PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIOLOGY *

by

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Introduction

The birth of sociology at the beginning of the 19th century and its subsequent growth and development as a special science continuously stressed the fundamental dependence of sociological theorising on philosophical presuppositions.\(^1\) As a science of creation in its totality, philosophy must explore of the mutual coherence in the discernible diversity of cosmic facets. Since no special science can escape from a foundational view on the relationship between the various aspects of creaturely reality it is obvious that no special science can operate without philosophical presuppositions. Even when a special science wishes to account for its own existence, it is compelled to move outside its own universe of discourse. Any special scientist, therefore, either has a philosophical vision (in which he gives a critical account of his philosophical starting point), or he is uncritically the victim of some particular philosophical trend in his special science.

Let us consider a few modern sociologists with respect to their basic philosophical orientations. R.M. MacIver started his sociological thinking in 1917 with a clear distinction between two kinds of laws: material and vital. The former is "the law of invariable concomitance or sequence, the fixed order of material nature" and the latter is revealed "in the will of the living, unstable, relative, riddled with changefulness and imperfection".\(^2\) Subsequently, in an intermediate period, MacIver distinguished between the "Physical Realm, The Realm of Organic Being" and "The Realm of Conscious Being".\(^3\) (These distinctions are similar to those of P. Sorokin between the inorganic, the organic and the superorganic phenomena\(^4\), and they are influenced by the phi-

\* This paper was delivered at the Social Science Seminar, August 3-11, 1978, at the Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto, Canada. (Note of the Editor)

\(^1\) Consulting the following two works of P. Sorokin is enough to convince anyone of the truth of this statement: Contemporary Sociological Theories, London 1928; and: Sociological Theories of Today, London 1966.


\(^3\) Social Causation, Boston 1942, p. 273.

\(^4\) Society, Culture and Personality, New York 1962, p. 3.
sophical approach of the neo-Kantian thinker H. Rickert.) In the well-known textbook of MacIver and Page on Society the third realm is divided into civilization and culture. In one of his last works, however, a remarkable shift can be noted in his total orientation, cancelling even his original distinction between material and vital law. Completely in line with the continuity-postulate of mechanistic evolutionism he wrote the following words in 1962: „The line from the inorganic to the organic is continuous. The line therefore from the nonliving to the living is continuous and among the living from the simplest living forms of vegetative existence to the highest of the animal world”.

Another striking example of such a radical shift is found in the development of R. Bierstedt. In a discussion of an early work of T. Parsons, viz. his: *The structure of Social Action* (1937), Bierstedt, in a rather strident tone, rejected the scientific value of terms like means and ends: „The positivistic tradition, . . . requires as the very minimum criterion of a concept that it be reducible to referents which can directly be related to sense-experience or be reached by empirical operations. Ends and means by definition fail to satisfy this criterion. They are not sensory objects to which an investigator can respond”. Claiming that „concrete existential entities susceptible of sense-experience” is the „prime criterion of science”, Bierstedt does not hesitate to speak of sociology as „a natural science” (pp. 38, 39). In 1974 he reviewed this article as follows: „It is an orthodox positivistic response to Parson’s theory, an assertion of the necessity of dispensing with subjective concepts in sociological inquiry, and a defense of determinism against voluntarism. At the time it was written I had fallen under the influence of George A. Lundberg, then a visitor in the Columbia department, and had read with increasing excitement all his polemical papers”.

Eventually it was MacIver, among others, who led Bierstedt to „a close and critical examination” of his own position (p. 7), and finally he became convinced that Lundberg’s radical empiricism „had solipsistic consequences and would, if taken seriously, destroy the objectivity of sociological knowledge” (p. 8). A mere eleven years after his attack on the Parsonian means-end schema, he read a paper before the annual meeting of the Illinois Academy of Science (Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois, May 5—7, 1949) with the title: *A Critique of Empiricism in Sociology*! In this article he stresses the active role of human reason in scientific inquiry which transcends sense-experiences — an approach that betrays the influence of Kant.  

8 *Power and Progress*, p. 5.
9 Cf. op. cit., pp. 133—149.
11 In note 3 on page 135 Bierstedt remarks: „Epistemology did not, of course, begin with Kant, but so profound was the influence of the Kantian philosophy upon subsequent intellectual history, an influence which incidentally persists in the