sociology have been criticised recently by Roszak (*Dissenting Academy*) and Blackburn (*Student Power*) while Chomsky has attacked the validity and use of rational argument in social crises (*American Power and the New Mandarins*). But it appears that the basic criticism is of the role ascribed to man by analysts who are themselves playing the same alienated role suffered by those they are studying. Criticism is aimed at those holding partial, static, establishment views of the world, views that empiricise man and abstract him from his humanness. Methodology has become of paramount importance, a methodology ignorant of its own presuppositions and grounded in a pseudo-scientific rationale of 'objectivity' that does not include a critique of its own value stance but from which pronouncements about other value stances are constantly made. Total involvement in methodological considerations has had the effect of reducing analysis to particularised description and divorcing it from the process described, alienating form and content and implicitly justifying what is rather than postulating what can or ought to be.

In the approach to sociological enquiry which emphasises man as the focus of study, it is necessary to state the assumptions about the nature of man on which the analysis of social forms is based. Because of the nature of social interaction as a process, analysis concerned with truth in the Cartesian sense is not satisfactory. For this, as Vico argues, is a static construction, while science — and especially social science — is really an inter-subjective human project whose principles are not to be found in things themselves independent of human action, but rather 'within the modifications of our own mind'. He argues that man acts in the world, makes it human and in so doing, humanises himself. Marx also follows this construction, claiming that the need for self-realisation in man is accomplished through "the union of man with nature, the realised naturalism of man and the realised humanism of nature". For Dilthey, too, understanding rests on the recognition of 'the I in the thou'.

Man is consequently viewed both as creator and creation, as the
producer of his own conceptual universe and as the product of his own projection. Concern for both sides of all interaction, mediated through a process-definition of reality is an attempt to avoid reifying the form of social action into an ideal type, unidimensional, static construction. Central to this approach is a view of man’s relatedness to the world, the interior and exterior condition of his self. Marx supplies the key to understanding the dynamic nature of man and states that the anterior condition of action is need, the need to express oneself through the objects of the environment, to act on the environment as a positive expression of human creativity. It is not, therefore, simply environment action on a passive receptor that is the condition of man, but it is the expression of man through the environment that transforms both the environment and man himself in a two-way process. The interior condition of man is need, the exterior condition of need is praxis.

The formulation of need-praxis as the condition of individual action corresponds to Sartre’s definition of the dialectic where he argues that man and the environment (including other men) interact in a continuous process. The individual perceives the environment in terms of lack, that is, he projects a particular construction onto the environment, a construction that orders it in terms of a felt need. The praxis which corresponds to this ordering then organises the external world as a means of fulfilling the need and in this way man projects and actualises himself through the active attribution of meaning which reflexively affects his consciousness. Berger and Pullberg suggest that “to act means to modify the figure of the given in such a way that a field is structured which, to the actor, constitutes a meaningful totality” and it is this process of the structuring of the environment by man that is the projection of his meaning onto the world. However, at the same time, the field to be structured contains of itself data and is the material on which man works and which faces man as both the raw material and the result of his work. Man’s meaning, mediated through its own actualisation returns to him as the introjected* condition of external reality. Thus what was once a meaningful ordering of the world in terms of need becomes meaningless as the need is filled by the projected order, and each particular formulation of man’s need to express himself through the world is detotalised by its own successful totalisation. There is, consequently, a continuous process relationship between man and the environment, where man realises himself through the world and realises the world through himself. History is the stream

* Introjection here means the incorporation into one’s personality of a particular projected view which orders the environment—Ed.
of such meaning actualisation and, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, should not be divorced from philosophy as both history and philosophy are man's creation and actualisation of meaning.

At this point it is tempting to reformulate the interaction process simply in terms of man's consciousness of it, and this is precisely what Hegel does when, in The Phenomenology of Mind he suggests that man is alienated and returns to himself only in thought. Marx's criticism of the Hegelian formulation is that this "turns man into the man of consciousness, instead of turning consciousness into the consciousness of real men, living in the real world". When Hegel studies the alienated products of man he takes them only in their abstract form and, in a sense, denies their material expression as real wealth, etc. But man is not alienated by the spiritual essence of his produced objects; he is, as Lefebvre says, "alienated by being temporarily dominated by a world that is 'other' even though he himself gave birth to it", and he suggests that Marx's critique of Hegel's theory of alienation "opens the way for a positive humanism which has to transcend and unite idealism and materialism".

Man is, once more, the focus, and it is man's creation and recreation of himself in the world of material objects and other men that is the necessary ideal of understanding. Together with this orientation towards man as self-creator goes the existential emphasis on the freedom of choice. That is, each individual is free to choose and, in good faith, perceives the choices. Unconscious drives are merely those forces which the conscious mind knowingly denies. The individual expresses himself under conditions of need/praxis and is himself manifest in action, one aspect of which is choice. Thus not choosing is itself a choice not to choose and is one choice among a range of possible choices. It is therefore a uniquely human problem to be aware of the choices and to have the responsibility attendant on any particular choice. The process of choosing is an ongoing one which is at once the condition of, and the limitation to, man's potentiality since action requires that a choice be made and the 'utility cost' of this alternative is the alternative foregone. This is what Sartre calls the 'kernel of unfreedom in freedom' and is the condition of a temporal existence. Husserl also emphasises the becoming nature of man and advocates a concentration on experience as the proper focus of study as this is the stimulus and response of man's actions in and through time.

Individual identity is, consequently, a constantly becoming process, being formed and reformed, actively maintained or changed; it is a unity of consciousness temporally linked with
experience to experience. William James states: "It is but our abstract conceptual thought that isolates and arbitrarily fixes certain portions of this stream of consciousness"; it follows that understanding of man in society requires a system of reason appropriate to the unity of man's ever moving consciousness and action, and the most satisfactory system seems to be dialectical reason.

Man acts to constitute society and the society so constituted reacts back onto man as the continuing expression of his manifest praxis. Thus the present approach to man does not dehistoricise him but makes him uniquely responsible for his social environment and the perceived requirements of the environment. Man operates in society to the extent that society operates in man, the whole construction is a human creation and requires human action to maintain the construction. Consequently, the whole social system may be analysed as a process of projection and introjection, that is, an active expression of man's creation. Every act constitutes and reconstitutes the social system while categorisation of the society as a 'given' corresponds to the arbitrary fixing of one particular formulation as the formulation, as the social reality and neglects the continuity and historical unity, the relational form of which is temporality. Categorisation, in effect, emphasises the spatial order and neglects the temporal, states a content devoid of form. Formal logic is not an epistemology. The form of society is process and therefore the content changes, so to state one formulation as the formulation states a partial as a total and divorces the society from man. Viewing society in process terms it can be seen to operate only in and through man, the active carrier and creator of the relations that make up the social system; so man is posited as the central focus of study.

The anti-psychiatrists, notably Laing and Cooper, also add to this approach to sociology. They emphasise context and view the relation of individuals to others as a process of interchange where each is constantly affected by and affects the other. They emphasise the process and continuity of the interchange and show how complete patterns of human interaction develop through interpretation and reinterpretation of the other's activity. However, they also recognise the action of the subject in this interchange situation, so that the action of the subject attendant on his reinterpretation of the other, causes the other to reinterpret him and modify his own behaviour accordingly. This is the basis of a dynamic analysis of interpersonal relations where my action passes from being my action for me to being my action for you, 'from being mine for me it becomes other for the other'. There is, consequently, a twofold problem in understanding social interchange.
The first is the impossibility of experiencing the other's experience. The second part consists in the difficulty of comprehending a context when one is a part of it, and where the very actions towards understanding alter the context if for no other reason than that they become a part of it. This indicates that I cannot predict how you will experience me. I cannot be sure what my actions mean for you and similarly I cannot tell what your actions mean for me, as my understanding of you is mediated through my own experience. What is obvious for me may not be at all obvious for others.

Again, emphasis is on continuity, on process and on the unity in movement of all action. Thus we return again to man as the creator of his meanings, as the essential arbiter of his own universe. When it neglects this action orientation and individual involvement sociology falls into a determinist pattern which views the created universe as if the creation is the supra-personal arbiter of man, as if the society maintains itself rather than that man maintains society. Society has meaning only to the extent to which it exists and continues to exist in man’s consciousness and action. It is an abstraction made real by man-in-action, but which is often treated as an alien, for-itself entity beyond the construction of man. Sociologists fail in their task of analysis when they are content to treat the alienated fact as the given condition of man, when they deny their own active role in the total social process.

References:
Berger, P. and Luckman T.
Cooper, D.
Edie, J.M.
Fromm, E.
Laing, R.D. and Cooper, D.
Lefebvre, H.
Lyman and Scott
Marx, K.
Rickman, H.P.
Vico, G.

Sociology of the Absurd, Appleton Century Crafts.