

## NOTES ON INSTITUTE ACTIVITIES.<sup>1</sup>

*The research project summarized below formulates certain problems which the Institute of Social Research intended to investigate about a year ago. General world conditions, however, brought to the fore other social problems more urgently connected with American interests and compelled us to postpone our original intention. The Institute plans, nevertheless, to return to this project in due time.*

*As published here, the project contains not only research problems but theoretical conceptions which were in part arrived at through previous research and which would in some measure have to be probed through further investigations. It goes without saying that none of these theses will be treated as dogmas once the actual research is carried through.*

*The publication of the project in the present issue may help further to clarify the conception of critical social research. The prevailing methodological viewpoints of this approach may briefly be characterized as follows.*

I. Concepts Are Historically Formed. *The categories we intend to use are not generalizations to be attained by a process of abstraction from various individuals and species, nor are they axiomatic definitions and postulates. The process of forming these categories must take account of the historical character of the subject matter to which they pertain, and in such a way that the categories are made to include the actual genesis of that subject matter. This unique character of the relation of the concept to its "material" does not allow of such abstract concepts as "social change," "association," "collective behavior," "masses," unless these are used as mere formalistic classifications of phenomena common to all forms of society. The proper meaning of "masses," for example, cannot be derived through an essentially quantitative analysis or from certain isolated types of "collective behavior," even though such analysis may be an integral part of any attempt at a theoretical interpretation of the term. Proper methodological usage must recognize that the masses are basically different at the different stages of the socio-historical process and that their function in society is essentially determined by that of other social strata as well as by the peculiar social and*

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<sup>1</sup>Under this heading we shall publish from time to time reports on programmatic and other activities undertaken by the Institute of Social Research.

*economic mechanisms that produce and perpetuate the masses. The category is thus led, by the very nature of its concrete content, to take in other, different sectors of the given social configuration and to follow out the genesis and import of its content within the social totality. The general concept is thus not dissolved into a multitude of empirical facts but is concretized in a theoretical analysis of a given social configuration and related to the whole of the historical process of which it is an indissoluble part. Such analysis is essentially critical in character.*

II. *Concepts Are Critically Formed. The critical nature of societal concepts may best be elucidated through the problem of value judgments that animates current discussion among social scientists. The latter is much more than a methodological problem today. The totalitarian states are imposing the political values of imperialist power politics upon all scientific, cultural, and economic activities. This engenders all too much readiness in democratic countries to interpret freedom of science (which is held to include freedom from value judgments) as a drawback of the democratic forms of life. Hence derives a positivist and even skeptical attitude. The attempt has been made to overcome this by a return to old metaphysics, such as neo-Thomism. But this proposed return to the supposedly absolute values of past theological and metaphysical systems may facilitate the destruction of individual liberties to an even greater degree than would the conscious and honest skepticism of the positivists. Social theory may be able to circumvent a skeptical spurning of value judgments without succumbing to normative dogmatism. This may be accomplished by relating social institutions and activities to the values they themselves set forth as their standards and ideals. Thus, the activities of a political party may be investigated in the light of the avowed aims and ends of the party without accepting these as valid or evident. If subjected to such an analysis, the social agencies most representative of the present pattern of society will disclose a pervasive discrepancy between what they actually are and the values they accept. To take an example, the media of public communication, radio, press, and film, constantly profess their adherence to the individual's ultimate value and his inalienable freedom, but they operate in such a way that they tend to forswear such values by fettering the individual to prescribed attitudes, thoughts, and buying habits. The ambivalent relation between prevailing values and the social context forces the categories of social theory to become critical and thus to reflect the actual rift between the social reality and the values it posits.*

III. Societal Concepts Are "Inductively" Formed. *Social concepts derive their critical coloring from the fact that the rift between value and reality is typical of the totality of modern culture. This leads to the hypothesis that society is a "system" in the material sense that every single social field or relation contains and reflects, in various ways, the whole itself. Consequently, an intensive analysis of a single relation or institution that is particularly representative of the prevailing pattern of reality may be far better able to develop and grasp the nature of the pattern than would an extensive compilation and description of assorted facts. The "pervasive" character of our society, the fact that it makes its peculiar relations felt in every nook and cranny of the social whole, calls for a methodologic conception that will take account of this fact. Categories have to be formed through a process of induction that is the reverse of the traditional inductive method which verified its hypotheses by collecting individual experiences until they attained the weight of universal laws. Induction in social theory, per contra, should seek the universal within the particular, not above or beyond it, and, instead of moving from one particular to another and then to the heights of abstraction, should delve deeper and deeper into the particular and discover the universal law therein.*

IV. Social Concepts Are Integrative. *The peculiar kind of induction we have just outlined makes the formation of social concepts an empirical process and yet distinguishes this from the empirical method employed in the specialized sciences. For example, the concept "youth," denoting a particular entity in present-day society, is not a biological, psychological, or sociological concept, for it takes in the entire social and historical process that influences the mentality and orientation of youth and that constantly transforms these. Consequently, our concept will assume different functions *pari passu* with the changing composition, function, and attitudes of youth within the shifting social pattern. And owing to the fact that the concept is to be formed under the aspect of the historical totality to which it pertains, sociology should be able to develop this changing pattern from the very content of the concept instead of adding specific contents from without.*

*In this way, the various categories will be integrative ones through their very content and may themselves serve as the basis for combining the experiences and results of the various special sciences without being impeded by their several fixed boundaries.*

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