

ABSTRACT

Calvin A. Woodward has likened contemporary youth to Diogenes. Youth's cynicism is not, however, as Mr. Woodward contends, purely traceable to the scepticism which modern science evokes. Rather it is explicable in terms of the unchallenged sway of empiricism — which is the dominant interpretation of science under capitalism.

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Diogenes in the Tower of Babel: Capitalism in Decline

Older generations have perennially bemoaned the bad manners and anti-authoritarianism of youth. From time immemorial, elders have decried the flaming rebelliousness which youth invariably embodies. Are we correct, then, in believing with Mr. Woodward that the ascendancy of science is responsible for our contemporary malaise? After all, even ancient Greece had its thoroughgoing sceptics — witness, the fame of cynics such as Diogenes whose candle could not even illumine an honest man.

On the other hand, ancient Greek society attained a temporary degree of coherence and balance which has almost all but eluded Western civilization. Neither our architecture nor our literature nor our philosophy can compare with that which the ancients sired. Nevertheless, it is necessary to concede that modern science and technology have, in many ways, surpassed their ancient analogues. To accomplish this, both the aristocratic and scholastic principles had to be swept aside. In the world of ideas, this was largely the result of Francis Bacon and John Locke, the former popularizing the inductive method, the latter decrying the tyranny of innate ideas. Although the rational — that is, the logico-mathematical — emphasis of Leibnitz, Spinoza and Descartes contributed its share to the development of Western civilization, Locke's attempt to derive all ideas from experience, which was further sanctified by the work of Hume and Kant, has evolved into the dominant view actuating contemporary science and philosophy — namely, empiricism.

Despite the fact that Mr. Woodward does not explicitly point to modern empiricism as the *agent provocateur*, he does, at least, refer to one of its by-products — namely, agnosticism. Now agnosticism can, as Engels once said, be a fig-leaf for materialism. This, of course, he thought was true in the case of Thomas Henry Huxley, one of the foremost popularizers of Darwin's theory of evolution.

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Nevertheless, as Mr. Woodward intimates, this is hardly the case with regard to the empiricism animating contemporary social science. As Mr. Woodward correctly points out, contemporary social science has spawned a veritable tower of Babel whose methodological jargonese and paucity of insight has fostered scepticism. This scepticism places all assumptions before the new inquisition (that is, the bar of experimental verification), and, in so doing, all authority and categories become suspect.

Although Mr. Woodward is right in what he affirms, he fails to cognize the role of empiricism in solidifying the triumph of bourgeois capitalism; for, after all, Locke's emphasis on individual experience and liberty was directly related to the new reign of private capitalist property which he supported. Hence, it is just not science *per se*, but a particular interpretation of science which is culpable; it is just not authority in general which is derided, but authority which fails to provide direction through the bewildering maze of current events. Hence, it is correct to say that Gouldner's "coming crisis of Western sociology" is an integral part of the general crisis of capitalism. In the theoretical realm, this means that scientific empiricism — the prime, theoretical pillar of bourgeois science — is increasingly interpreted as being both sterile and impotent. Hence, youth's rejection of contemporary forms of academic authority leads into a twilight world of alienation and meaninglessness, assuming that Marxism or other varieties of rationalism are roads which are rarely taken.

Although it is true, as Morris Cohen has pointed out in *The Meaning of Human History* and in *Reason and Nature*, that empiricism overemphasizes the collection of facts and underrates the primacy of reason, the pathology which we are currently witnessing is, in addition, explicable in terms of broader considerations. Specialization can have salutary consequences; past a certain point, however, it degenerates into intellectual myopia and anarchy. The emphasis on methodology can have a disinfecting effect; past a certain point, however, it readily turns into a new scholasticism devoid of palpable content. Scientific precision demands sophisticated terminology; but if pursued as an end, as a Wittgensteinian puzzle or technical labyrinth, all dissolves into an ineffable congerie of words amid the tedious din of interminable, semantic controversies. Professionalization can, under certain conditions, provoke creativity and autonomy; but if misused, it can quickly evoke a new dilettanteism, with elitist implications. In a word, the academic representatives of the middle-classes, with their appeal to experience as reality, have run amok. After years of research in numerous fields, confusion still abounds. Students soon learn this, and begin to realize that the disinterested pursuit of truth is not the life-style which their mentors hold dear. Therefore, as Mr. Woodward correctly puts it, the severity of intergenerational conflict has recently become extremely exacerbated. This is because, as Mr. Philip Slater has averred in *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, we are witnessing a "culture at the breaking point." All institutions are seen as being inherently corrupt. There is a crisis in living, and a crisis in knowledge legitimation. Science tells the would-be scholar to search for evidence, and after assiduously engaging in the quest, a baleful answer is usually reached: the search itself was inherently flawed. In a word, it is impossible to derive laws and causation from the domain of contingency and misconceived micro-analysis. And it is precisely law and causal explanation which youth seeks, but which their elders fail to supply.

Mr. Woodward has, therefore, raised an intriguing set of issues. However, his treatment of science as the source of intergenerational conflict suffers from vague-

ness. His analysis, therefore, needs to be supplemented by an approach which views science in general and the professoriate in particular as social institutions of a society experiencing a period of protracted contraction and decay. After all, it would be foolish to imagine that a mere interpretation of science could provoke such profound social turmoil and discontent. Only the decline of capitalism could do that.