

SOCIOMETRY, COMTISM AND MARXISM*

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A century ago, August Comte had finished his great work "Cours de Philosophie Positive" (1830-42) and Karl Marx had formulated in "The Theses on Feuerbach" (1845) his famous theory of social revolution. The originator of sociology tried to give the new science a permanent foundation by developing a world-embracing theoretical system which should be gradually substantiated. To the founder of scientific socialism, however, a world-wide "view" of society, its "fanciful circumscription and fixation" did not seem sufficient. He stirred up a world-wide mass *action*, a social revolution, hoping that this would not only change the structure of human society, but perhaps also substantially increase our knowledge of its nature. Sociometry, one hundred years later, has formulated a position which is now widely accepted. It is related to the system of Comte by acknowledging the methods of observation and experimental verification as indispensable to objective research. He assumed that these methods will gain the same astounding results for the social sciences which they have had for the physical sciences. It is in this point that Comte made his greatest methodical error. Sociometric studies have demonstrated that objective research and guidance of human relations cannot be obtained in many cases without the aid of *action*, *participation* and *realization* techniques.

Sociometry is related to the system of Marx by considering his theory of practice and his theory of change as of the utmost importance to the methodology of all social sciences. The Marx of "The Civil War in France", the practical-critical analyst of a social revolution in process, is greatly obscured by Marx, the analyst of political economy. He would probably have consented to the sociometric notion—that some degree of practical involvement in an actual situation animates the participants to make choices and decisions more akin to their present needs than otherwise and thus in a by-play, revealing to the investigator their individual and collective experience. He would have well appreciated the catalyzing value of action techniques in psychodramatic procedure, the "warming up to an act," and the realization techniques in sociometric testing, the giving to the subjects

*This is the first of three articles comprising a study in sociometric method. It will be followed by "Experimental Sociometry and Experimental Sociology,"—"Social Revolutions and a Theory of Sociometric Revolution."

some degree of realization of choices and aims in order to facilitate action research and clarify their spontaneous response.

The sociometrist disagrees with both Comte and Marx in the fundamental direction of approach to the human situation. They are both *macro-sociologists*, Comte in the way of theoretical totalism, Marx in the way of revolutionary-action-totalism. Sociometry, without however giving up the vision of totality by an inch, has retreated from the maximum to the minimum, to the social atoms and molecules. As I wrote several years ago in "Sociometry in Relation to Other Social Sciences":¹ ". . . From the sociometric angle the totalism of the neo-Marxists appears as flat and unrealistic as the totalism of Hegel appeared to Marx. Compared with the *élan* of the totalistic schools of thought, sociometric effort may seem narrow. Instead of analyzing social classes composed of millions of people, we are making painstaking analyses of small groups of persons. It is a retreat from the social universe to its *atomic* structure. In the course of time, through the cooperative efforts of many workers, a total view of human society will result again, but it will be better founded. This may be a deep fall after so much dialectic conceit, but it is a strategic retreat, a retreat to greater objectivity. These large generalizations encourage *pseudo-totalistic* views of the social universe. . . . The basic social and psychological structure of the group remains a *mythological* product of their own mind, a mythology which is just as much a barrier to the progress from an old to a new social order as the fetish of merchandise was before Marx's analysis of it. The dialectical and political totalists have reached a dead-end. A true advance in political theory cannot crystalize until more concrete sociometric knowledge of the basic structure of groups is secured. . . ."

Sociometry can therefore be called a *microsociology*, a sociology of the microscopic dynamic events, regardless of the size of the social group to which it is applied, small or large. The result of the sociometric development has been that the investigation of the smallest social aggregates has become more interesting than the large ones; and that pint-size revolutions, for instance social changes produced in a classroom, have become more interesting than efforts at a world-wide revolution. It has developed methods by whose means it is possible to deal with current events and immediate situations positively and directly without falling into the scylla of political socialism (Marx), or in the charybdis of utopian reformism (Comte).²

There is another angle in the relation of sociometric practice to social-revolutionary practice. The social revolutionist does not wait for the

¹*Sociometry*, Vol. I, No. 1, pp. 214-217, 1937.

"event" to happen. He fears delay of the uprising of the masses or even that this may never happen and so he *produces* it by instigating and arousing them (and he calls this process the "will" of the masses). Therefore, up to a certain point the social revolutionist creates the atmosphere of a sociometric experiment, he turns the collective life situation—where it is, in situ—into a social laboratory. But in the social analysis following the revolutionary event it becomes clear that the revolutionary operation is carried out in the dark, the inter-individual and sociodynamic structure of the mass involved in the action is unknown except for certain ideological premises and the role structure on the surface—certain key individuals in the "role" of the laborer versus others in the "role" of the capitalist.

The difficulty of the purely-at-a-distance investigator, of the passivist (Comte), is that he and his subjects are never *in* the situation, it is, so to speak, transcendental to him, thus he does a lot of guessing as to what it represents. The danger of the Marxist actionist, on the other hand, is that when he instigates and arouses the masses he may stir them up to *more* action than they are spontaneously inclined to and to more than he can eventually control. The result is that not only the revolutionary gains (if there are any) are of doubtful value—he does not know when a relapse or a regression to a pre-revolutionary or worse state might take place, but also the social analysis itself is bound to be faulty and full of indissoluble implications because he did not know when the revolutionary action was started, what structure the mass had in *statu nascendi* and the specific dynamic factors operating within it.

It is astonishing how slowly human thought progresses. It took the moral learnings of several social revolutions, the theoretical preparation and fifty years of pioneering of men like Simmel, Cooley and others, before the scene was set for procedures as simple as the sociometric test.

²For the future development of sociometry it may be desirable to separate it as a special discipline and to consider it as a *microscopic and microdynamic science underlying all social sciences*. In the biological sciences microscopic disciplines as histology, chemistry, have been similarly differentiated from macrobiological sciences as anatomy or genetics, and this has happened to the greatest advantage of each sister science. The debate on this point is still open. Burgess, Chapin and Znaniecki consider sociometry as a sub-division of sociology, whereas Dodd and Lundberg tend towards division rather than amalgamation. See E. W. Burgess, "Sociological Research Methods," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. L, No. 6, May 1945; F. Stuart Chapin, "The Relation of Sociometry to Planning in an Expanding Social Universe," *Sociometry*, Vol. VI, No. 3, August 1944; Florian Znaniecki, "Controversies in Doctrine and Method," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. L, No. 6, May 1945; Stuart C. Dodd, "Sociometry Delimited," *Sociometry*, Vol. VI, No. 3, August 1944; and George A. Lundberg, "The Growth of Scientific Method," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. L, No. 6, May 1945.