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Taboos and the Social Sciences

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A CHIEF obstacle to the disinterested pursuit of the social sciences is the vital, not to say inflammatory, matter they contain. The fundamental institutions of society are hedged with a mysterious sanctity that forbids the scrutiny of reason.

Religion, group loyalty or patriotism, property, the family, and certain concepts of personal morality, not merely surround themselves with taboos, but emit passionate fumes to blind the sight and confuse the brain of frivolous scrutineers. The case of religion is notorious. No truly religious person will submit his deity or his worship to cold tests of the intellect. Industrious anthropologists may track each of his holy rites back to its origins in sympathetic or imitative magic. But they will not eradicate entirely the "superstitious" sentiment attaching to this magic, and to the primitive "Weltanschauung" of which it was a part. But the most conclusive testimony to the difficulty of a scientific study of religion is, not the emotional bias of the believer, but the counter-bias of the unbeliever, the odium anti theologium, so conspicuous in professing "rationalists." They are not to blame. An escape from prevailing sanctities stamped by early association upon the tender mind can only be achieved by an emotional struggle in which the combative instinct is engaged so strongly as to leave behind a sentiment of hostility and disgust, often intensified in passionate natures by well-founded fear lest the emotional escape be incomplete. Students of comparative religion, or of the higher criticism, will be well aware of the havoc made in the application of laws of evidence to matter laden with such passionate appeal.

But even more significant is the sentiment of sanctity when its veneration and taboos are applied to the concepts of country, property, or sex. The moral and legal supports of these concepts, and of the obligations they impose on conduct, are termed appropriately "sanctions." For into each of them is carried the same sentiment of awe or mysterious veneration that is realized with fuller consciousness in religious ceremonial and beliefs.

In order to exploit more advantageously this sentiment, political practitioners cultivate with care the divinity that doth hedge a king, or, when personal government has dwindled or been displaced, the close linkage of "God and Country." The elaboration of symbolic ritual in salutation of the flag, national holy-days, patriotic hymns and processions, and the running of history into sentimental moulds of national heroism, for the education of our children, is a semi-conscious endeavor to divert to patriotic purposes the fund of superstition liberated for this work by the weakening of religious attachments. Where powerful religious feelings still survive they can be rallied round the sacred person of the King or the holy Fatherland. Where they decay, owing to the waning belief in another world, the State claims such reverent rights to its emotional inheritance as it can make good in patriotic practices.

How patriotic passion not merely perverts the conduct of public affairs from the paths of sweet reasonableness, but how it conceals, or transforms the truths about this conduct, is in abundant illustration, familiar to all serious students of history. Yet such truths constitute the raw material of political science.

Even when they are laboriously dug out of their hiding places, or restored from their defacement, the "scientific" treatment accorded them is everywhere liable to the subjective valuations of historians or scientists who cannot wholly divest their minds of personal sentiments. The best, because the most truthful, histories are those which make no attempt to conceal these necessary biases. The pretence to a strictly scientific impartiality is both false and foolish. For the human sympathy involved in the perception, interpretation and valuation of events, acts, and characters is incompatible with the impartial attitude that is claimed. This is not uncommonly admitted as precluding a reliable history of very recent affairs. But it is applicable in a more or less degree to the treatment of remote events, which cannot escape the back-stroke of a selection and valuation governed by the current ideas and feelings of today. Though the "political scientist" may distinguish his calling from that of the historian, he can hardly escape the legacy of defects in historical records which must form the staple of his "scientific" treatment.

But not only are "my country," its King, its Constitution, sacred. The fundamental institutions of its legal and social order are also sacred. Property is peculiarly sacro sanct. It is hedged with legal, intellectual, and moral sanctions which make it more dangerous and more wicked to tamper with its foundations than with those of any other institution. The genuinely religious awe attaching to the property concept could not be better illustrated than in the shiver that ran down the backbone of all good citizens the world over at the revelations of Bolshevism in Russia. It was not the cruelty and bloodshed, the forcible autoeracy, or even the collapse of industry, with its accompanying abhorrence. It was the sudden raking up from the embers of a dateless past of the horror of "the unclean thing." The other feelings of pity and resentment entered in but as accessories to this central rush of inflamed horror. Normally we do not realize the emotional meaning we attach to such a concept or institution as Property. We are not obliged to realize it, and there is an intellectual economy in not doing so. But when it is subjected to a sudden challenge, the full force of the "survival value" which it has carried down the ages, suddenly awakes in us. We feel that Property is holy, and its destroyers in Russia, or elsewhere, they and their remotest sympathizers, the professors of any doctrine, the advocates of any policy that threatens any sort of recognized property are sacrilegious monsters.

I have no desire to dispute the survival value, and, therefore, the natural necessity of this sentiment, but how are the sciences of politics and economics going to conduct their processes with cold scientific rigor on the crust of a volcano like this?

There remains, however, one matter perhaps even more intractable to scientific treatment than property, namely, sex and the social relations into which it enters. To sexual activity and selection, with resulting parenthood, is assigned the chief part in organic evolution, the individual survival being regarded primarily as a means to survival of a species. In sex mentality, conscious and uncon-

scious, psychology, therefore, finds the most potent of human urges. To sociology the family is not merely one among many social institutions; it is the nest and nursery of those restraints and provisions which are the source and condition of all larger and higher modes of group life. For though as some anthropologists hold, tribal groups may have preceded definite family life, the tender emotion, fostered in the narrow circle of the family, is a far more powerful educator of self-restraint, altruism, and co-operation, the springs of social conduct, than any of the thinner and more diffuse feeling of gregariousness. Precisely because sex and parenthood are the most potent and intractable of urges, the practices and institutions designed to their utilization and control are compelled to work by strong regulations and repressions.

Making all allowance for these diversions or transmutations of sex-passion into art, sport, religion, called sublimation of the instinct, a continual warfare is waged between the crude demands for sex-satisfaction and the interests of the social order. Especially is this the case in communities or classes, where social order is sought to be enforced by strict taboos, involving tight curbs on thought and speech as well as conduct. Nature here comes to the aid of the repressed instinct by ranging on its side curiosity and the related interest of intrigue. When strong natural promptings are present, the sense of shame and moral reprobation by which law, morals and custom have striven to enforce their taboo adds zest to temptation. This is so well recognized among intelligent persons that organized attempts are made to remove the veil of reticence which helps to shed a glamour upon sex. The error of Puritanism consists partly in misconceiving sex feeling as an enemy to society, partly in supposing that forcible modes of suppression can be effectual. It is doubtless true that there can be no better security for social order than the provision of economic and other arrangements compatible with a freer satisfaction of sex-feeling, not only in its sublimated but in its primary expression. It is, indeed, significant that a rapid and widespread interest among social students is being directed to the related problems of quantity and quality of population, and to the economic, political, racial, and moral issues involved in birth-control and eugenics.

The most striking of all testimonies, however, to the explosive and disturbing influence of sex is afforded by the resent science of psychology. I allude here not so much to the fact that schools of professional psychologists have gathered round sex as the chief centre of activity and interest in the psychical study of man. More significant for my present purpose is the enormous and quite popular reclame which this study has obtained. The fact that everywhere huge numbers of otherwise un-intellectual men and women are chattering psycho-analysis, in clubs, drawing-rooms and improvised study circles, and are dabbling in its literature and practices, furnishes a striking revelation of the difficulties of an impartial scientific treatment of any social problem into which sex enters as a factor. For it is quite evident that it is no purely "disinterested culture" that attracts most of these

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