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Report of the Annual Meeting

## The Social Scientist in the Modern World

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## THE SOCIAL SCIENTIST IN THE MODERN WORLD

This session took the form of a general discussion. The paper by A. R. M. Lower, "The Social Sciences in the Post-War World," published in the March 1941 issue of the *Canadian Historical Review*, provided a point of departure. The discussion was opened by F. H. Underhill, the Abbé Maheux, and R. A. MacKay.

Mr. Underhill said that he agreed with everything Mr. Lower had written. He detected, however, a certain note of self-pity as applied to social scientists in Canada because of the smallness of their constituency. He doubted if this were justified. The Great Britain of Adam Smith's day and of Gibbon's was smaller than Canada is now. These men were doing something which Canadian social scientists refuse to do. They were making a broad analysis of a society and drawing conclusions about it. Mr. Underhill recalled saying five years ago that, since we are in a period of upheaval, the social scientists should try to come to some conclusion about the values of our community. It was said that the social scientist could not do this, that he must avoid conclusions. Since then there had been a change. This change was due to two things. First, there was the Rowell Commission report, in the preparation of which many social scientists had taken part. They had contributed also to the conclusions made in the report. The second cause of change had been the war. The social scientist had discovered that the community had values, now under attack, and that he must go out and take his part in their defence.

Mr. Underhill then went on to discuss Mr. Lower's statement that, unless the social scientist did something for his community, some other people would do it for him. The existence of a deep social and cultural struggle is part of our age. Unless we take some part in this struggle, our teaching will have very little effect. A particular reason for this concern lies in the existence today of what have been called "the opinion industries," by which public opinion is now made. The tradition of rational free enquiry is breaking down, and we are going through an anti-rational reaction. With the social scientist lies the function of making rational judgments. Because of controls which are already being instituted, this will become more and more difficult. The social scientist must keep his freedom, but he must not assume that he can do so merely by remaining aloof. It is not likely that he will be allowed to burrow around making his investigations into society without interference.

The practical solution for this problem lies in the formation of a professional organization through which the activities of the social scientists may be defended. Pressure is now being exerted all over Canada, and a professional organization, prepared to fight, is necessary to withstand these attacks.

The Abbé Maheux said that the great classical figures, such as Demosthenes, were case studies in democracy. He said that he regretted the decline in the study of Greek and Latin. He suggested that the study of Plato would throw a great deal of light on the working of democracy. In support of this statement the Abbé referred to the dictum of Walter Lippmann that religion and the study of the classics are the keynotes of

democracy. He said that he disagreed with Mr. Lower's opinion of the working of democracy in Canada.

Mr. MacKay said that he assumed that Mr. Lower's call goes to the historically minded social philosophers with constructive imaginations. They must be philosophically minded, because a sense of social values is of supreme importance, and historically minded so that they will not "miss the boat." They must be able to visualize the desirable new social order, and they must be social engineers, not mere utopians.

Even Mr. Lower will admit that a division of labour is desirable. The social engineer may find his niche in the civil service or other constructive or administrative agencies in society. The social philosopher may find his place in the class-room or in research. Mr. Lower thinks that in a cataclysmic world the social philosopher cannot wait for his disciples to apply his teachings. Mr. MacKay said he was inclined to agree. He saw little likelihood that, in a world where society is organized for collective violence or collective change on a grand scale, the social scientist would be allowed to take refuge in universities and libraries and be free from interference.

Mr. MacKay said that, unlike Mr. Lower, he thought there were still two choices for the social scientist—enlisting as a social engineer or attempting to carry on as a critic of society. We must defend the right of the social scientist to refuse to enlist at all in this sense. Mr. MacKay developed a comparison between Milton and Socrates as examples of men who had chosen one or other of these alternatives. The choice seems to have been dictated by personal inclinations. Milton, for all his speculative interest, had an itch to manage things, and Socrates had an itch to talk. Perhaps also it was a matter of faith or belief in a personal mission. And so it must be with the social scientist when events permit him or compel him to take a stand.

Mr. McIlwraith said that he was in almost complete agreement with Mr. Lower. He insisted that the social scientist, since a member of the body politic, must consider how best he can play his part in it. This must vary according to the fields of the different social sciences and Mr. McIlwraith then discussed the contribution which can be made by the anthropologist. The anthropologist has a vital part to play in the modern age because of cultural adjustments which are occurring all over the world. Since he is largely concerned with the study of non-European peoples he can throw considerable light on the behaviour of such peoples as Iraqi and North Africans whose reactions to western culture are so important today. Here in Canada the anthropologist can assist in producing a greater understanding of the North American Indian. He suggested that a knowledge of Indian culture, methods of land tenure, and conservation of wild life might lessen the difficulties of culture contacts between white and Indian. He suggested also that an intelligent use of anthropological principles could be employed in the education of Canadian Indians by the process of building upon the foundation of aboriginal interests and techniques. Principles made evident in studies of native and European interactions are pertinent in the problems of adjustments between other groups of mankind, such as the assimilation of European immigrants.

Mr. Brown said that it appeared that the differences of opinion here were largely in regard to method. Even those who take the view that the

social scientist should concern himself with scholarship only, regard this as the best method by which he can make his contribution to society. In the long run it is felt that his influence will be felt by society indirectly. Mr. Brown himself, however, thought that a lot of our scholarship had been too detailed. In teaching we have dealt with the more specialized aspects of a subject, and have not dealt with the more fundamental assumptions of the society in which we live. Religion, which historical scholarship has tended to leave out of consideration, is a good example. The social scientist cannot be expected to preach sermons, but nevertheless he has had certain assumptions about religious values in the community which he has been unwilling even to discuss.

Mr. Brown also referred to the fact that we have had much diplomatic history in regard to the relations between Canada and the United States, but no real attempt to explain the fundamental basis of the Atlantic world in which we live. It is becoming increasingly evident that the social scientist must give something more than the detailed studies that can be documented at every point.

Mr. Masters said that he wished to emphasize one aspect of Mr. Lower's paper, namely, the necessity for creating in the community at large a group of people who understand and appreciate what the social scientist has to say. Unless such people exist, able to talk his language, the social scientist may find himself without contacts through which his findings can be made effective. Mr. Masters also said that he thought both functions, that of intensive research and that of interpretation, were necessary. Useful service was given in both fields, and he saw no point in endeavouring to eliminate one or other of these activities.

Mr. Innis said that he saw in the popular tendencies of the time a retreat to barbarism in which the social scientist was taking part rather than standing aside and exercising a critical function. With regard to the so-called opinion industries, he said the social scientist in Canada had got into publicity without realizing the tremendous change that had come over the press in recent years. The great public provided by the contemporary press and the radio created temptations which could not be resisted. He said it was impossible to think of an Adam Smith or a Gibbon working in Canada at the present time and willing to give fifteen or twenty years of his life to some fundamental piece of research. It is the characteristic of the scholar that he is interested in some problem of far-reaching importance. The matter of coming to a conclusion or finding an answer is not practicable. When anyone appears who claims that he has found an answer, he should be regarded with great suspicion.

Mr. Carson urged that the universities should make a more extensive practical contribution in the social sciences by supplying more workers in such fields as adult education and the Frontier College, and a greater appreciation of the importance of these activities.

Mr. Trotter said that on looking back to the process which he was put through as a student, he remembered how he left college with the idea that a student of history must not only always start by knowing that there were two sides to any question he might study, but he must also avoid to the end taking either of these sides. He now thought that this was a kind of negativism, a retreat from the obligation of drawing a conclusion on the plea that doing so might incur the risk of falling into error. We must remember,

he said, that we are in a society in which most of the people with whom we are dealing live in a real and pressing world in which decisions must be made and actions taken. If our expertness has any place in this world of action, then it must reach conclusions which may be a basis of action. To avoid conclusions is to try to escape the necessity of taking responsibility.

Mr. Macpherson said that there was a danger that social scientists would be used by the state, as some of them had been used in the past, to give a respectable academic front to whatever institutions the new forces and new leaders in the state might propose to set up. In order to avoid this exploitation, the social scientist, Mr. Macpherson felt, should give some thought to the re-appraisal of his own scheme of values, and, more concretely, to the ways in which the effectiveness of political philosophies is, and has been, related to the emergence of new social and economic forces.

Mr. Glazebrook said that the social scientist, like the banker, clergyman, or doctor, is also an individual, and not necessarily better fitted than they to apply his professional knowledge to the problems of the country. He suggested that the most valuable function of the social scientist is to keep the minds of his students moving in reasoned channels. He suggested also that social scientists are not always right in their judgment when they express opinions on matters of public policy. Many American scholars now wish to reverse trends of opinion which they helped to create in the post-war world. He said it is a matter of temperament whether the social scientist exerts his influence by direct or indirect methods.

Mr. Lower said that he agreed entirely with Mr. Innis about the right of the scholar to persevere in his studies to his own independent conclusion. That, however, was most practicable in an age of stability. Scholarship seems to be a product of stable societies, and it tends to deteriorate or disappear when society weakens or disintegrates.

He added that he thought the discussion about processes in scholarship a subsidiary one. Right now we are in a great transitional epoch, in which there may be precious small place for any of the graces of life. Power is passing into the hands of those who are strong enough to wield it, and we must ask ourselves the question whether or not, in this process, there is any chance of preserving the values of our civilization.

The historian sees the great panorama of history spread before him. He is aware of the many lessons that could be learned, by which man could avoid the mistakes that so often roll him down the slope up which he has climbed. And yet history itself forces upon him mankind's inability to learn. Mr. Lower said that he finds himself in consequence in a curious theological position, hovering between free will and predestination. If man were wise enough, he could rise through knowledge and control his fate. But he is not wise enough and he keeps on repeating his mistakes, and thus is not the master but the slave, of fate. If historians were gods!