

MAN, CONCEPTS AND SOCIETY

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Professor I. C. Jarvie's *Concepts and Society*¹ is a rare, and pleasing, phenomenon in contemporary academic sociology: it is an exposition of the doctrine of methodological individualism, one of the major foundations of both liberal sociology and the "Austrian School" of Economics and its "praxeological" approach.² Its author has thus produced a work which, thematically at least, stands alongside the — alas, small — group of volumes in this tradition: F. A. Hayek's *The Counter-Revolution of Science*, and Ludwig von Mises' *Theory and History*, *Epistemological Problems of Economics*, and *The Ultimate Foundation of Economic Science*. It is indeed refreshing to find Jarvie calling for the injection of "a powerful charge of mentalism ... into the methodology of the social sciences".³ As he points out, "deterministic" approaches (i.e., be-

haviourism, functionalism etc.) founder precisely in being unable to satisfactorily explain social *change* — at least, not without resorting to quasi-mystical concepts of inherent "forces", a point Jarvie might also have added. Against the dominant deterministic tradition then, Jarvie champions the views that "ideas affect the way people act, and hence the world is" and that "The struggle of privately held beliefs to realise themselves in the world through the actions of their believers ... (is) ... a fundamental force behind social change."⁴

Given the scarcity of work in the methodological individualist tradition, and given the basic soundness of Jarvie's own position, it is doubly disappointing that qualitatively his work must be judged as falling far short of that of Hayek and von Mises. The book also suffers from a somewhat disjointed and unintegrated character, a character explained by the fact that it is actually a compilation of previously published essays and additional material (although Hayek, it should be remembered, avoided any disjointedness in his own similarly composed book). The six chapters, largely equal in length, which constitute *Concepts and Society*, vary considerably in value and specific comments on each one are in order.

I: Situational Logic

In the first chapter, "The Logic of the Situation", Jarvie expounds Karl Popper's concept of "situational logic", which is defined as "explanation of human behaviour as attempts to achieve goals or aims with

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limited means”⁵ — an interesting praxeological formulation which was indeed suggested to Popper by his reading in economic theory.⁶ However, it is to my mind Jarvie’s heavy reliance and emphasis on Popper’s work, in contrast to his neglect of von Mises (who is mentioned only once and in passing) that explains some of the work’s weakness. This is not to say that there is anything *positively* or fundamentally erroneous in this aspect of Popper’s approach or terminology or Jarvie’s exposition of it, but rather that it is somewhat gratuitous, adding nothing really substantial to what Hayek or von Mises have already written. Jarvie’s discussion in this first chapter seems to me needlessly abstract and prolonged, simply elaborating — over-elaborating! — rather than fruitfully applying or validating, the basic category.

This latter point also applies, in my view, to the second chapter, “Understanding and Explaining in the Social Sciences”, which is devoted to a discussion and refutation of the relativism of Professor Peter Winch. While largely valid, Jarvie’s discussion seems once more needlessly extended and less than fully successfully integrated with the rest of the book and its thesis.

II: Concepts and Class

The next two essays, “Between Adult and Child: Notes on the Teenage Problem” and “The Idea of Social Class” are, however, more apposite, being in fact “case studies” chosen to “exemplify the idea that how society is conceived to be by its members considerably influences how it is”.⁷ The former, on the teenage problem, is of less consequence, being mainly some rather “commonsensical” reflections focussing on the teenager’s lack of any generally accepted “social role” and on the tensions involved between his economic, emotional, and social circumstances. Of far more importance is the latter essay on social class, which represents a substantial contribution to this major issue. Noting the startling degree of disagreement among scholars as to what social class actually consists of, Jarvie in fact attacks the predominant “naturalistic” definitions. Indeed, what Jarvie argues is that in a free market society (a vital point) “The classification of people into a system of readily and objectively identifiable social groups is false; it does not correspond to the facts about the people it classifies ...”⁸

Unfortunately, some of the major politico-economic premises fundamental to his position are not made fully explicit. But the point is nevertheless clear: “social class” in the present (semi-market) society is different in essence from social class in a non-market or feudal society. In the latter there was, and is, “a fairly clearly (that is, legally) defined system operating in pretty unambiguous ways ... (a) hierarchy of social classes ... characterised by certain non-conflicting indicators.”⁹ A society in which the market and the cash nexus predominate is, in contrast, one which makes

available all goods and services to the great mass of the people and hence destroys social class barriers and immobility. Yet, in our present society the language and belief in “the class system” does still persist. Why? Jarvie answers that “what sustains the reality of the system of social class is that real people believe in it and act on these beliefs”.¹⁰ In other words:

[T]hat people have *theories* (i.e., beliefs) of class, and that they act *as if* these theories were true, adequately explains the ‘class’ phenomena. So I am not denying the reality of those snobberies and discriminatory practices which operate in our society. That people believe in, and act on, their theories of class adequately accounts for these things. One might put the point this way: the concept of social class, like most sociological concepts, is dispositional. It describes people’s dispositions to believe in and act in certain typical ways; as a belief held in common and acted upon it is a social myth or tradition; a social class is a quasi-group of people whose links are that they *think* they have similar interest, and who share common *beliefs* about the system of social class, their own position in that system, and similar dispositions as to the behaviour appropriate to their position in that system.¹¹

The social class divisions of modern society are thus *conceptual* in nature:

[P]eople are divided from themselves: their theories or beliefs, their myths, are what so tragically separate them. And these theories, because they are acted on, themselves create and sustain imagined divisions.¹²

Given the continued importance of the collectivist attack on capitalism as a an alleged “class society” Jarvie’s methodological individualist thesis is thus of more than mere scholarly interest. It is rendered even more important, in my view, by the unfortunate tendency of some libertarians to reify the market, to see it in a manner independent of the human behaviour and beliefs of which it is in actuality the result. Hopefully, Jarvie’s account of class might also serve as a stimulus to some to consider the whole question of the “social framework of the free market”, a question so unfortunately neglected at present (with the notable exception of Wilhelm Roepke¹³).

III: Against Social Determinism

But if society and social classes are fundamentally conceptual in nature, and given that our concepts can be both mistaken and inappropriate — perhaps disastrous — what an we say about their *sources*? The prevailing and rigid deterministic answers are, as we have already noted with Jarvie, unsatisfactory. Jarvie’s final two chapters, “The Sociology of Knowledge Reconsidered” and “Concepts and Society” are thus attempts

to reach a new understanding of the “social context”, to answer the questions “How does (the) constructed, intersubjective world come to be? How is it sustained?”¹⁴

In the former essay Jarvie, while rightly rejecting the vulgar, traditional form of the sociology of knowledge as “naïve and unconvincing”, comments at length on the recent “revised and improved” re-development of it by Berger and Luckman in *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), a work he describes as “useful and illuminating”. In fact, it is by no means inconsistent with methodological individualism to recognise that, as Jarvie puts it, “Once they have existed over time, institutions become something over and above their component individuals: an objective, external, coercive fact. The existence of an institution as such is a primary social control.”¹⁵ Jarvie goes to some pains — and rightly so, given the common misunderstandings regarding it — to elucidate the position of methodological individualism *vis à vis* the social context.

A methodological individualist ... while stressing that society and social entities are made up of individual people, their actions and relationships; that only individuals have aims and interests; that individual actions are to explained as attempts to realize aims, given the circumstances; and that the circumstances are changeable as a result of individuals’ actions; *need not deny the equal reality of social circumstances* ...

Methodological individualism is not a reductionism that would eliminate all but individuals from sociological explanations.¹⁶

Thus:

Among the cardinal realities facing the individual, then, are his social surroundings, especially institutions. These are as concrete and as real as his physical surroundings, and must play a part in his discussions and activities.¹⁷

That such a reiteration should prove necessary is indicative of the extent to which methodological individualism has been misunderstood or deliberately distorted in the process of critical attack — and perhaps also of the neglect of its most consistent exponent, Ludwig von Mises. Surely von Mises’ own clear and concise formulations should long ago have left no room for misunderstanding? As he wrote in *Human Action*:

It is uncontested that in the sphere of human action social entities have real existence. Nobody ventures to deny that nations, states, municipalities, parties, religious communities, are real factors determining the course of human events. Methodological individualism, far from contesting the significance of such collective wholes, considers it as one of its main tasks to describe and

to analyze their becoming and their disappearing, their changing structures, and their operation. And it chooses the only method fitted to solve this problem satisfactorily.¹⁸

In fact, a good case can be made that von Mises *over-estimated* the role of the social context and its determining function in human action!¹⁹

IV: Conditioning or Contexts?

Unfortunately, however, one is forced to say that Jarvie does *not* in fact satisfactorily answer the questions he himself sets, that he fails to illuminate the relationship between the individual and the social context. Whether one finds Berger and Luckman’s study useful (and I do not) it is important to note that these authors are — in the tradition of James Mark Baldwin and George Herbert Meade — committed to a view of individual consciousness as *overwhelmingly* socially conditioned, that “the self is a reflected entity”, a passive “social product”, or reflective emanation of “significant others”. And, indeed, any examination of the *soziale frage* tradition in sociology and social psychology reveals a strong and ingrained normative hostility to self-interest, the profit motive, and the “chaotic” market, and an equally strong commitment to altruism, “social control”, planning, and “order”.²⁰ However, while the very real forces of social conditioning, the “manifest effectiveness of social entities”, are not denied by Jarvie (nor by praxeologists or libertarians in general), the vital questions of the nature, extent, and *limitations* of that conditioning — of why some men are “common men” and others “innovators” as von Mises once phrased it²¹ — remain unanswered, even in outline, by Jarvie. In fact, Jarvie tends merely to talk around, rather than come to grips with, the basic issues. In the final essay he simply returns to a discussion of Popper’s view of “the location of social reality in the third world, a world the features of which are constantly changing as they interact with physical states through the mediation of mental states”.²² Yet this concept of the “third world” — at least as expounded by Jarvie — simply *re-states*, in metaphorical terms, the problem at hand! Jarvie ends with the same vision with which he started, but without having either completely validated it, or demonstrated what it adds to our concrete knowledge.

That this is so is all the more regrettable, since in the last two decades or so a small but growing body of extremely valuable scholarship relevant to his theme has emerged — from writers like Clyde Kluckhohn, Gordon W. Allport, Gardner Murphy, Dorothy Lee, H. G. Barnett, Mary Ellen Goodman, and Abraham Maslow.²³ While not denying the constructive and moulding role of society and culture, these writers provide both a far more accurate insight into their operation and of the factors of individual transcendence, autonomy, and resistance to socialisation. An integration

and synthesis of this “revisionist” and “humanistic” vein of thought would have served Jarvie well and represented a useful contribution to sociology.²⁴

I suspect however that American students may well find the brief appendix to Jarvie’s work, “The Methodological Individualism Debate”, one of its most valuable features — for they may be unaware that such a debate *has* taken place! Although apparently largely ignored in American academic circles, there occurred in Britain during the 1950’s a serious discussion of the merits of methodological individualism, primarily stimulated by the work of Hayek and Popper. The debate took place in such journals as the *British Journal of Sociology*, *British Journal of the Philosophy of Science*, *Journal of Philosophy* etc., and involved such scholars as Jarvie himself, Ernest Gellner, J. W. N. Watkins, J. O. Wisdom, Joseph Agassi, L. J. Goldstein and Stephen Lukes. Jarvie summarises chronologically the major contributions and arguments in the debate, and although (as his summary alone reveals) much of the hostile criticism was rendered gratuitous due to its misunderstandings, students of the debate will undoubtedly find many of the contributions greatly stimulating and will be well rewarded by following up the references supplied.

If *Concepts and Society* does not constitute a *classic* contribution to methodological individualism in the manner of Hayek or von Mises it nevertheless does remain an important work — if only because of the paucity of scholarship in this tradition. Those concerned with the methodological foundations of both economics and the social sciences in general will certainly find Professor Jarvie’s work stimulating.

NOTES

1. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1972, in its “International Library of Sociology” Series.
2. The late Ludwig von Mises conceived of economics as being part of a broader science of human action, a science termed “praxeology”. See Ludwig von Mises *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, William Hodge, London 1949, especially pp. 1-142. On the relationship of Mises’ praxeology to earlier economic methodologies see Israel M. Kirzner *The Economic Point of View* (1960), Sheed and Ward, Kansas City, 1976, especially pp. 146-185.
3. *Concepts and Society*, “Preface”, p. x.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. x, xi.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 122, 121.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 126. Of course, we are not dismissing the very real class, or caste, divisions based upon the relationship of individuals and groups to the State. Such divisions are justly dealt with by libertarian class analysis, with its fundamental categories of the “economic means” and the “political means” to wealth. Cf. Murray N. Rothbard, “The Anatomy of the State”, *Rampart Journal* (Rampart College, Larkspur, Colorado), 1(2), Summer 1965, and “Left and Right: The Prospects for Liberty”, *Left and Right*, 1(1), Spring 1965, and Albert J. Nock, *Our Enemy, The State*, Caxton Printers, Caldwell, Idaho, 1950.
13. See Roepke, *A Humane Economy: The Social Framework of the Free Market*, Regnery, Chicago, 1960.
14. *Concepts and Society*, p. 131.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 156, 157.
17. *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
18. *Human Action*, Regnery, Chicago, 1966, Third Edition, p. 42.
19. Cf. his statement: “Inheritance and environment direct a man’s actions. They suggest to him both the ends and the means. He lives not simply as man *in abstracto*; he lives as a son of his family, his race, his people, and his age; as a citizen of his country; as a member of a definite social group ... He does not himself create his ideas and standards of value; he borrows them from other people. His ideology is what his environment enjoins upon him. Only very few men have the gift of thinking new and original ideas and of changing the traditional body of creeds and doctrines.” (*Human Action*, p. 46)
20. For a particularly graphic modern example see Ernest Becker, *The Structure of Evil: An Essay on the Unification of the Science of Man*, George Braziller, New York, 1963.
21. Von Mises, *Theory and History*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1958, pp. 190-191.
22. *Concepts and Society*, p. 163.
23. For an introduction to this school of thought, and for further bibliographical details, see Mary Ellen Goodman’s valuable study *The Individual and Culture*, The Dorsey Press, Homewood, Illinois, 1967.
24. In this respect Jarvie’s definition of the social sciences as “not out to explain why people do things, to understand or explain in that sense. Primarily they are concerned to explain typical, repeatable, and unintended phenomena ...” (*op cit*, p. 43) is surely open to debate as excessively restrictive. Is not the whole direction of the book toward the *why* of human behaviour? In fact, the question of the status of psychology in relation to the social sciences is dealt with inadequately in my view both in Jarvie and the other literature of methodological individualism. Jarvie would probably rest his case upon Popper’s analysis in “The Autonomy of Sociology”, Chapter 14 of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. 2, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1945. Popper likewise argues that “the main task of the social sciences ... is (that) of analysing the unintended repercussions of intentional human actions” (p. 95). However, I consider that Popper not only erects a quite unnecessarily radical dichotomy between what he terms “psychologism” and “institutionalism”, but that his whole concept of “Sociology” is unsatisfactory.