

THE USE AND MISUSE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

RANDOLF S. DAVID

President (1977) Philippine Sociological Society

That the social sciences can be of use to society is a piece of rhetoric that we loudly assert largely as a way of justifying our existence. But that we find it necessary today to worry about their possible misuse seems to indicate that social scientists in the Philippines have finally arrived.

Indeed there are a number of critical intellectuals in the Philippines who have long felt that much social science research in the Philippines has been nothing more than a wasteful pastime of academics who seek relief from the tedium of teaching, or an additional lucrative source of income, or perhaps an easy way to public recognition. Yet it is also true that even our harshest critics have maintained a largely tolerant, if sometimes condescending, attitude for it is generally thought that the social uselessness of much social science research also serves as a guarantee that it is incapable of posing any serious danger to the well-being of society.

There has not been, in the past few years, any radical change in the character of Philippine social science activity. What is certainly new is that, today, more and more agencies, institutions, and organizations, both local and international, are willing to allocate a tremendous amount of money for social science research. In the past, many programs and projects were conceived without regard for the social element. The minimal success achieved by these programs, however, appears to have led agencies to feel that somehow they must take into account that elusive and mystical "social dimension," if only to avert either violent resistance or indifferent reception of

their programs by the people.

The recent generous support for social science research is, of course, good for the "starving" social scientist. But, certainly, this *cannot* be the gauge for social usefulness. For, to talk of social usefulness would be to assume some concrete understanding of the needs of the social community — not of the requirements of the dominant sectors who commission social science research.

There can be no doubt that the social sciences can be made useful, but perhaps, the essential question is: useful for whom? So far, it appears that the answer to this question has tended to be: useful for the social scientist and those who can afford to pay for his skills.

The theme of this Convention revolves around the utility of social science research to policy making and program planning. I think that we should remember that when we talk of policies and programs, we are often talking of the rhetoric and strategy of *social control*. Most policies and programs follow the logic of dominant interests. For this reason, we should guard against social science research being enlisted to supply the necessary credibility and scientific aura to predetermined courses of action.

Several years ago, a noted Filipino sociologist lamented the fact that social science research in the Philippines was being used by various agencies and organizations in much the same way that a drunk uses a lamp post: more for support than illumination! I suppose that it is the special virtue of social science research to lend itself well to legitimation purposes.

I am aware that there are many of us who are convinced that it is possible for social

scientists to play more than a legitimating role — that it is in fact possible to influence public policy, if not to make it. That may well be, but I think we should not delude ourselves into thinking that in this vital area, we shall ever be given a free hand. Perhaps, it is more accurate to say that when our findings are consistent with established positions, our studies are conveniently cited. But we should not forget that in countless other instances, we are conveniently ignored.

In his 1968 presidential address to the Philippine Sociological Society, John Carroll, S.J. argued that it was the distinct responsibility of the social scientist to inform government planners of the social realities in which they operate, so that if mistakes are committed in the process, they would not be able to claim later that they knew not what they were doing.

I believe that some planners do know what they are doing, and that often they also have a

sound notion of the possible short and long-term consequences of their programs. Many other planners, however, do not seem to know what they are doing, and consequently do not care about the effects of their programs. Both types of planners are simply recipients of orders emanating from higher authority, though while the former feel powerless to do anything much, the latter do not even bother to question the premises upon which the orders are based. Concerned planners will often confess that all they can really do is try to minimize the adverse effects of their activities upon the people. This can be a most frustrating experience, and it is not surprising that many idealistic social scientists who become planners leave their agencies just as soon as their first year of duty is over. The unconcerned, and those who remain, become the vanguard of the emergent technocracy.