

INDICATORS OF SOCIAL CHANGE  
Concepts and Methods

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A reviewer should not begin or take up space at all with apologies, especially when the contributing authors and editors have performed so prodigiously. If I am allowed to "cop a plea," I will say simply that I have reviewed an encyclopedia. Such an endeavor can have only limited success as encyclopedias are long, all-embracing, complex and, aside from general editorial policy, have little in the way of guiding theme or consistent style. Still, this is an important if not pivotal book and one must try.

The book provides a wealth of indices of social trends in most major areas of human endeavor. The 14 chapters are: The introduction, "Monitoring Social Change in American Society," by the editors; "Population: Trends and Characteristics," by Conrad Taeuber; "Production of Goods and Services, the Measurement of Economic Growth," by A. W. Sametz; "Labor Force and Employment Trends," by Stanley Lebergott; "The Measurement of Knowledge and Technology," by Daniel Bell; "The Changing Politics of American Life," by Joyce M. and William C. Mitchell; "The Theory and Measurement of Family Change," by William J. Goode; "Trends and Anti-Trends in Religious Change," by Nicholas J. Demerath III; "Consumption: A Report on Contemporary Issues," by Milton Moss; "The Definition and Measurement of Leisure," by Philip H. Ennis; "Problems in the Measurement of Health Status," by Iwao M.

Moriyama; "Trends in Output and Distribution of Schooling," by Beverly Duncan; "Social Stratification and Mobility, Problems in the Measurement of Trend," by Otis Dudley Duncan; and "Welfare and its Measurement," by Ida C. Merriam. The book is suitably indexed.

Though the total volume of useful information and possibly important indices of trends are very valuable, considerable repetition occurs in the several chapters on population, income, occupations, employment and education.

In each chapter, some more than others, there is a cataloguing and development of measurement problems, usually in relation to a conceptual development of what is to be measured. Perhaps the most elegant linking of theory-concept-method-technique-measures is given by O. D. Duncan. Not to detract from the excellence of his presentation, it is important to note that his subject is much more delimited than those of other authors, and he further delimits stratification conceptually to, "The extent to which status achievement depends upon the level of social origin . . . Rank may be highly differentiated, but if there is roughly equal access to unequally ranked positions, the society is not highly stratified, within the meaning of the term as it is used here."

Several problems must be solved in order to arrive at an estimate of the past trend of social stratification in the United States or to propose a program for following the trend in the future. These may be listed summarily, by way of introduction; a more extended consideration of details will follow.

1. We require a conceptual orientation that will lead to criteria for the measurement of stratification.
2. Pertinent data must be located or created.
3. It must be established that the data for successive periods of time are sufficiently comparable, so that intertemporal differences can be taken to signify change rather than mere fluctuation in errors of measurement or variation in study design.
4. The intertemporal comparisons must be inspected for evidence of secular trend or other identifiable temporal pattern. (p. 696)

The detailed identification, discussion and warning of data problems is extensive. But he carefully concludes: "No trend." The society is as rigidly stratified or loose today as it was in 1910. Is this a lot or a little? No adequate cross-national comparisons or standards are available to answer the question.

If O. D. Duncan has conceptual data and interpretation problems, others have more. For example, Merriam, contemplating the level and distribution of income as "the most useful overall measure of welfare," notes that "the relevant literature is so voluminous—and the unsolved questions so numerous—that it is difficult to know how to get a hold on the problem."

This concern is repeated in one way or another in the other chapters. Recognizing the value of simplifying statistics in reducing "the great big buzzing confusion of social events," the editors wisely halt before a seemingly intractable reality: "In the current state of the theory and art of social diagnosis, it would appear that such simplifying indicators must be established by inductive generalization, not by deductive derivation from established laws." (p. 10)

Clearly, the reviewer needs a strategy to handle all this. Mine is to be critical of the theoretical level.

No adequate theoretical notion (not to say model) of society exists to guide the authors in identifying indicators and data of potential significance for planning the solution of important problems. What limited theory is available seems to be of an establishment-oriented, structural-functional sort that Dahrendorf has contrasted so sharply with change-oriented, conflict theory (Ralph Dahrendorf, *CLASS AND CLASS CONFLICT IN INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1959, Chapter V).

The chapters by Bell, Goode and O. D. Duncan have more theoretical guidance than the others. Bell's chapter elaborates a titillating idea of the "post-industrial" society in which knowledge, particularly theoretical knowledge, becomes the motor and technology the instrument of change. This chapter is nearly worth the price of the book.

Still, a notable lack of serious attention is afforded the seamy side of life in this society. True, poverty is considered, but where are the indices reflecting things so acutely perceived by young people of the day—starvation, other inequities, crime, violence, war, wastage of the environment, culpability and cupidity?

A more complete “bill of particulars” is given by Paul Goodman, *LIKE A CONQUERED PROVINCE*, New York, Vintage, 1968, esp. Appendix VII, “A Causerie at the Military-Industrial.” Bell, incidentally, would draw our attention from the “military-industrial complex” to the “scientific-administrative complex” also identified by President Eisenhower on leaving office.

Amazingly enough, even though the book includes a chapter on politics, no serious consideration is given the bases of social power or who exercises it—the power structure.

Bell deals with social power in oversimplified terms, identifying the primary source of theoretical knowledge. But in this he is either a dreamer or a misguided, hired academic hand who seeks to bust the traces. The realities of power and morality are otherwise in our society:

Corporate institutions are free to plan their future course of development, but they plan for their own purposes. The consequences are not simply profits but, more important, expansion of the corporate world into more and larger sectors of our national life. In defining their own roles and jurisdictions these institutions are oblivious to whether certain individuals are injured or neglected by the corporate thrust. At the same time they are above public control and take no responsibility for the social and psychological impact of their decisions. The situation, looked at from one vantage point, is highly rational and organized; corporate behavior is predictable and the corporate life is secure.

Viewed from a different direction a corporate America will hang on the edge of anarchy. Despite their sophisticated rhetoric and civilized demeanor, the great institutions of the nation have the power to carry the public along a road it has not consented to travel and for which there are no discernible alternatives.” (Andrew Hacker, “Power to do What?” pp. 144–45 in I. L. Horowitz, *THE NEW SOCIOLOGY*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1965.)

We might ask ourselves, "Why hasn't any workable, systematic model for gathering social statistics taken hold?" This book, like that edited by Raymond Bauer (*SOCIAL INDICATORS*, Cambridge, The M.I.T. Press, 1966) is important in raising the issue of social indicators (including economic indicators) and identifying nearly all the methodological, procedural and technical problems that might answer the question—for example, measures have to be reliable and valid at an initial point in time and at subsequent times. The dimensions one measures may lose their importance as change takes place; the inference of causal links between changes in policy and programs and indicators is usually impossible to justify in a multi-causal nexus.

But the real difficulty in finding out "Where are we going, if anywhere?" (see Kenneth Boulding's article of this title: *Human Organization*, 21, 162–166, Summer, 1962) is that the "we" are a lot of different "we's" with varying interests and amounts of power.

The bulk of this power is concentrated in privately run corporate structures with little public accountability or interest in such accountability as Mills and Hacker have indicated.

This book could have been vastly improved by the adoption of a firm value stance on behalf of the well-being of the general public, and an attempt to present a model of American society showing how the frustration of this general well-being occurs. Moriyama's chapter reflects the relatively poor showing in mortality for a "post-industrial" society, but gives no attention to the inadequate organization of health services that undoubtedly contributes to this picture. Merriam's chapter makes up for this somewhat. From such a value-theoretical stance the authors could have searched for useful indicators of gaps between ideals and realities. Identification of gaps would define problems and motivate action.

In spite of this critique, I feel that the book is essential reading for analysts of American society.

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