TALCOTT PARSONS

The Structure of Social Action

A STUDY IN SOCIAL THEORY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO A GROUP OF RECENT EUROPEAN WRITERS

VOLUME I

THE FREE PRESS, *New York*
COLLIER-MACMILLAN LIMITED, *London*

to believe that this process of development of thought has suddenly stopped,[1] the only justification for publishing the results of such a study at this or any other time is the conviction that the process has reached a point where the results to date, while not definitive, are well enough integrated to be significant.

The god of science is, indeed, Evolution. But for those who pay their obeisance in a true scientific spirit, the fact that science evolves beyond the points they have themselves attained is not to be interpreted as a betrayal of them. It is the fulfillment of their own highest hopes.

NOTE ON THE CONCEPT "FACT"

To forestall a very common source of confusion it is well at the outset to note the sense in which the term "fact" is to be employed. Adapting Professor Henderson's definition,[2] in this study a fact is understood to be an "empirically verifiable statement about phenomena in terms of a conceptual scheme." At present the questions as to the sources of evidence for such statements and whether it is legitimate to include such a phrase as Professor Henderson's "receptor experiences" will not be raised. In various connections these questions will come up later in the study. At present, however, it is necessary to point out only one distinction which has a significant bearing on the question of scientific abstraction. In the above definition a fact was referred to as "an empirically verifiable *statement* about phenomena." The point is that a fact is not itself a phenomenon at all, but a proposition *about* one or more phenomena. All scientific theories are made up of facts and of statements of relations between facts in this sense. But this does not in the least imply that the facts included in any one theory are the only verifiable propositions that can be made about the phenomena to which they refer. A system of scientific theory is generally abstract precisely because the facts it embodies do not constitute a complete description of the concrete phenomena involved but are stated "in terms of a conceptual scheme," that is, they embody only the facts about the phenomena which are *important* to the theoretical system that is being employed at the time. The distinction between a fact, which is a *proposition about* phenomena, and the phenomena themselves, which are concrete, really existent entities, will, if kept clearly in mind, avoid a great deal of confusion. The terms will be employed in these senses throughout the present study.

It follows from the above considerations that no phenomenon is ever a "fact" unless one is speaking in an elliptical sense. In general, a concrete phenomenon can only be described adequately for purposes even of a single theo-

[1] Indeed the result of critical reconsideration of various parts of the study, stimulated by the friendly criticisma of colleagues, has, since this sentence was first drafted, strongly confirmed the statement. The process has continued and will doubtless do so in the future.

[2] *L. J.* HENDERSON, *op. cit.*

retical system by stating a number of facts which are logically independent. Just what order of statements and how many is a question which is relative both to the empirical character of the phenomenon being studied, and to the theoretical system in terms of which it is being analyzed. For the purposes of any conceptual scheme there is an "adequate" description, the determination of a sufficient number of *important* facts. This falls, in general, far short of all the facts that it is possible to know about such a phenomenon. Even when we say "we do not know enough facts" to justify a given conclusion, we do not mean quantitatively that we cannot make a sufficient number of verifiable statements about the phenomenon but rather that we are not in a position to make certain *important* statements which are logicnlly required as premises for the conclusion. What facts are important is determined by the structure of the theoretical system.