

hide behind a façade of objectivity and invoke the magic of science to back his crypto-propagandist insinuations.

In comparison with what came later, Merton's essays (as well as the publications of his early followers) appear as wonderfully clear, which weakness led to the supplanting of this variant of Panglossian sociology by a more potent medicine. For if you reiterate the same few notions in a language which (though open to serious criticism) is at least comprehensible, people will eventually notice the repetition, whereas if you wrap them up in incomprehensible mumbo-jumbo, you can go on and on safely without anybody knowing what you are saying anyway. And if you are a famous man in a top position and with a lot of influence, few people will dare to say, or even think, that it is all nonsense, lest they be accused of ignorance and lack of intelligence, and forfeit their chances of obtaining appointments, invitations or grants. So the panglossian functionalism came to be replaced by a super-panglossian structural-functionalism shrouded in heavy clouds of opaque verbiage.

Chapter 6

The Smoke Screen of Jargon

The human mind is scarcely provided with the means of grappling with a reality which is not only staggeringly complex but also fluid, elusive and opaque – a reality which can be apprehended only with the aid of abstractions, which are themselves so indirectly based on sense perceptions that they are always slipping into the realm of pure fancy completely out of touch with reality. As the terminological confusion is just one aspect of the general lack of understanding, the definitions given in dictionaries of sociological or political terms can inform merely about how people use these terms, without providing much guidance on how they ought to be used, because in the present state of the social sciences current usage always leaves much to be desired. On the whole, apart from the economists, the anthropologists have sinned much less on this score than their colleagues in other social sciences; because, describing strange customs and beliefs, they had less need to wrap up their findings in an impressive-sounding opaque jargon than have the sociologists or psychologists, writing about situations familiar to their readers and about which, consequently, it is much more difficult to say something original. If you are a mentally alert black-coated worker, you might learn a thing or two from a book about your class, but you are unlikely to find any startling news there. But, if you are a European or an American and have not studied Moroccan ethnography, you could not guess what goes on in the mountains of the Atlas.

What is at least equally important, during the great days of anthropology the objects of the inquiry were unlikely to learn what the anthropologist had said about them; and even if they did, and did not like it, they would not normally be in a position to cause the author any great annoyance. The shrinking of the world, combined with decolonization, has radically

altered the situation, with the consequence that the anthropologists are now just as cagey as anybody else – if not more so – owing to the touchiness of the objects of their enquiries. Actually, many had to rename themselves as sociologists in order to get a visa to some of the new states.

Although the value of conceptual analysis unaccompanied by constructive theorizing must remain limited, it does not follow that such analysis must be entirely useless. On the contrary, constant attention to the meaning of terms is indispensable in the study of human affairs, because in this field powerful social forces operate which continuously create verbal confusion, much greater than what is inevitable in view of the rudimentary state of this branch of learning.

The prime example of obscurity is, of course, Talcott Parsons, as can well be seen even in a book which is less burdened by this vice than his other works: namely, *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives*. The great merit of this book (as well as of its author's other works) is that it has higher aspirations than the popular image of the sociologist as an unreflecting fact-finder rushing around with questionnaires, not in the least interested in such impractical questions as the evolution of mankind or the nature of the social bond. Unfortunately, however, and despite the author's good intentions, what he says is sadly lacking in clarity. Indeed, he can make the simplest truth appear unfathomably obscure. As every schoolboy knows, a developed brain and acquired skills and knowledge are necessary for attaining specifically human goals, but our author feels that he must tell us this, and this is how he puts it.

Skills constitute the manipulative techniques of human goal attainment and control in relation to the physical world, so far as artifacts or machines especially designed as tools do not yet supplement them. Truly human skills are guided by organised and codified *knowledge* of both the things to be manipulated and the human capacities that are used to manipulate them. Such knowledge is an aspect of cultural-level symbolic processes, and, like other aspects to be discussed presently, requires the capacities of the human central nervous system, particularly the brain. This organic system is clearly essential to all of the symbolical processes; as we well know, the human brain is far superior to the brain of any other species.

The author's addiction to nebulous verbosity shows itself especially in the first chapter, where he offers us some glimpses of his famous general theory of action which in reality consists of incredibly ponderous restatements of the obvious. On page 7, for instance, we read:

Within the limits imposed by the genetic species-type on the one hand and the patterning of the culture on the other, lies the opportunity for given individuals and groups to develop independently structured behavioral systems. Because an actor is genetically human, and because his learning occurs in the context of a particular cultural system, his learned behavioral system (which I shall call his personality) shares certain broad features with other personalities – e.g., the language he habitually speaks. At the same time, his organism and its environment – physical, social, and cultural – are always in certain respects unique. Hence, his own behavioral system will be a *unique variant* of the culture and its particular patterns of action. It is therefore essential to consider the personality system as not reducible to either the organism or the culture – *what* is learned is part of neither the 'structure' of the organism in the usual sense nor a feature of the cultural system. It comprises an *analytically independent system*.

The idea which the author is trying to express is that although every individual is in many ways similar to other human beings, he is also unique in a way which is predetermined neither by the properties of his organism nor by the state of the culture. Again . . . hardly a revelation. Sometimes the author's insensitivity to the meanings of words and his lack of feeling for logic prompt him to make statements which are not merely platitudinous but plainly silly, as when he writes on page 30, 'In the realm of action, the gene has been replaced by the symbol as the basic structural element'. As if we could be here at all if our genes had been replaced by symbols, or as if our capacity to use symbols did not depend on the nature of our genes. After all, worms cannot speak and crocodiles cannot write.

After the first chapter the book becomes slightly better, as the author leaves his system alone and proceeds to tell us about the societies of the Australian aborigines and the Shilluk, and later about social structures in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia,

India, Israel, Greece and Rome, and the Islamic empires. Though hardly novel, the account might be of use to newcomers to comparative historical studies, were it provided in a succinct and clear manner instead of being wrapped up in pompous and nebulous phraseology; as, for instance, on page 56, where (to find out that in ancient Egypt the common people were liable to be conscripted for work) we have to read the following passage:

For those whose roles primarily involved the performance of services, as distinguished from assumption of leadership responsibility, the main pattern seems to have been a response to the leadership's invoking obligations that were concomitants of the status of membership in the societal community and various of its segmental units. The closest modern analogy is the military service performed by an ordinary citizen, except that the leader of the Egyptian bureaucracy did not need a special emergency to invoke legitimate obligations.

Herbert Spencer – who, as we saw earlier, introduced the concept of evolution in the study of society as well as coined the term ‘comparative sociology’ – gets a mention in the conclusion, where the author says:

The present analysis differs significantly from most evolutionary theories in that the developmental dimension I have used is fully compatible with the idea that there is considerable variability and branching among lines of evolution. The evidence we have reviewed indicates that, in the earlier stages of evolution, there have been *multiple* and *variable* origins of the *basic* societal types. Thus, we need not postulate one primitive origin of all intermediate societies, even though we consider such factors as independent cultural legitimation and stratification *necessary* conditions of all intermediate societies. At all stages, the importance of such variability can be adequately treated, we argue, only by an analytic theory of variable factors and components. The impressive development of such theory since Spencer's time enables us to construct a much more sophisticated evolutionary scheme than his.

In reality, however, the scheme offered is an inferior version of Spencer who, with much greater clarity, formulated the idea of evolution as the tendency towards increasing differentiation and integration. Such a trend can indubitably be discerned in the

history of human society, whereas Parsons' own addition – ‘the enhancement of adaptive capacity’ – is untenable, and reflects a demoded popular biology. Is the adaptive capacity of the elephant greater than that of the fly? Or of man greater than that of a virus? Is the adaptive capacity of the Americans greater than that of the Eskimos? What about adapting to living without iron or petrol or paper? The real difference is, as Spencer has pointed out, which social entity can absorb or destroy which.

Nor can Parsons' classificatory scheme – dividing societies into the primitive, intermediate and modern – be regarded as a step forward, as it is much cruder than the taxonomies of much older writers, beginning with Morgan, Marx and Spencer, or even Adam Ferguson and John Millar. Later, Leonard Hobhouse, Rudolf Steinmenz and Richard Thurnwald proposed much more sophisticated classifications.

Sometimes the verbal substitutions masquerading as contributions to knowledge are so inept and gross that it is difficult to believe that the authors really think that they are revealing new truths (which must be the case), and that they are not laughing up their sleeves at the gullibility of their audience. One of the crassest examples of such delusions is the recent vogue for the letter ‘n’, chosen to deputize for the common word ‘need’ because of its status-bestowing properties stemming from its frequent appearances in mathematical formulae. So by scribbling the letter ‘n’ all over their pages some people have succeeded in surrounding their platitudes with the aura of the exact sciences in their own eyes, as well as those of their readers who might have seen some books on mathematics without being able to understand them. As an example of the consequences of the belief in the occult powers of this magic letter, we can take a book by a Harvard professor, Everett E. Hagen, with a presumptuous title, *On the Theory of Social Change*. As Heraclitus said, everything changes all the time; and, therefore, a work offering a theory of social change without specifying any restrictions should in strict logic amount to a comprehensive treatise on general sociology. However, in Hagen's book, ‘social change’ means only one of its possible variants: namely, technical innovation; and, in trying to find the sources of this

the author shifts the viewpoint without warning, employs the term 'innovation' in the widest possible meaning, and proceeds to discuss the psychological determinants of innovation in general. An economist by profession, Hagen has become disenchanted with economic theory on the justifiable grounds that it fails to account for economic backwardness, and has set out to supplement, or rather supplant, it by a partly sociological but mainly psychoanalytic explanation.

Laudably looking further than the usual mental horizon of his fellow economists, Hagen contends that the factors which decide whether an industrial take-off will take place or not are of a psychological nature. This is possible, but to prove it (let alone to prove that the specific psychological factors which he mentions are really crucial) he should have compared societies on a roughly similar cultural, economic and technical level which differed in respect of the psychological traits of their members, instead of confronting psychological characteristics of peoples living under circumstances so contrasting that all other conceivably relevant factors are different too. We might inquire into the role which differences in so-called national character may have played in determining the relative rates of industrial development in France and Germany, but it is ludicrous to attempt to account for the slow speed of technical innovation among the Sioux Indians or the ancient Celts as compared with the United States of today by pointing out the differences in the methods of bringing up children and toilet training. Suppose the Sioux Indians, or even the Burmese peasants, of today were mad on technical innovation, would they then be able to make nuclear reactors or supersonic aeroplanes?

The picture of the 'traditional mentality' painted by the author (on the basis of various studies of American specialists who never bothered to learn the language and who mechanically applied to the inhabitants of the Arabian desert or Burmese jungles the ready-made questionnaires prepared for students in Milwaukee) is on the level of travellers' tales translated into obscure psychoanalytic jargon. Notwithstanding the statement on page 426 that 'with the fibers of their nervous system, not merely with their minds, many individuals in underdeveloped

countries must fear Americans . . .', nobody who has had even a brief contact with peasants and tribesmen will believe that they are all anxiety-ridden obsessionals, or that they are less capable of reasoning than ordinary dwellers in modern cities. A hunter or a herdsman has more opportunities of making decisions and taking risks (and is less likely to be anxiety-ridden) than an average employee of General Motors or Unilever. The author's low opinion of the mental state of the inhabitants of unindustrialized countries is supported by the evidence of their inability to give satisfactory answers to questions which he regards, in all seriousness, as appropriate for illiterate peasants. On page 253 he quotes the following passage from the book of his worthy colleague, Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of the Traditional Society*:

Two of the questions are: 'If you were made editor of a newspaper, what kind of a paper would you run?' and 'Suppose that you were made head of the government, what are some of the things you would do?' As I have suggested in Chapter 5 in discussing world cognition, many peasants are simply unable to answer some such questions.

Surprising, is it not? Why not test the level of 'world cognition' (that is general knowledge) of the President of the United States or the editor of Foreign Affairs by asking him which is the best way of milking a camel.

Though clearly insufficient to account for the differences between societies in respect of the rate of technical progress, psychological considerations should help to explain why certain individuals make innovations while the others do not. Hypotheses about the connection between infant training and inventiveness could be tested by drawing upon biographical material about inventors and confronting it with the data on the general history of customs; but this the author does not attempt. Had he done so, he would have seen that instead of resembling the out-going, novelty-seeking American 'kids', many, if not most, of the giants of scientific discovery were timid and anxious recluses like Newton, or had a very severe and authoritarian upbringing like Gauss. In any case, Hagen would have been prevented from discovering any significant

psychological connection by his employment of the blanket term 'innovator', which covers among others Ghengis Khan, Jesus Christ, Al Capone, Dior and his models, Albert Einstein, the Beatles and the Prince of Wales, who inadvertently introduced the fashion of having turn-ups on trousers. What can be their psychological common denominator? If it is some special kind of toilet training, it remains to be proved.

Hagen's framework of psychological analysis is based on the idea of 'needs' which he regards as an innovation, notwithstanding the fact that it occurs in the Bible. It must be noted, however, that unlike the ultra scientific psychologists, the Bible does not confuse need as an objective requirement necessary for survival with mere desire. There is, however, one real innovation which the author makes or adopts from a psychologist named Henry A. Murray: namely a contravention of one of the basic rules of English (including American English) grammar, which stipulates that if a noun is used in an adjectival sense it must precede the noun which it qualifies – not the other way round. Hagen employs, for instance, the expression 'need aggression' – not, mark, aggression need – to designate the inclination to commit aggression. Since the dawn of philosophy innumerable writers have discussed this proclivity – calling it pugnacity or combative instinct or aggressive drive or what not – but none has invented a term equally well designed to make speech unintelligible. Self-reliance is called according to this dictionary 'need autonomy'; ambition – 'need achievement'; sociability – 'need affiliation'. In Hagen's own words (page 107): 'need understanding is the need to understand . . . to make thought correspond to fact'. Obviously 'need for understanding' or 'wish to understand' would not be scientific enough. On page 106 we read: 'Need order is the need to put things in order'.

The historical material is handled with the same acumen. For example, on page 346 we are told about Colombia: 'The proximate answer to the question why growth began is: Because of the enterprise of the Antioqueños'. Antioquia, however, was inhabited long before this 'take-off', but we are not told why its inhabitants waited so long or did not wait longer; although we are informed that their pre-eminence in

Colombian business was due to the fact that 'they manifested high need autonomy, need achievement and need order' – which means that they were self-reliant, ambitious and orderly.

Actually, a bird's-eye survey of the agrarian relations in Colombia readily suggests an explanation of the Antioqueños' competitive advantage. In contrast to the rest of Colombia – divided into large estates where the peasants had no chance of improving their lot through work, while the landowners had no need to exert themselves – much of the land in Antioquia was in the hands of peasant proprietors who were neither exploited nor in a position to exploit others, and for this reason more frequently developed the habits of self-reliance, foresight and hard work needed for success in business. Why the spurt in industrial development took place at this particular time rather than another cannot, of course, be explained without taking into account the sequence of political and economic circumstances not only in Colombia but in its leading commercial partners as well. The explanations of business enterprise or scientific creativity in terms of toilet training remain wildly implausible, but such a factor might have something to do with the desire to deface the language with distasteful excrescences.

No doubt many critics of sociology are prompted by an obscurantist prejudice against systematic study of human affairs. Moreover, there is sometimes a need for a new term (and in my *Uses of Comparative Sociology* I have tried to specify the conditions which make a neologism justifiable); but it is quite clear that the fashionable sociological jargon consists almost entirely of distasteful and confusing verbal innovations which represent no new ideas whatsoever.

On the other hand, there are some good terminological innovations. Reisman's 'inner-directed' and 'other-directed man', for instance, are very good terms because they point to an important phenomenon, cannot be replaced by any previously existing word and (though vaguely self-explanatory) need a fairly long statement to explain their meaning exactly.

To prove to myself that I too can make such discoveries, and that my opposition to this kind of thing is not motivated by impotent envy, I have written the following report which was published in one of the sociological periodicals. To make this

piece comprehensible I must explain that in addition to our old friend 'n Ach', the equally ungrammatical 'n Aff' stands for 'need affiliation' or, more grammatically, the need to affiliate – that is to belong to a group – the human characteristic known since time immemorial as sociability. 'N. Bam' is my own addition, the meaning of which you are invited to guess.

In connection with David McClelland's article it might be relevant to report that the preliminary results of our research project into the encoding processes in communication flow indicate that (owing to their multiplex permutations) it is difficult to ascertain direct correlates of 'n Aff'. On the other hand, when on the encephalogram 'dy' divided by 'dx' is less than 'O', 'n Ach' attains a significantly high positive correlation with 'n Bam', notwithstanding the partially stochastic nature of the connection between these two variables.

After the publication of this letter I was approached by some industrial research organisations who offered co-operation. Perhaps you would like to try to decipher what my letter says: then you can compare it with my own translation into plain English, printed upside-down below:

Owing to the waywardness of human nature, it is difficult to find out why people join a given group, but observation of how people speak and write clearly suggests that, when the brain is slowing down, a desire to achieve often gives rise to a need to bamboozle.

The article to which I referred in my letter supplied one or more of the innumerable instances of that ever-popular kind of explanation which consists of a tautological rephrasing which tells us nothing that we did not understand before. An explanation which Molière ridiculed three hundred years ago in one of his plays, where one of the characters answers the question about why opium makes people sleep by saying that it is because of its soporific power. In historiography and the social sciences this kind of explanation crops up again and again. Thus, to take an example of a great scholar who luckily did not confine himself to this, Werner Sombart attributed the development of capitalism to the spread of 'the spirit of capitalism', without telling us how we could find out that this spirit was spreading except by observing activities which add up to the process known as the development of capitalism.

The 'n Ach' business is in the same vein, except that it is not accompanied by the wealth of other interesting ideas and data which we can find in Sombart's tomes. It has a long genealogy in all kinds of writings purporting to explain the differences in economic and scientific progress between the East and the West by attributing to the Westerners a gift or an inclination in these directions and the lack of it to the Orientals. However, even the racist Gobineau did not go to the length of imagining that the benighted Orientals did not want to achieve anything at all. In reality no tribe, nation, creed or race has been seen so far about whom we could say that they generally lack the desire to achieve. The Negro truant whom the test-obsessed American educational psychologists find lacking in the 'need to achieve' may care nothing about scholastic achievement, but will make great efforts to attain a respected position in his gang through achievements (such as gambling, womanizing or robbery) which rule out good scholastic performance. Far removed from the spirit of capitalist enterprise, the monks and hermits of old tried to achieve holiness and salvation: goals which often led to bitter rivalries about who was the humblest. The American Indian warriors had no knowledge of money, but had a great desire for achievement as measured by the number of scalps; while the hidalgo depicted by Cervantes had neither skill nor taste for accumulating capital, but strove madly to maintain his dignity and to achieve fame.

The crucial question always is not the presence or absence of the desire to achieve, but the problem of why, in a given society, this desire is canalized towards one goal rather than another. To explain India's poverty by attributing to the Hindus a lack of the desire to achieve reveals ethnocentric blinkers, firstly because (as I have tried to show in *African Predicament* and *Parasitism and Subversion*) under certain circumstances 'the spirit of enterprise' may call forth behaviour which impedes economic progress; and secondly because, even if the entire population of India consisted of fakirs, this would prove not that they lack the desire to achieve but merely that they are pursuing goals which do not appeal to an ordinary American or European. If Murray, McClelland, Hagen or any of their

followers doubt this, I challenge them to have a try at one of the fakir's lesser achievements such as lying on a bed of nails.

The constant recourse to the letter 'n' helps to *cash in* on the prestige of mathematics, which seems to be the only ground for replacing 'desire' by 'need', which lends itself to this impressive abbreviation. As anybody with a mind undamaged by negative education knows, people often desire what they do not need, and what may even do them harm (such as an excessive accumulation of wealth or excessive consumption of food), while needing what they do not desire: for instance, unpolluted air or fair criticism. The grammatically more correct but equally obtuse expression 'need reduction', so beloved by the psychologists of late, means the same thing as 'satisfying the desire'; and though there is little danger of grave ambiguity when we are experimenting on a rat's reaction to the withholding of food, the term acts as a vision-distorting piece of mumbo-jumbo when we talk about (often unquenchable) human propensities such as ambition. Here we have another example of pseudo-scientific jargon being much less discerning than the literary language in which 'reducing a need' does not mean the same as 'satisfying it'. When we say that so-and-so has reduced his need for sleeping pills (e.g. by changing his habits or diet, or moving to a quieter place) we imply that he can now satisfy his need with fewer pills. A need thus reduced may remain unsatisfied if he can obtain no pills, while an 'un-reduced' one may be perfectly satisfied if he can get enough of them.

Equal lack of discernment underlies the use of the term 'reinforcement', which in the psychological jargon has replaced the word 'incentive' in the wide sense of the word, which covers positive incentives (that is, rewards) and negative incentives (that is, punishments). As is always the case with jargon, this substitution confuses the issues instead of clarifying them because, whereas 'incentive', 'reward', 'punishment', and 'deterrent' refer only to the manipulation of motivation of some human beings by others, or of higher animals by men, the word 'reinforcement' is much vaguer, as it can be applied to military operations, building techniques or the manner of advancing arguments in a debate. Moreover, this usage in psychology does violence to the meaning of the prefix 're-', which obliges us to

restrict the connotation of 'reinforcement' to the acts of making stronger something that already has some force, rather than use it to cover situations where incentives are instituted in order to induce certain individuals to act in a way for which they had no antecedent inclination. When, for example, I set up a business and induce people to enter my employment by offers of wages, I am not reinforcing their tendency to work for me, but creating it. The same is true even of animals: when by an ingenious application of rewards and punishments Skinner taught pigeons to play ball, he could only reinforce their inclination in that direction after he had instilled it into them. What he was doing at the beginning when he was furnishing or withholding food might be called applying incentives but not reinforcements.

The problem of how to control the behaviour of men and animals through punishments and rewards has been treated in innumerable treatises on penology, legislation, education, management and animal training, beginning with the works of Aristotle and Confucius, not to speak of countless proverbs and adages. To say something important and new on this subject is always possible but very difficult. But one piece of pseudo-scientific terminology can confuse and intimidate people into accepting as a significant discovery an oversimplified (and therefore less valid) version of old folk wisdom.

Although it originated in America, the disease of jargon has spread far and wide, aided by the European academics' desire to make friends with rich Americans. Anyway, owing to the strength of the human tendency to imitate, even quite intelligent people will accept the crassest nonsense once a collective folly sets in – particularly if they are anxious to be 'with it'.

In the halls of the schools of swordsmanship in old Japan, they used to have inscriptions 'Do not think. Thinking makes cowards'. Although they would not go so far as to write it out, the motto of today's academic sheep seems likewise to be: 'Do not think. Thinking will make you unpopular at the next annual meeting of your Pseudological Society'.

To forestall the impression that I am picking on American writers for some ulterior political reason, I must emphasize that Europeans are quite capable of emulating (and surpassing) the worst American examples. Inspired by the founding masters,

Merleau-Ponty in philosophy and Gurvitch in sociology, a proliferating breed of literary contortionists has sprung up in France, who, by fusing a pot-pourri marxism with the worst excrescences of the Germano-American jargon, have broken the Boston supremacy and have made Paris into the most productive centre of mumbo-jumbo, often packaged under the labels of existentialism and structuralism. Even without enquiring into the nature of the contents, these labels alone should arouse suspicion because they are so meaningless. Obviously we exist; things exist, and everything that exists must have a structure. It has hitherto been regarded as too obvious to call for elaborate comment that all the sciences have been, and are, studying the structures of the objects of their interest; and the sole innovation of 'structuralism' is a tireless persistence in repeating this word, which can be regarded either as a gimmick or a compulsive neurosis. However, to avoid the difficult task of translating passages which resemble writings by schizophrenics, I shall forego an attempt to give you a sample of what passes for philosophy, sociology, psychology, linguistics and even historiography in the homeland of Descartes and Voltaire. Instead, let me give you a milder example made in Britain: the book by J. P. Nettl and Roland Robertson, called *International Systems and the Modernization of Societies*. It consists of three essays: 'Modernization, Industrialization or Development', 'The Inheritance Situation', and 'Modernization and International Systems'. According to the authors... 'They are neither the product of any specific research, nor are they individual think-pieces. Instead they result from a great deal of informal discussion between two authors who were for some time colleagues in the Department of Social Studies at the University of Leeds'. (p. 7.) A Columbia professor, Amitai Etzioni, who has provided an introduction, adds pompously that... 'The authors of the present book make several significant contributions toward a theory of societal guidance' (p. 15) and... 'the discussion of industrialization and modernization - which occupies much of the following pages - extends the foundations for a theory of societal guidance as these two are central societal processes through which efforts at guidance are largely channelled.' (p. 16.) 'Societal guidance', incidentally, is a euphemism for

'planning' - which word excites the ire of American businessmen except when applied to their own activities.

The purpose of the work is to clarify some basic concepts, but the tortuous style produces an exactly opposite result. It would be difficult to find a more muddled piece of writing than the following passages in which the authors indicate the scope of their book:

... Our major concern is to deal with the relationship between concept and referent. In other words our discussion of concepts having to do with processes and patterns of social, especially societal, change hinges largely on the motivation to analyse in an *ostensive* and *real*, as opposed to a *nominal*, manner. We want to point up the pressing need for a greater interest in the phenomenal variables to which the three major as well as other associated concepts refer. (p. 17.)

and

A scheme for the analytical breakdown of individual societies into functional sub-systems has been evolved by Parsons, Smelser and others. This basically consists in the categorization of aspects of social interaction in terms of the four functional exigencies with which, it is postulated, all viable social systems must cope. We propose to utilize the notion of functionally specific sub-systems, including the idea that one of the four will tend to manifest primacy and greater situational relevance at particular times... We are here concerned primarily with the implications of the phase model for so-called twentieth centuries. The evidence of primacy or emphasis or relevance is of course rather sketchy and inconclusive: especially in respect of the actual societal, as opposed to the merely social-scientific, preoccupations. In emphasizing the link between primacy or interest or attention in the writings of social scientists or philosophers, and the paramountcy of functional emphasis in the societies about which they wrote, we believe that indications of any such focus among the former at least partially reflect evidence of corresponding paramountcy in the latter - allowing, of course, for the previously mentioned possibility of professional-scientific autonomy sustaining an academic style beyond the terminal point of its 'real' relevance. This quite basic postulate, which in itself makes no assumptions about cause and effect, but only about correlation, probably applies more accurately to the past than to the present - *when the sheer quantity of social research makes the identification of primacy of concern with functional paramountcy more difficult.* (p. 21)

Even the more coherent pages exhibit a scholastic mentality in comparison with which the Hindu theologians appear as paragons of matter-of-fact rationalism. Thus, for instance, one would think that the word 'modernization', being a common-sense rather than a scientific label for the process of adopting recently invented methods and gadgets, calls for no lengthy exegesis. Nonetheless the authors devote fifteen pages to contemplating its meaning, and at the end come up with the following definition: ('Atimic status' or 'atimia', incidentally, is a scientific term for being behind the times)

Thus our conceptualization of modernization runs as follows: Modernization is the process whereby national elites seek successfully to reduce their *atimic* status and move towards equivalence with other 'well-placed' nations. The goal of equivalence is not a fixed but a moving 'target'; and the perception of it will depend both on the values and exigencies in the international system and on the values, dispositions and capabilities of the nation in question, as experienced particularly by national elites. Although the international system is the focal point of our analysis, we do not wish to impose a teleology on the international system. Rather, we have viewed the international system as one 'where (nearly) everybody's values and objectives are (usually) formulated in relation to somebody else's', and where the choice of technological objects for acquisition and use is also based on a widely diffused 'pool' of knowledge, and a high degree of selectivity in relation to varying definitions of modernity.

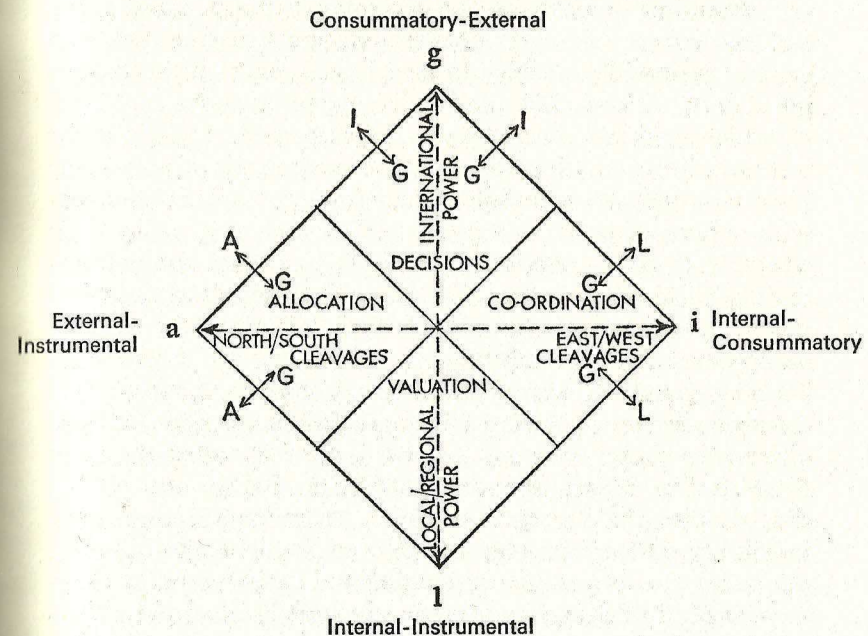
(pp. 56-57)

Having been initiated into these semantic mysteries we come to Part II, called *The Inheritance Situation: A Model of the Formation of Actor Orientations in the Third World* where, taking a commonplace metaphor literally, the authors search for equivalents between inheritance of wealth from one individual to another and the transition from colonial rule to independence. The most curious feature of this disquisition is that, despite their claim to have incorporated Marx into their system, the authors refer to the former rulers as 'the benefactors' and to the new states as 'the beneficiaries'.

At the end of the book we get a summing-up. If you wish to find an explanation of what is happening in the Congo or

Venezuela or whatever the place might be, you must behold the mandala below, bearing in mind that 'from being embedded in pattern-maintenance and tension-management structures (L) other more specialized structural forms become separated out relative to integrative functions (I) then political functions (G) and finally adaptive (principally economic) functions (A) as the social system "develops"' (p. 146). If you are mystified, try a freudian interpretation of its meaning.

Structure of International G-System
(Goal-Commitment; Goal Attainment)



With a further 'categorization of international objects of orientation' and 'a reduction of atimia', this scheme could become almost as helpful for 'societal guidance' as the prophecies of Nostradamus.

To insure an international coverage for our little sample of the inexhaustible flora of pseudo-scientific phraseology let us look at an example which comes from the pen of an author of

unimpeachable Third World origin, and who is a programme director at the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development: *Subversion and Social Change in Colombia*, by Orlando Fals Borda (Columbia University Press, 1969). Though one would hardly guess it from the title, the book is a kind of history of Colombia from the precolonial until our times. As the author is a professor of sociology, the book raises the problem of whether an acquaintance with the dominant currents of today's sociological theory helps to understand the past.

As in other fields, all the significant advances in historical understanding depend on an interplay between fact-finding and theorizing: with new data stimulating new questions and general propositions, which in turn have prompted the gathering of data of a new kind, the importance (or even the existence) of which had not been previously suspected. Marxism, for instance, in its creative days had the great merit of jolting the historians and political philosophers from an exclusive concern with actions of prominent personalities, and of drawing their attention to the impact of economic factors upon the political and cultural phenomena. Likewise, Durkheim's sociological school has impressed upon the French historians the need to look at every item of culture as a part of an organic structure. To open genuinely new vistas for the historians, a sociological theory must point to hitherto unsuspected connections between observable classes of events – which is precisely what the great theorists like Marx, Spencer, Durkheim, Pareto and Weber did, despite the errors into which, as pioneers, they have inevitably fallen. Among other contributions to full employment, the output of new-fangled and flashy verbal packagings for platitudes and inanities has included historical writings which pretend to shed a new light on the past by couching well-known information in incomprehensible jargon.

Fals Borda's book contains no data which cannot be found better presented in standard works on Colombian or general Latin American history; its only distinction consisting of a pretentious and obfuscating terminology. For example, it is no news that the conquest and conversion of the Indians produced a new social order; which piece of information is dressed up by

labelling this change as a 'dialectical refraction', its agents as 'disorgans' and 'conditioners', the new faith as 'prescriptively rigid countervalues', the new moral code as 'acritical counter-norms', the old tribal structure as 'topia nr 1', and the succeeding seignorial society as 'topia nr 2'. 'Topia', incidentally, means a social system which has existed or exists, as opposed to a utopia. Since, in Fals Borda's vocabulary, 'subversion' means bringing about a change in society, the title of the book is pleonastic; and the word 'subversion' merely rouses in vain the reader's expectations of gleaning inside information about some sinister machinations.

Pleonasm, however, is a very minor offence in comparison with the mental fog exuded by the mixture of watered-down marxism with a patchy parsonianism. It should, however, have a soothing effect in the high circles of the international 'cultural' bureaucracy, where one must be diplomatic and show good will towards both superpowers. What capitalist will not be cheered when he hears that, instead of a bloody revolution, he will only experience an instrumentalization of counter-values and counter-norms of topia nr 5 by counter-élite reference groups?

One of the most effective sales campaigns of recent times was set in motion around the works of Marshall MacLuhan, 'hired' (as the Americans say) at the time by the Jesuit-run Fordham University in New York, at a fabulous and duly publicized salary. A well-concerted chorus of critics greeted MacLuhan's volumes as the greatest revelation of recent times, some comparing him to Freud, others (more modestly) to Arnold J. Toynbee. Even the latter, however, could not have read *The Study of History*, or they would not be putting it into the same category with Marshall MacLuhan's flights of fancy. Analysed from the viewpoint of logic and scientific method, Toynbee's theories can be shown to be vague, unsubstantiated and tautological, but his books are full of recondite factual information, and merit respect as products of serious scholarship. They embody an immense amount of work, and bear no resemblance to the linguistic contortions of an author who openly proclaims his rejection of logic and declares his contempt not only for orderly argument but even grammar. Answering one of his critics on the pages of *The Listener*, MacLuhan says: 'Miller's

confusion begins with his assumption that I have "notions" and theories, concepts rather than percepts.' Toynbee's comparisons and confrontations may not prove his general points, and may appear superficial in comparison with the analytical and comparative sociologists such as Herbert Spencer and Max Weber, but they are seldom without interest, are often suggestive and sometimes illuminating. In contrast, MacLuhan's thesis (not to speak of subsidiary foibles) that under the influence of television human beings are becoming less 'visual' and more 'audio-tactile' is completely gratuitous, to put it mildly. When people look at television instead of reading books they certainly do not become less visual – they are still using their eyes just as much. In fact one could say that their perceptions become less symbolic and more visual. Nor is there a shred of evidence that before television, transistors and piped music, people were using their ears less than they are now – only they were listening to their companions or live music or natural sounds instead of the box. The final absurdity is the claim that the telly gapers' tactile impressions are more intense than those of the previous generations. How and where? Certainly neither in their hands nor feet. The only possible place is the buttocks. Nonetheless, MacLuhan does manage to insert into his flood of free association a few snappy phrases which hit the nail on the head (such as that the medium is the message or the massage of the brain, or that more important than the question of whether there is life after death is nowadays the question whether there is life before death), which is more than his more 'scientific' compeers manage to do. On the other hand, statements (which are meant to be more serious) such that television has turned the world into a 'global village' are slick but hyperbolic and nonsensical metaphors.

One of the most common examples of a boring fad is the predilection for the word 'feedback', which (outside its proper technical context) usually merely replaces more precise words like 'report' or 'reaction'. Equally laughable – and illogical too – are the nouns 'in-group' and 'out-group'; because the words 'in' and 'out' have no meaning without a specification (which may be left tacit if sufficiently self-evident) of the entity to which they are supposed to refer. There is no point in

speaking about 'in-pencils' and 'out-pencils', unless these prefixes refer to a position in relation to some bounded space such as a drawer. Colloquially (and, as always, metaphorically) we speak of 'insiders' and 'outsiders'; and if this is all that the expressions 'in-group' and 'out-group' mean, then they are completely superfluous. The latter, moreover, is in that case grossly misleading because there is no reason to assume that the outsiders must form one group, as they might have no connections with one another at all, or only through the insiders. The customers of a football pool agency form a logical category, but not a group in a sociological sense because they do not interact with one another. For the same reason it would be equally misleading to call the non-members of a given group the 'out-group'. If we followed this convention we would have to count Mr Chou En Lai and the Emperor Haile Selassie as members of the Pangbourne College Chess Club's out-group, which would contravene all the definitions of the word 'group'.

If 'in-group' is supposed to connote the members of a given group, then it is utterly superfluous as well as confusing. If it is supposed to mean a group which has members as distinct from one which has not, then the expression is silly because we can only have an empty set in logic but there can be no human group without members. Only in the adjectival sense can these expressions be used with some justification, as when we speak of 'in-group attitudes' (meaning the attitudes towards the co-members) as opposed to 'out-group attitudes', that is attitudes towards non-members. Like the fad for replacing 'individual' or 'somebody' by 'actor', which we shall look at in a moment, the habit of adorning the noun 'group' with meaningless prefixes must be treated as a pseudo-scientific false pretence.

There are many other examples of verbal fads of this kind. No doubt owing to the militarization of science, the word 'strategy' came into fashion and replaced 'method' without any gain in discernment. On the contrary, as with most fads, this substitution has led to an impoverishment of the language because, instead of two words with distinct though overlapping meanings, only one is used indiscriminately – so

indiscriminately indeed that people talk pleonastically about 'strategy of conflict', as if there could be a strategy which does not refer to a conflict.

One of the most futile fads centres round the word 'role' whose metaphorically sociological usage dates from the eighteenth century at the latest. Although this metaphor has by now become utterly commonplace, the suddenly developed addiction to repeating it interminably has been baptized as 'role theory'. This 'theory' consists of pompous, nebulous and incredibly lengthy re-statements of what has been common knowledge for a very long time; namely, that in every group the members play different roles which sometimes are complementary and sometimes contradictory; that sometimes individuals change or exchange their roles; that often one person acts in several roles which may be mutually reinforcing, but also may be incompatible; that a group can act effectively only if the roles of its members are in harmony. These platitudes can be equally well expressed without ever using the word 'role', which proves that this fad in no way leads to an improved understanding.

Perhaps the saying that 'every portrait is a self-portrait' might help to understand why, in the company of sociologists and psychologists, one hears the words 'role' and 'actor' as incessantly as the well-known four-letter words among soldiers. Why not 'individual' or 'person' or 'doer' rather than 'actor'? Bothered, maybe, by the gnawing doubt that their brand of science is a mere pretence, the addicts may be sub-consciously trying to protect their self-esteem by insinuating through their choice of words that all social life is mere play-acting. The plebeian taste of their verbal somersaults, however, calls for a further rephrasing in the shape of a replacement of the word 'actor' by 'clown'. Just get hold of a text on role theory and you will see that it makes a much better sense with the aid of this substitution.

Not that there is anything wrong with 'role', which is a perfectly useful word, provided we use it unpretentiously when needed instead of treating it as a magic incantation which opens up the Sesame of otherwise inaccessible knowledge. As a rule a good test of whether we are offered a new idea or merely

a new way of talking is to see what happens when we use different words. In this case it is perfectly clear that, though quite convenient, 'role' can be replaced without any loss of meaning by other words such as 'position' or 'place'. There is no difference in meaning between 'his role in the group' and 'his place in the group', or 'his position in the group', all three terms being in fact metaphorical designations for the recurrent elements of human interaction. It would, of course, be possible to define these terms so as to give them slightly different connotations; but, instead of doing this, what the 'role theorists' have done is merely to provide eager aspirants to authorship with an opportunity for rephrasing the old commonsense knowledge in accordance with the new fashion.

Actually the only writer who made a good use of the concept of role, and has succeeded in saying something beyond the obvious, is Ervin Goffman, who takes it in the least metaphorical sense, most closely adhering to the theatrical use, and looks at social relations as repeated encounters in which each person 'shoots a line' or 'plays up', attempting (deliberately or automatically) to foist upon his interlocutors the desired image of himself, thus paralleling an actor's efforts to convey to the audience the picture of the character he is playing. Although this approach has brought forth no great revelations so far, it has enabled Goffman to make useful contributions to knowledge and to write a number of books which contrast very favourably with the arid scholasticism of 'role theory'.

The tendency to seize upon and labour *ad nauseam* the most trivial points, covering up banality by obscure and pompous jargon, is well exemplified by the famous theory of social action. Weber's muddled classification of social actions into types such as *Wertrational* and *Zweckrational* played no part whatsoever in his substantive explanatory theories; nevertheless, it was adopted by Talcott Parsons as the foundation stone of his own system, in preference to Weber's more substantial comparative studies. In *Structure of Social Action*, Parsons devotes about six hundred pages to showing that the chief merit of Alfred Marshall, Weber, Pareto and Durkheim was that they pointed the way towards 'the voluntaristic theory of action' finally formulated by him. Translated from the tenebrous language in

which it is couched, this theory amounts to saying that in order to understand why people act as they do, we must take into account their wishes and decisions, the means at their disposal, and their beliefs about how the desired effects can be produced.

The emergence of this piece of knowledge amounted, no doubt, to an important step in the mental development of mankind, but it must have occurred some time during the Paleolithic Age, as Homer and the Biblical prophets knew all about it. True, none of the writers treated in Parsons' book has made any explicit statements to this effect, but this was not because they did not know about it but because they took it for granted that no sane reader needed to be told about such an obvious thing. Nor did they specify other equally important pre-requisites of social action, such that people can remember, communicate, reason and move – which does not mean that the world must wait for another Harvard professor to discover this.

The attraction of jargon and obfuscating convolutions can be fully explained by the normal striving of humans for emoluments and prestige at the least cost to themselves, the cost in question consisting of the mental effort and the danger of 'sticking one's neck out' or 'putting one's foot in it'. In addition to eliminating such risks, as well as the need to learn much, nebulous verbosity opens a road to the most prestigious academic posts to people of small intelligence whose limitations would stand naked if they had to state what they have to say clearly and succinctly. Actually, the relationship between the character of a jargon-monger and the amount of his verbiage can be expressed in the formula below, which I propose to call The Equation of Jargon-Mongering, which can be applied in the following manner. The first step is to assign intuitively estimated scores for an author's ambition, designated by A, and to knowledge, designated by K (which must always be greater than O, as nobody knows exactly nothing). A must also be positive because, if somebody's literary ambition is nil, then he writes nothing, and there is nothing to apply our equation to. V stands for verbose jargon. Our equation then is

$$\frac{A}{K} - 1 = V$$

Why -1 ? Because when the knowledge matches the ambition, there is no verbiage. When knowledge exceeds the ambition V becomes negative; and negative verbiage amounts to conciseness. However, since there is a limit to conciseness, V can never become less than -1 ; whereas there is no limit to verbiage, and so V increases indefinitely as ambition grows, while knowledge vanishes.

Our formula cannot, of course, be treated as exact until measurable indices are devised for the variables, and then checked against empirical data. I do believe, however, that it is approximately true, and I invite readers to try it on the authors they read as well as on their colleagues, teachers or students. Its predictive and explanatory power is roughly the same as that of most theorems of mathematical economics. The advantage of our formula is that it explains the behaviour of many different kinds of people, ranging from an undergraduate who is trying to scrape through a dissertation without having learned anything, to a scholar with a fairly extensive knowledge but devoured by a craving for greatness.

Leaving aside the economists, the only European who can compete with the top American pundits in influence and fame is Claude Lévi-Strauss – a man of impressive knowledge and brain power whose first major work – *Les Structures Élémentaires de la Parenté*, published in 1949 – constituted a valiant attempt to provide a unified explanation of the workings of a large number of variegated kinship systems, based on an extensive survey of data and a highly ingenious theoretical scheme. This volume was to be followed by another where the remaining kinship systems of the world would be analysed with the aid of a similar circulatory model. Unfortunately, however, certain awkward factual data were shown to contradict his theory – which incidentally proves that it was no mere tautology but a truly inductive generalization. Lévi-Strauss could perhaps have saved his thesis by examining possible limiting factors, and by restricting the applicability of his model to a subclass of systems which the existing version encompasses. Had he tried that and succeeded he would have converted his valuable but tentative interpretation into a solid contribution to knowledge,

but he would have had to renounce his claim to having discovered a universal master key. The feat would have been praiseworthy, but insufficiently far-reaching to form a title to true greatness. Maybe he is still trying to do it, but insofar as one can judge from what has appeared in print, he has changed course rather drastically. Abandoning the clarity of his earlier work, he began to spin out speculations sufficiently vague to be safe from the danger of a confrontation with awkward facts, where undigested bits of mathematics and linguistics are juxtaposed with an unordered array of bits of ethnography, seasoned with marxism à la mode and served with that coffee-house philosophy known as existentialism. Although the product resembles in many of its parts some kind of surrealist poetry, it is linked with the movement known as structuralism which claims to be some kind of super science, or a quintessence of all the sciences, in the sense of having found the most fundamental ingredients of them all – which discovery boils down in fact to nebulous and tirelessly repetitive affirmations of the unsurprising finding that everything has a structure, adorned by constant invocations of this sacred word in its various transsubstantiations ending with ‘ed’, ‘ing’, and, of course, ‘tion’. As an account of the ways of thinking of pre-literate peoples Lévi-Strauss’s *La Pensée Sauvage* is a great deal more defective than Lévi-Bruhl’s thesis that primitive people cannot think logically, expounded in several books written at the beginning of the century, one of which was translated into English with the title, *How Natives Think*. Nonetheless, Lévi-Strauss has become a great guru, a status which no-one in the social sciences (not even Keynes) could achieve, along the hard road of clear and realistic reasoning.

When stripped of the embellishing stylistic pyrotechnics, his theories about the primitive (or, as he calls it sensationally, ‘savage’) thought process boil down to an alchemical synthesis of Lévi-Bruhl’s theory of pre-logical mentality, with Bastian’s century-old concept of *Elementargedanke* (a kind of universal basic ingredient of all belief systems), and Jung’s notion of archetypes, couched in abstruse terminology taken from linguistics. Nevertheless, in keeping with what remains in him of the old gallic ‘esprit’, and in contrast to the stodgy teutonic

emetics of the parsonians, his writings about myths narrate many captivating stories which, together with his clever crossword or pun-like comments, supply a most suitable material for smart table talk. Apart from the advantages accruing from praying ardently to Marx, a facility for startling and often entertaining play upon words, suitable for a salon, accounts no doubt for much of Lévi-Strauss’s celebrity, although (as we shall see later) equally effective in this respect must be his highly original technique of persuasion (reminiscent of a sorcerer’s spell-casting) based on threatening people with mathematics: muttering darkly about algebraic matrices and transformations without revealing their exact nature.

The usage of mumbo-jumbo makes it very difficult for a beginner to find his way; because if he reads or hears famous professors from the most prestigious universities in the world without being able to understand them, then how can he know whether this is due to his lack of intelligence or preparation, or to their vacuity? The readiness to assume that everything that one does not understand must be nonsense cannot fail to condemn one to eternal ignorance; and consequently, the last thing I would wish to do is to give encouragement to lazy dim-wits who gravitate towards the humanistic and social studies as a soft option, and who are always on the lookout for an excuse for not working. So it is tragic that the professorial jargon-mongers have provided such loafers with good grounds for indulging in their proclivities. But how can a serious beginner find his way through the verbal smog and be able to assess the trustworthiness of high ranking academics?

Addressing myself to such readers, I would suggest that the only way of going about it is, firstly, to test your brain power on texts falling within a field where there is little room for bluff, and which are intellectually demanding without requiring extensive specialist knowledge: namely the less technical books on the philosophy of the natural sciences, such as P. W. Bridgman’s *Logic of Modern Physics*, or Rudolf Carnap’s *Philosophical Foundation of Physics*, or Bertrand Russell’s *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, or J. H. Woodger’s *Biological Principles* – to mention just a few among many eligible titles. Now, if despite a serious effort – and remember that these are

not bedside books, and require concentration and persistence – you cannot understand them, then keep away from high-powered theories and do not attempt to produce anything very abstract yourself. Be honest and adjust your aims to your abilities. There are many areas of sociology, anthropology, political science, psychology and economics where useful work can be done without recourse to high-powered abstractions, many areas where common sense coupled with a good range of factual information suffices. However, if you have mastered a number of books such as those just mentioned and despite having made a decent effort, still cannot understand what some sociological or politological or psychological luminary has written or said, then you can legitimately presume that it is his fault rather than yours, and justifiably suspect that it might all be nonsense.

If you happen to be a student, you can apply the same test to your teachers who claim that what they are teaching you rests upon incontrovertible scientific foundations. See what they know about the natural sciences and mathematics and their philosophical foundations. Naturally, you cannot expect them to have a specialist knowledge of these fields; but if they are completely ignorant of these things, do not take seriously grandiloquent claims of the ultra-scientific character of their teachings. Furthermore, do not be impressed unduly by titles or positions. Top universities can usually get the best people in the fields where there are firm criteria of achievement; but at the present stage of development of the social sciences the process of selection resembles, as often as not, a singing competition before a deaf jury who can judge the competitors only by how wide they open their mouths.

For the same reason do not be impressed by the imprint of a famous publishing house or the volume of an author's publications. Bear in mind that Einstein needed only seventeen pages for his contribution which revolutionized physics, while there are graphomaniacs in asylums who use up mounds of paper every day. Remember that the publishers want to keep the printing presses busy and do not object to nonsense if it can be sold. As my grandmother used to say, paper is patient.

Unless restrained by sales resistance, to use an appropriately commercial expression, all sellers can gain by diluting their wares. We have all seen how increasingly flashy packaging usually accompanies a deterioration in the quality of the contents – which is happening not only with foodstuffs but with books as well, especially since the publishing houses began to fall under the control of large trusts whose executives must prove their worth in cash, and cannot let themselves be unduly influenced by ethical or aesthetic considerations. In a mercenary climate of opinion, unpropitious to a pride in craftsmanship, the academics follow those who show them how to spin out words, dilute the content, and wrap it all in an impressive package of pseudo-scientific pomposity; and hound the rate-busters who write too concisely.

In strict logic an *argumentum ad hominem* cannot impugn the value of a statement, but a judge always takes the witnesses' probable motives into account. It may be said that this is irrelevant because a judge has to make a decision as to whom to trust, whereas in science everything is above suspicion. Unfortunately, however, even in the exact sciences cases of fraud have been noted, while in subjects where we cannot check the information by repeating an experiment much has to be taken on trust. A historian assessing the reliability of his sources will try to ascertain the interests and the character of their authors; and the purportedly scientific studies of contemporary situations must be approached with equal caution.

In this connection I should like to suggest that his sense of humour is a fair indicator of a social scientist's value as an observer of human affairs, provided he is not plainly dishonest or lazy and careless. True, the case of Newton and many other examples suggest that in mathematics and the natural sciences this quality may be irrelevant; while even in the study of man such outstanding thinkers as Marx, Schopenhauer and Auguste Comte have lacked it, and were inclined to take themselves very seriously. They combined, however, great originality and profundity with doctrinaire delusions; but, although Max Weber also appears to have been humourless, his judgments on the march of events have been very sober. Nonetheless, I believe that, by and large, there is a connection between a

sense of humour and the ability to judge social situations realistically; and I would explain it as follows.

The world never conforms to all our wishes, and nobody can enjoy uninterrupted happiness. Even those who are fairly satisfied with their lot know about the certainty of death and the threats of bereavement, illness and other misfortunes, and are aware of the tragic fate of so many of their fellows, and the sufferings of animals. There is a saying that you can tell a pessimist from an optimist by the fact that when both have drunk half a bottle the pessimist will feel sad that there is only half a bottle left, while the optimist will feel pleased that there is still half a bottle left. The same applies to life in general; and a tendency to dwell upon the pleasant rather than unpleasant aspects of existence is indispensable to happiness or even mental health. However, even those who are not temperamentally inclined to gloomy ruminations have to perceive more unhappiness and evil than they would like to see. They can stave off despondency in two ways: either by deluding themselves that the world is a better place than it is, or by finding its imperfections, as well as their own misfortunes and weaknesses, a bit funny. In other words, laughter is a mental mechanism which enables us to face reality without falling into despondency or delusion. As people who have sunk into apathy seldom bother us by rushing into print, delusion (leaving aside deceit) constitutes the chief obstacle to the progress of our understanding of society, and in this context it usually assumes the form of doctrinairism couched in a mystifying jargon. A sense of humour is the most reliable external indicator of the likelihood of immunity from this folly, and of the ability to appraise social situations realistically.

Chapter 7

The Uses of Absurdity

Even a most cursory survey of human beliefs reveals that man has no innate inclination to seek the truth; and that absurdity and obscurity, far from repelling, have for most people an irresistible attraction. As we shall see in a moment, there are several reasons for this proclivity, but the most general of them is that clarity and logic impose upon our thinking severe constraints which prevent it from wholeheartedly ministering to our desires, hates and whims. To speak in the inexact but evocative freudian terms, logic and clarity are the guardians of the Reality Principle which prevent the flow of our ideas from following the Pleasure Principle, while the latter guides us towards the maximization of mental comfort through believing what we would like to be true, regardless of whether this is in fact the case.

Our pursuit of the Pleasure Principle would have no bounds if we had no need for correct information about the workings of our environment which would enable us to manipulate it in order to satisfy our desires. The extent to which our minds will have to abandon the Pleasure Principle for the sake of the Reality Principle will depend on how hard and immediate are the penalties which reality inflicts upon us for harbouring false notions about it. The immediacy and magnitude of this retribution will depend on whether the success of our practical undertakings depends on the correctness of our views. It will seldom be profitable to hold unwarranted opinions about currents and the rocks when we are sailing, whereas the most absurd views about philosophy can be entertained indefinitely with perfect impunity.

One of the pleasures obtainable through recourse to confusion and absurdity is to be able to feel, and publicly to claim, that one knows when in reality one does not. Closely connected