

PSYCHOLOGISTS AND THE MAJOR PROBLEMS OF SOCIETY.

F. Emery.

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The original purpose of this symposium, as I understood it, was to consider "The psychologist's role in promoting economic and social development in modern society". The phrase "modern society" was specifically meant to refer to the state of economic disorder that we have been in since the massive world-wide round of economic recessions of 1975-6. In this period economic problems have come to overshadow all other considerations. The activity of most of the world economies have been depressed over this period. For the Third World and most of the Second World countries their economic activity is already more deeply depressed than in the nineteen thirties. The US rearmament program and corporate cannibalism have recovered for some of the First World countries some real growth, but no confidence that they are out of their economic troubles.

Notwithstanding the failure of "economic science" to predict these shattering economic developments, and notwithstanding the failure of economists to explain why these changes took place, the economists have emerged as the dominant priesthood. There is a logic to this. The critical presenting problems are economic therefore call in the economists. They may not have got their theories right but they are the ones most familiar with the facts and best placed to learn quickly. It seems to be but a simple extension of this logic to insist that proposals for social developments should first be assessed by economists. After, and only after, the possible economic impacts are considered are social or psychological considerations taken into account. That kind of logic very firmly puts the psychologists, and the sociologists, anthropologists and psychiatrists into subordinate role: they sweep clean the surfaces after the economic steam-roller has been through.

When we talk about the role of psychologists in promoting economic and social development in modern society we cannot avoid a direct confrontation with the imperial position that is taken by present day economists.

This, of course, is not a matter which would necessarily concern most academic or even practicing psychologists. Whatever the outcome it would not much affect what they are doing today. It is, however, a very serious matter for the future development of psychology and a concern for social scientists whose inter-disciplinary work relies heavily upon developments in psychology. (I would put myself in that category). The sort of psychology that adequately serves someone who is concerned with dark- adaptation in motorists, colour preferences in consumers or indoor sports for unemployed youth is quite inadequate for inter- disciplinary social scientists.

With this introduction we may now try to identify what is at issue in defining a role for psychologists viv-a-vis the economists.

Given the limitations on my time I will spell out the issues, as I see them, in the form of a set of theses.

1. No deductions from neo-classical economic theory are scientifically testable unless they are operationally defined in social and psychological terms. As a corollary, no economic policy for any social entity, e.g. national state or corporation, can be logically deduced from any theorems in economic theory.

2. The facts that economic theory deal with are 'social facts'. Many social facts do show regularity, inter-correlation with other social facts and predictability. These are characteristics that are shared by science and witchcraft alike. Social facts cannot be validated by comparison or inter-correlation with other social facts. "Social acts (sic) can be true or false; they can either meet or violate the needs and potentialities of persons" (Asch, 1952, p181). The thesis is clear. Economics cannot validate itself as a social science, or any other kind of science, simply on the basis of what it defines as facts.

3. Economics is not a social science. A social science would have to be sensitive to changes in our knowledge of human beings - unless, of course, we were talking about a science of something like a society of arthropods. Anthropology, sociology and psychiatry are sensitive to changing concepts of the nature of man. I can think of no changes in our concept of human nature that would require any changes in the theoretical structure of neo-classical economics. Thus, for instance, the concept of maximization of utility is a rule for ordering elements in a formal structure. There are no operational definitions connecting this rule to real economic life. Even maximization, in the important economic context of 'maximization of profit' depends critically upon the idiosyncrasies of creative accountants. "Maximization of utility' can be made to mean anything in any situation where alternative means are available for moving to a particular end (one has only to change the meaning of the end).