The Social Scientist as Political Activist: The Ethical Dilemmas

Bruce M. Russett

What are the political, social, and moral obligations of a social scientist? How sure, for example, must a peace researcher be before advocating a particular policy? When does he or she pass over the line from the faithful searcher after truth to the possibly erring committed citizen? Questions worth exploring.

The government official is at one extreme on a continuum running from social theory to social action. The official's responsibility is to act, and in a modern industrial society the acts of a senior official can have enormous impact on the lives, the liberties, and the happiness of citizens. The official knows this and the citizens know it. For this reason various constraints—which may operate well or badly—are imposed upon the official to assure that this power is used responsibly.

At the other end of the continuum is the pure academic social scientist, trying to discover why societies do as they do. As a searcher after truth, the academic social scientist may consider it a responsibility to pursue truth wherever it may lead, with little concern for particular applications in the "real world." Such responsibility demands that this truth be pursued with clear logic and valid and reliable evidence. From some perspective on the history of social science comes the knowledge of how easy it is to be wrong even when convinced of being right; findings are offered tentatively, with rarely a feeling so confident as to work for the immediate application of those findings to social policy.

In some degree my characterizations are caricatures. The official thinks as well as acts, and usually acts with at least some humility. The scientist acts as well as thinks; indeed it is notoriously easy to become convinced of the truth of one's theory and hence of its

BRUCE M. RUSSETT, Professor of Political Science at Yale, is author, among other books, of one which takes a skeptical view of U.S. entry into World War II (*No Clear and Present Danger*).

impelling social utility. Nevertheless, individuals vary greatly in the degree to which they adhere more closely to either of the poles. In this age particularly, many academic social scientists feel compelled to create a policy science, to apply their research to grave and immediate social problems. In the field of international relations, for instance, social scientists have frequently spoken out on issues like nuclear arms limitations and strategy, the causes of arms races, "domino" effects in Asia, the causes and "cures" of insurgency, and the roots of global inequality between rich nations and poor ones.

In making public pronouncements about problems like these, the academic analyst is stepping beyond the strict bounds of the scientist's role. The state of modern social science is *not* so well developed as to justify speaking often with great confidence. Presumably knowing more than the average nonexpert does not always mean very much. The specialist is—or ought to be—torn between a sense of the tenuousness of individual knowledge and the duty of a citizen to share the knowledge that may be acquired with officials and other citizens who must make urgent decisions in a real world. It is necessary to walk between the extremes of saying much less than is known out of an exaggerated self-skepticism or humility and speaking with more academic authority than any healthy respect for evidence would allow.

When recommending action on problems of poverty and justice, peace and war, it is not enough to have good intentions. When we make political recommendations, we are playing with people's lives. Remember all the crimes that have been committed, often with good intentions, in the name of the people. Stalin's action in collectivizing agriculture—a measure that directly caused the deaths of millions of innocent people—has, for example, been characterized by Adam Ulam as an act of dogmatic belief rather than one of sinister motive. Many American social scientists might recall the fruits of their enthusiasm for

nation-building in places like Vietnam, where Robert Oppenheimer's Alamagordo cry is again appropriate: "I am become death, destroyer of worlds." Consider the costs of virtually all wars and revolutions. It requires a peculiar calculus to imagine how many of them were worth, to the dead, the costs inflicted. It is even difficult to see how many resulted in a net improvement in the lives of the survivors. We surely can think of a few that certainly did so, and of a larger number that just as certainly did not. Between these extremes, with consequences very hard to evaluate, lie many of the traumatic political events of human history.

How do we decide we know enough to recommend that people should act on the basis of our knowledge? How do we determine that the prospective benefits (and to whom?) of a recommended change are likely to exceed those of the existing situation? This is a special problem in circumstances where the process of *making* change will itself impose great costs that must be weighed against any expectations of benefit. In short, how certain must we be that our theories are correct before we advocate action?

Of course it is impossible to make any accurate calculus of full costs and benefits, because it is impossible to compare rigorously the *subjective* costs and benefits felt by other individuals. Also, we must beware of any "greatest good of the greatest number" criterion, because that can so easily degenerate into using some people as a *means* to others' ends. The problem is further complicated by the need to balance the suffering imposed by governments or establishments against suffering inflicted in the course of violent revolution against injustice, and to consider long-term as well as short-term effects. Nevertheless, we cannot avoid trying to balance costs and benefits, however unsatisfactory the measurement must be.

One aspect of this problem arises in the numerous attempts to design new social systems to take the place of some very fallible current ones—perhaps a new order of political and economic relations within a country or a replacement for the contemporary international order organized around nation-states. Surely this kind of future-oriented perspective, the attempt to construct models of better worlds, is welcome. Analysts ought to think about what could be, as well as what is, should think in terms of desirable social systems and not imagine that only those systems currently observable can in fact exist.

But designing is not the same as actual construction in the real world. Physical scientists and engineers design new materials, such as compounds or machinery. Some of their design work is in the abstract, for example, on paper or in computers, but this leads to large-scale concrete experimentation with materials. Dealing only with materials, it is easy enough to throw away or recycle the failures. Social scientists also de-

sign in the abstract, or experiment with data. Sometimes they work in quasi-laboratory conditions, for example, with computer simulations, or in controlled small-group experiments, where the rules for responsible procedure are fairly generally accepted. With computations, at least, they can throw away the paper or the computer printout that represents failure. But how do we decide when it is time to move from this kind of speculation, design, and laboratory experiment to experiments with living systems? *Can* we experiment with people?

The problem resembles that of geneticists who have for some years been engaged in genetic engineering. Thanks to their work with DNA, the molecules governing heredity, they are at the stage of being able to change the characteristics of cells and through them to control the development of whole organisms. Expanding from their work with primitive life forms, they are now able to make rather complex organisms develop in ways quite different from what would normally occur. There is a clear prospect, for example, of disease-resistant mutations artificially introduced, or of organisms with unusual strength, endurance, or the ability to withstand hostile environmental conditions. The basic principles of this work, well understood through laboratory experiments, appear entirely applicable to complex life forms—like humans.

There are numerous ethical questions about the appropriateness of genetic engineering on humans. Even should there be a favorable consensus about inducing certain kinds of artificial mutations, the process itself raises great difficulties. Unavoidably it is somewhat clumsy, and mistakes occur frequently. With lower life forms this is no great problem; the failures are discarded. Yet if the mistakes were to occur on human "raw material," what then? Can we throw away humans that went wrong through the engineering or monstrous organisms that would be human save for some induced mutation that went bad? Mistakes are especially likely in the early trials of transferring the genetic engineering expertise from other forms to humans. Are the sufferers to be regarded cold-bloodedly as "inevitable" victims in the march of progress? What is to be done with the failures? When, *if ever*, would knowledge gained from experimentation on lower life forms be regarded as sufficient to justify the leap to work on humans? These are very lively questions in molecular biology.

For the social analyst who would like to help create a better world, one response to hard questions like these could be immobilism, the refusal to make any political recommendations because the scientific basis is necessarily uncertain. Such a view takes full recognition of the difficulties facing science, and carries to an extreme the proposition that scientifically we can only disconfirm our theories or hypotheses and can *never prove them correct*. Always taking refuge in the need for more evidence, one never proceeds to action. I do know people, very careful scholars, who indeed

take this position. Its implications, however, become that of preferring the devil we know (the current situation, whatever it may be) to the unknown devils that could be released by mistaken action. Immobilism is perhaps a special temptation, conscious or otherwise, to scholars who are personally and professionally secure, living well in rich countries. The status quo may not seem bad enough to risk changes that might easily worsen rather than improve conditions. It is sometimes hard not to fall into this trap, given full awareness of how readily the sum of human misery could be increased and less than full firsthand appreciation of the extent of human misery already being endured. Nevertheless I do not accept the immobilist position for myself. I often make policy recommendations, frequently based on scientific evidence and sometimes based on theories or intuitions not fully substantiated. But I also feel uneasy about the risks incurred for others in those recommendations.

Another possible reaction is that of the pacifist to make recommendations for change-oriented action, but to insist they be carried out by nonviolent means. Pacifism is an attractive philosophy. I can imagine myself adopting it, and do not criticize those who actually do so. Yet I think that in this context it is beside the point. The question at issue here is less that of choosing appropriate means in the abstract (for example, violent vs. nonviolent means) than of understanding the costs and benefits of any effort at change and of appreciating the limits of our ability to make accurate forecasts of those costs. Some may disagree and declare that it is better completely to rule out, as invariably self-defeating, the use of certain means. That is a beginning toward an answer to the question being posed here. But we are left asking: If we accept the idea that social analysts, such as those who consider themselves "peace researchers," are able to make recommendations, how do we elaborate principles to guide the move beyond peace research to action, for peace?

Perhaps social analysts can derive some guidance from the principles generally in practice among the medical profession, especially the distinction doctors make between experimentation and treatment. Like peace researchers, physicians presumably work for the benefit of human beings. They too deal with powerful forces that can maim or kill as well as heal. And they too deal in a far from exact science; often the degree of uncertainty attending the consequences of the actions available to them is high, especially with new treatments. When surgeons operate as a matter of therapy, they do so not for the benefit of people in general, but for the benefit of a particular patient. As expressed in the Declaration of Geneva of the World Medical Association, "The health of my patient will be my first consideration." Physicians may use only those procedures that give reasonable expectation of benefit to this patient, in relation to the
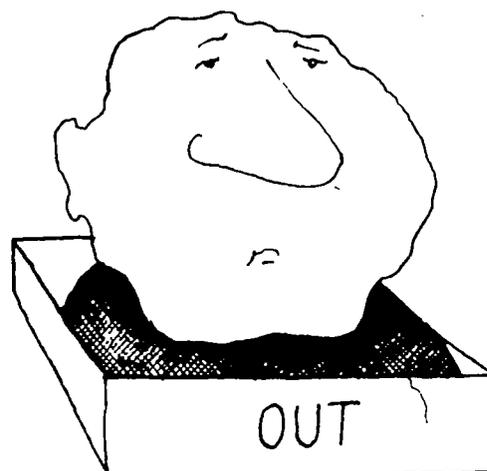
Janice Stapleton

possible harm that may come either from the treatment or from the disease. They may only give drugs that have been thoroughly tested, through extensive tests on lower animals and on special human subjects. There are some ambiguities in these rules, and there have been some conspicuous bad failures (for example, the Thalidomide tragedy), but the principle is fairly clear and generally observed for normal treatment. Even in an epidemic doctors would not administer a completely untested drug. (This might be a caution to those social analysts who consider the current status of global poverty and oppression to be analogous to an epidemic.) Any procedure must offer some reasonable basis, from evidence rooted in empirical test, of being therapeutic. That is, it must offer a better prospect of gains than do alternative, less vigorous treatments, and gains proportionate to the pain, cost, and danger incurred.

These are the principles guiding *therapy*. Doctors also must sometimes *experiment* on people, under circumstances that may not offer benefit to the particular patient but may provide knowledge that will be useful to other sufferers. It is impossible to extrapolate entirely from the effects of a drug on monkeys to its probable effect on humans; some human guinea pigs are frequently required. Prisoners, dying patients, and other volunteers may become subjects for the experiment.

In a social science field the work by Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, raises similar problems. Milgram persuaded volunteer subjects to take part in a laboratory experiment presented as a study of learning. The subjects were to administer electric shocks as punishment when another participant failed to learn correctly, with the shocks building up to a possibly fatal strength. Despite dramatic pleas and screams from the victim, the majority of subjects continued the punishment as ordered by the experimenter. The find-

ings of this work are considered extremely important, illustrating the degree to which normal human beings will often act in a brutal manner out of obedience to authority.

The laboratory situation was, of course, contrived to deceive the subject; the "victims" were confederates, actually no shocks were administered, and they felt no pain, nor were they in any danger. All subjects were told this after the experiment was over. During the experiment, however, Milgram manipulated his subjects in ways that could have been very dangerous to them. Many of them exhibited extreme tension and could well have suffered severe psychic or physical damage at the time. More seriously, at the end of the experiment they knew they had behaved in a way that could have killed if the situation had really been as they believed. The guilt and other effects of this knowledge could have been extremely harmful to their well-being. Criticism of Milgram's experiment, from both professionals and laymen, was very sharp and led to the promulgation of an explicit code of ethics for psychological researchers, forbidding such activities. However valuable the knowledge gained, methods that so use and endanger unwilling volunteers are impermissible.

The medical rules for experimentation correspond roughly to the statement of the Articles of the Nuremberg Tribunal, the basis on which Nazi "medical experiments" were condemned and their perpetrators sentenced. Consider its requirements, thinking about how, if at all, they might be fulfilled in social experiments involving people's lives and well-being:

> The voluntary consent of the human subject is absolutely essential. This means that the person involved should have legal capacity to give consent; should be so situated as to be able to exercise free power of choice, without the intervention of any element of force, fraud, deceit, duress, overreaching, or other ulterior form of constraint or coercion; and should have sufficient knowledge and comprehension of the elements of the subject matter involved as to enable him to make an understanding and enlightened decision. This latter element requires that before the acceptance of an affirmative decision by the experimental subject there should be made known to him the nature, duration, and purpose of the experiment; the methods and means by which it is to be conducted; all inconveniences and hazards reasonably to be expected; and the effects upon his health of person which may possibly come from his participation in the experiment.

If we were to take these principles as a guide for social analysis and action, it seems to me they would drastically limit the scope of pure experiments on people in the social sphere. It would rarely be possible to obtain this kind of informed consent from the people we are trying to help—frequently people who are illit-

erate, and certainly in no way able to evaluate a research design even if we were able to specify the hazards as required. Moreover, in a social situation some of the people on whom we would be experimenting would inevitably be children, from whom consent would be meaningless. Thus we can never use people in a conflict situation where we expect the effort to fail, even though the failure might be instructive for helping other people. The requirement for informed consent is too rigorous. Our efforts must always offer some reasonable prospect of helping *these* people who are being subjected to the act. (A constant problem, of course, concerns exactly *who* these people are. How about the "benefits" to those who will die in a social upheaval, even though their surviving relatives and fellow citizens stand to benefit?) Either a "no experiment" rule or the general "do no harm" principle would certainly prohibit the kind of behavior attributed to Radio Free Europe at the time of the Hungarian uprising in 1956. At best RFE's alleged call to revolt was an experiment in a situation that offered little prospect of success to the people concerned; at worst it was a cold-blooded effort to use these people in a hopeless cause to make trouble for the Soviet Union.

We return then to the matter of treatment. Knowing the prospects of success for various "treatments" is very difficult in social analysis, *much* more difficult than the kind of extrapolation medical people have to make when moving from animal experiments to people. Of course we do sometimes have to act, as doctors have to act, on the basis of imperfect knowledge. We must respond to life; the problem of making decisions under conditions of uncertainty is a near-universal. We act politically as ordinary citizens, voting and taking a normal part in the political life of our countries. While we presumably take care to act responsibly, we do not usually agonize over our choices in such situations. Furthermore, specialist students of peace do have a particular contribution to make from their deep insight and professional knowledge.

At the same time, scientists are also especially well equipped to comprehend the limits of that knowledge and the depth of uncertainty, to ask in a penetrating and embarrassing fashion *how* it is that we know what we think we know. They are required both to make public the basis of their beliefs and the reasons for maintaining skepticism about them. Before prescribing therapy they must first do scientific studies in the most careful and honest way, to the best of their ability and compiling evidence so that others can verify their knowledge. Doing research must not become an excuse for avoiding action indefinitely but a reason for humility in avoiding premature action that could hurt *people* for ephemeral gain. The social scientist's main task is to collect, systematize, and disseminate knowledge. This should be done in the same rigorous and reliable way as for any other science. This is the first prerequisite for credibility, and a major condition for potential application.

So much for general principles, necessarily vague. Where does all this leave us in concrete situations? One thing we surely can do is to clarify the value basis of our recommendations so that others can judge not only our proposed means but our intent. For another, a "no experiment" rule can doubtless be modified in certain political circumstances where therapy is performed in a manner that incorporates an experimental design. Legislation, drawn up and executed by legitimate political institutions, is frequently experimental in that a problem has been identified, but, since the best solution is unknown, either multiple solutions are attempted or a pilot program is begun. I can see no objection to this sort of action when performed as a normal function of democratic government with appropriate precautions. Nevertheless, we should be aware of how difficult it is to design such social experiments adequately, in a way that will permit the scientist actually to judge at the end whether it succeeded or failed.

A distinguished psychologist, Donald Campbell, has therefore endorsed a "shift in political posture...from the advocacy of a specific reform to the advocacy of persistence in alternative reform efforts should the first one fail." We may be able to identify the fact that a disease exists without being able to specify its remedy. As such there is a role for the social scientist, in addition to the activist roles of experimentation and therapy, in *diagnosis*. Even this, however, carries its risks. Others will act on the basis of the diagnosis, and so the diagnosis must be detailed and accurate. We might, for example, identify a case of exploitation of poor countries by rich ones. Yet the remedy would depend on the details of that diagnosis. Lenin, for instance, traced such exploitation to the depredations of finance capital. Johan Galtung, the Norwegian sociologist, blames it largely on trade restrictions that consign poor countries to the role of suppliers of raw materials and importers of processed manufactures. The economist Arghiri Emmanuel, in an extremely influential recent work, holds that "exploitation" is unavoidable in a world system where goods and capital flow freely across national borders but the movement of labor is sharply restricted. Very different treatments would follow from each of these very different diagnoses of the problem, and each has its vigorous enthusiasts. The wrong choice would be terribly damaging, yet there is little scientific evidence as to which, if any, is a correct diagnosis.

Perhaps this discussion speaks too much about the role of the peace researcher or other social scientist as expert. Both are, after all, merely participating in a situation of social discourse where they have *some* contribution to make. In any political context their recommendations will be evaluated by other citizens, and we should not imagine that they alone bear the whole responsibility by involving others. At the same time, this fact cannot become an escape from ethical responsibility. It can be parodied in the form, "we can be irresponsible just because we are not (alone) responsible."

Another partial mitigation of the dilemma between immobilism and irresponsible advocacy is, of course, that most achievable political actions in the world are by their nature marginal and incremental. We often must move slowly, whether we like it or not, and the emerging effect of reforms can be seen in at least some gross fashion. Frequently we deal in a situation where errors can be corrected before they do too much damage. This may be the case with many arms control proposals, and with many acts to improve conditions in less developed countries as well. But this too cannot become just an easy escape from careful preconsideration of the consequences. Not all reforms are marginal and incremental. A bad choice of nuclear strategy could bring cataclysm; very likely the changes many of us desire for the global system cannot all be achieved without at some point making dramatic changes where the effects are not so easily foreseeable or controllable.

All this, like much of science itself, leaves more questions than answers. At heart they share many aspects of some classical problems of political theory— "When is a war just?" "When is regicide permissible?"—and we can learn from people's earlier questioning. As I have already suggested, it is easy for secure, privileged people to fall into the trap of satisfaction and immobilism. Yet it is also easy for such people to urge action upon others, under conditions where they themselves will not have to bear the consequences. We might recall the common practice among medical researchers of first performing dangerous experiments on themselves before proceeding even to willing and informed volunteers. Are social analysts prepared to take, for themselves, the risks they propose for others? And, if not, are they likely to become like those described by the West Indian journalist V.S. Naipul: "those who continue to simplify the world and reduce other men...to a cause, the people who substitute doctrine for knowledge and irritation for concern, the revolutionaries who visit centres of revolution with return air tickets...the people who wish themselves on societies more fragile than their own, all those people who in the end do no more than celebrate their own security?"