

VICTIMS OF STATISTICAL ILLUSION

THE SUBJECT of sociology, as is evident in recent books, is in a bad way. In one direction, it tends to get lost in the illusion that statistics, sorted by the punch card method, can explain anything. In another direction, it gets hopelessly mired in some of the most horrifying gobbledygook that it is possible to imagine.

As an example of the statistical illusion, there is Vance Packard's recent *The Status Seekers* (McKay, 384 pp., \$4.00), which seeks to establish the notion that people do things only to emphasize their individual worth in the eyes of the neighbors. One buys a house, not to live in, or because it is near a good school, but to flaunt to the outside world. Cars are not for travel; they are for display. Food is not to eat; it is bought, cooked, and served primarily to indicate one's income bracket. And so on.

Well, it is incontestable that some people do some things for show, but in any neighborhood you will find scores of different people doing the same things for entirely

different reasons. Punch cards which tabulate income statistics or job levels or whatever "objective" fact, are powerless to get at the startlingly variegated truth about any body of people.

As for gobbledygook, pick up almost any modern book on sociology and try it for yourself. In a piece of alleged prose by one of our more original sociologists, David Riesman, I find this:

"The politician needs contact with a great variety of spheres of life if he is to have empathy with the problems of the voiceless as well as the noisy among his constituents (the private and sheltered person, too, can find in politics a way of acculturation to the gamut of cultures which our society still encapsulates despite in some respects growing uniformity)."

Translation: Politicians must get around if they want to know what their constituents are thinking. Even those not in politics can learn a lot about the still ex-

isting variety of our increasingly uniform society if they study the subject.

"Abstracted Empiricism"

C. Wright Mills, a Columbia University sociologist, thinks it is a paucity of imagination that afflicts his colleagues. In a brilliant book called *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford, 300 pp., \$6.00), Professor Mills lashes out at the "grand theorists" of modern sociology for their "irrelevant ponderosities" and their "splendid lack of intelligibility." He also attacks the "abstracted empiricism" of those who succumb to the statistical illusion. The "grand theorists" use "sponge words" and indulge in "mandarin rubbish." As for the "abstracted empiricists," they think they have proved something startling when, by counting noses, they demonstrate that rich people tend to vote Republican. In other words, it's news to an empiricist when a dog bites a man.

Professor Mills has a refreshingly down-to-earth way of outlining the nature of sociology. The sociologist, he says, must begin with "biographies" — i.e., with individual people. Individuals, he notes, have troubles — and when individual troubles exhibit a uniformity of content and outline within a given group or class, it is time for the sociologist to get

out his notebook for some field work. Sociology, so Professor Mills concludes, is what results when "biographies" join in significant numbers to "intersect history" within a given structure of social and political organization.

According to the Mills prescription, the good sociologist will avoid "fetishism of method and technique," he will concentrate on clear statement, he will keep his eyes open to the varieties of individuality, he will avoid concentration on "one small milieu after another," he will distrust all "official" explanations, and he will always seek to isolate the "pivots of change" as "biographies" combine to surge against traditional ways of doing things. Above all, Professor Mills warns the fledgling sociologist against being rigid about procedure. He is against the "ascendancy of research teams of technicians." The "classic sociologist" has always done his best work as "one mind that is on its own confronting the problems of man and society."

A Trap for the Unwary

Since Professor Mills writes so well about the uses of the "sociological imagination," a reviewer is irresistibly impelled to test the author's precepts against his previous practice. Mills's best-known work, *The Power Elite* (Oxford),

asks a lot of relevant questions about top-level decision-making in the age of the atom bomb and the Cold War. But in checking *The Power Elite* against the warnings set forth in *The Sociological Imagination*, one is disconcerted to discover that Professor Mills is himself victimized by the statistical illusion.

Mills relies too much on the adding machine in putting together his "biographies" to arrive at his idea of the dimensions of "the power élite." Who and what constitutes this "élite"? According to Mills, it consists of the remnants of the old "metropolitan 400," the new "corporate rich," the chief executives, the "celebrities," the "very rich" (including the descendants of the "old rich" who have hung onto estates), the "warlords," and the "political directorate" (mainly administrative). Congress itself consists of politicians who, as elected officials, are mainly on the "middle levels of power."

The Role of Ideas

The trouble with this sort of analysis is that it ignores the role played by ideas in pushing social transformation. No doubt classes and occupation or status groups explain a lot about "who gets what, when" in this materialistic world. But it is ideas, not statisti-

cal groups, which create the "pivots of change" which Professor Mills has counseled his students to understand. Ideas are born, they struggle for acceptance, they divide classes and even families internally, they give shape to a whole epoch regardless of the social structure of a nation, and then they fade away. True enough, social ideas usually bear some original relationship to the troubles of individuals caught in a malfunctioning economic and political structure. Nevertheless, they tend to take on a life of their own — and they may have no actual curative value in reference to the problems that are crying for solution at any given moment.

With his eyes on a statistical aggregate, Professor Mills thinks the "corporate rich" and the "warlords" are somehow in league to promote a "rampant mindlessness" in contemporary foreign policy. He is impressed by the lack of debate of great issues in Congress and in the country generally. This "mindlessness," he says, goes back to the late thirties, when a few "insiders" made the decisions that involved the U.S. in World War II.

The Academic Scribbler

But was it and is it "mindlessness" — as practiced by a "power élite" — that has resulted in the

cataclysmic political decisions of the present epoch? Or is it the triumph of an idea — the idea of collectivism? Successful in Soviet Russia, collectivism has resulted in the practical barbarization and militarization of a great nation precisely as Herbert Spencer, an older social scientist who had the “sociological imagination,” predicted it would. To save ourselves from possible engulfment by the Soviet military power, we have had to call in the “warlords” and to spend tax money for military equipment manufactured in plants owned by the “corporate rich.” The villain in the piece is not any “power élite” of generals, admirals, and corporation executives. No, the villain is none other than that old “academic scribbler,” Karl Marx. He started it back in the eighteen-forties with an idea that was compounded of a false theory of value and an envious spleen. It is as John Maynard Keynes (who ought to know) has said: The movement of ideas is more powerful than institutions, and the supposedly decisive politician of today is usually in the grip of some dead intellectual of yesterday who heard voices in the air.

In *The Power Elite*, Professor Mills ignores the “academic scribbler.” He ignores John Maynard Keynes’s own grip on whole col-

lege departments which have provided the Washington, D.C., “political directorate” with ideas that have hitched our economy to a collectivistic and highly inflationary pap-wagon. He ignores the “Prussian socialism” that turned a great nation in the heart of Europe into a collectivist war machine. He ignores the bearded scribbler of the British Museum who blended Hegelian thinking about the role of the State with Robespierre’s trust in the creativeness of social insurrectionism.

And so, in spite of his own brilliant advice to young sociologists and his own brilliant phrasemaking about the “slow bureaucratic crawl” and the “obscurantist bunk of public relations,” Professor Mills ends up among the “abstracted empiricists,” a victim of the statistical illusion. • • •

The Naked Communist

By *W. Cleon Skousen*. Salt Lake City, Utah: The Ensign Publishing Co. 343 pp. \$6.00.

THIS is an outstanding volume on the rise and spread of communism from a revolutionary sect to an empire embracing a third of the world’s people, plus conspiratorial activities among the remaining two-thirds. The author, a lawyer, is presently Chief of Police in Salt Lake City; formerly, he was a