

Obrdlík, Antonín J.

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ANTONÍN J. OBRDLÍK

SOCIOLOGY IN THE SERVICE OF U.N. EXPERTS

Way back in the late 'twenties I was one of those who attended Sociology courses offered by Professor I. A. Bláha, and I also participated in the discussions which took place in his Sociology seminar. In those days we, his students, could only remotely guess that the theoretical axioms he explained to us were of an eminently practical value if heeded in actual life situations. I believe, though, that we all were particularly impressed with our teacher's repeated admonitions that while it was imperative to study social phenomena in an impartial and objective way, experience would reveal that scientific knowledge must go hand in hand with a social philosophy to guide us in our day-to-day life. To learn, to know is a necessary and an admirable thing; however, knowledge per se could remain sterile or it could even be misused if not related to the individual and social purposes it should serve. In this respect, Bláha's lectures on History of Sociology, Principles of Sociology, Methods of Sociological Investigation, etc. were most fittingly complemented by his lectures in "Practical Philosophy" (meaning Applied Ethics) — a course which was by far the most popular amongst his students and which, I am certain, left a permanent imprint upon the future citizens during their crucial formative years. In this series of lectures Professor Bláha showed us how to apply social theory to life that would be both individually rewarding and socially responsible. He was thus to us what his great university teacher, Thomas G. Masaryk, was to him and his generation in the years of transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century.

There was yet another element in Bláha's teaching of sociology. In spite of his emphasis on the scientific approach to the study of social phenomena he also appreciated the fact that there is a certain amount of pre-scientific sociological knowledge that we all acquire, to a greater or lesser degree, simply because we, as human beings participating in the various social groups to which we belong (family, nation, religion, school; professional, scientific, artistic, etc. groups or categories), learn from our day-to-day experience that there are rules, traditions, customs and mores which have to be observed, and complied with, by members of the respective "we-groups". Professor Bláha used in this connection the term of "functioning under social norms".

However, the pre-scientific (or common sense) sociological knowledge usually lacks the notion of the relativity of local norms of group behaviour as it varies in time and space — *D'autres pays, d'autres moeurs*. Bibliographical references recommended by Professor Bláha for collateral reading brought us in contact

with a wealth of data abounding in examples of ethnocentrism, described by authors specializing in the field of comparative social and cultural anthropology. We could clearly see that the norms governing the behaviour of one particular social group such as, for example, a primitive tribe were not necessarily accepted and practised by people living in another part of the world or in a different era. It was a good lesson in understanding and tolerance.

By the same token, we were able to see that — and why — in times of far-reaching technological developments leading, for instance, to modern means of transportation when, in terms of time and space, the hitherto distant areas of the world are brought together into a manifold relationship, social tensions and conflicts become practically unavoidable, at least during the transitional period of mutual adjustments. Here again, the main lesson we learned was the necessity to analyze various social situations in the light of the relevant historical perspective and against the general background of determining factors such as geography, demography, level of technological development, economic and socio-cultural institutions; always with patience and a sense of proportion, namely without social bias and ethnocentric attitudes when drawing lines of comparison.

In the course of more than twenty years of active service as member of the United Nations Secretariat, I was very fortunate in being able to test and verify time and again the validity and usefulness of the above theorems. Having belonged to the professional brotherhood of what is known as the International Civil Service, I considered it to be both my duty and privilege to eliminate, as much as was humanly possible, any and all preconceived ideas and forms of behaviour that might possibly affect my work, especially when I was on official missions abroad. As the years went by I realized that this was made easier and more rewarding for me because of the lessons I had learned as a sociology student and thanks to the subsequent experience I gained in sociological research.

On the pages that follow I should like to summarize some of the observations I made in connection with my six field missions in Africa and in the Middle East. Specifically, I shall endeavour to show that, to my mind, familiarity with the basic principles of sociology is instrumental in enhancing the work of experts whose services are made available by the United Nations Development Programme (technical assistance) to the developing countries.

Apart from the regular members of the U. N. Secretariat there is also a group of several thousands of men and women who are scattered around the globe, working as experts in the field of their specialization in countries and territories whose technology and other sectors of economic and social development are in need of technical assistance. These people, too, are internationally recruited, either by the headquarters of the United Nations or by one of its specialized agencies (ILO, UNESCO, FAO, WHO, etc.). As long as they function under a U. N. contract they are expected to behave like the regular members of the secretariat of the U. N. or the staff of the respective specialized agencies: To be objective and to keep uppermost in their minds and hearts that it is the people of the country of their assignment who should benefit, and not the expert himself or the country of which he is a national.¹

¹ David Owen: "The Concept of an International Civil Service". *University of Leeds Review* (England), Vol. X, No 2, September 1966, pp. 91—111.

It was by observing the behaviour, work and the results of missions of these experts that I learned a good deal about the practical value of scientific as well as "common sense" pre-scientific knowledge of sociology and applied social psychology, when used on technical assistance assignments.

On the surface of things it would appear that because these experts are knowledgeable and experienced persons, recognized and often highly appreciated in their own countries, they all stand a very good chance, indeed, of successfully accomplishing their mission in a technologically less developed area. Yet, it just is not so; some are conspicuously more successful than others, while some meet with a partial or an almost complete failure of their assignment. It would, of course, be erroneous to ascribe the failure exclusively to the expert; the situation is never so simple. If nothing else, there are sometimes marked differences in the general physical and social conditions in which the expert has to live and work. On one assignment he may be welcome by a congenial atmosphere of friendliness and cooperation while on his next assignment he may be faced with such obstacles as a very oppressive climate, lack of interest and cooperation on the part of those who were locally chosen to be associated with his project, or he may even be thwarted in his efforts by a willful sabotage of an official who, for reasons known only to himself, is scheming to bring about the fiasco of "that foreigner's" mission. Even so, or rather because of these non-technical factors affecting the outcome of his assignment, it is essential to underline the importance of the human traits in the expert's personality.

A number of questions need to be answered: Is the expert (he is sometimes called adviser, specialist or consultant) able and willing to share his knowledge and experience with those who did not reach his professional level? Is he patient and modest enough to discuss, persuade — in a word: to teach, in the broadest meaning of that word — or is he rather prone to adopt in his interpersonal relations an arrogant attitude of looking down upon his local associates, thus hurting their pride and inviting their antagonism? Can he inspire enthusiasm, goodwill and cooperation? Will he be a respected leader, of the team instead of being a moody and domineering prima donna? Is he likely to win confidence of the government officials under whose jurisprudence his project falls? Is he willing to listen to others, to observe and study in order to understand better, and is he imaginative enough to make adjustments in his plan of action and its execution in accordance with the requirements of the local conditions? Is he the type of person who would anticipate problems and avoid them if possible, or solve them tactfully should they materialize — not necessarily the way he would do in his own country, but in consultation and with the help of local leaders who are in the position of advising him in the light of the prevalent socio-cultural situation in the host country? Also, is the expert in good health and does he have enough stamina and emotional stability to endure the hardships of a difficult climate, insufficient housing, often life for months on end without members of his own family, and in a society and culture which is alien to him?

These are some of the considerations — examples, not an exhaustive list — which are taken into account before an internationally recruited expert is requested to undertake an assignment in a developing country. Yet, even this incomplete listing conveys, so it seems to me, a sufficient idea of the nature of the sociological and social-psychological components which come into play

in determining the outcome of the expert's mission. Very appropriately, therefore, the secretariat of the United Nations — apart from a thorough briefing it gives them before the mission starts — prepared for its experts a simple but very useful pamphlet, *"Briefing of International Consultants"* (1967), to keep on hand as a reminder during their stay abroad. I take the liberty of quoting from it in the paragraphs that follow.

The basis for technical assistance extended to the developing countries and territories by the United Nations and its family of specialized agencies is that they are being helped so that they eventually could better help themselves. In order to be meaningful the assistance from outside has to be supported and multiplied by efforts of the government and people of the country or territory who requested it:

"The fundamental job of the technical assistance consultant is to share and spread the benefits of his specialized knowledge in such a way that, when he completes his assignment, he will leave behind him people who are better able than they had been to cope with their problems in ways that are suited to the local situation."

The words "... in ways that are suited to the local situation" imply, of course, that the expert is expected to familiarize himself with, and make appropriate adjustments to, the possibilities he finds on the local scene. It does not mean that he will accept and leave everything as is; for, as a matter of fact, he is there to initiate change. But it does mean that he will guard himself against the pitfalls of automatically "transplanting" into the country of his assignment the ways and means, methods and practices, etc. as they exist in his own country or, generally speaking, in countries which are technologically more advanced. Rather, he will cautiously proceed in identifying those local elements which might be helpful in the process of "grafting", as it were, the components of change, thus facilitating the initiation of a new development.

I am reminded of the illustration Dr. Chisholm, the first Director-General of WHO, gave us in the course of his address delivered many years ago at U. N. headquarters in New York. A team of WHO consultants on assignment in a Far-Eastern country discovered a serious protein deficiency in the food of the rural population. They tried to remedy this by calling village chiefs to a meeting at which the problem was explained and suggestions were made how to cope with it. The audience listened politely, returned to their villages — and nothing happened. Weeks passed by and the disheartened members of the team, admitting failure of their mission, were making preparations for their departure. Fortunately, there was among them a young anthropologist who, doing a bit of research of his own, found out just in time that practices used in local food habits, supposedly related to religious beliefs, actually were based on old pagan beliefs. He discussed the matter with the religious leader who, once convinced, took upon himself the task of winning the support of the previously reluctant village chiefs; the new eating habits were introduced and spread to the population at large.

This little story illustrates, at the same time, that there is much an expert may learn (indeed, has to learn) while teaching others. It has to be a two-way process, since adaptability is essential to technical assistance:

"Even the best technician in a developing country seldom achieves his aim unless he gains the confidence, esteem and friendship of the people with whom he lives and works. The difficulties that stand in the way of good relations may

be cultural, sociological or psychological, and may raise barriers to the change that the consultant is trying to promote.”

Also:

“The most difficult task that awaits a consultant is that of understanding the problems he is called upon to solve, not from his personal point of view, but from the point of view of the local environment. He has to become an expert on the subject of change, since this is involved in all technical assistance as it is in all teaching. He must also remember that there will be no change unless the local people understand and desire it.”

To facilitate his work and ensure its continuation after his departure, the expert is usually teamed up with at least one (preferably more) local person who is designated by the respective government authority to function as the expert’s national counterpart. This is a very sensible arrangement, since the expert is not expected to stay in the host country indefinitely; in fact, the sooner his counterpart is ready for the take-over, the more successful his mission is considered to be. And while training him, the expert is well-advised to listen to what his counterpart has to say, and to seek and heed his counsel about matters he, being a foreigner, does not know or understand. In doing so he may avoid the danger of advocating solutions that are not suited to the local possibilities, as exemplified by one counterpart’s terse comment:

“The wolf that ate the teacher on his way to school did one good thing: it put an end to the idea of having children from villages go to central schools. The idea was recommended so persuasively by a former consultant that everyone was convinced, in spite of the fact that the children had to walk because there were no buses.”

I wish to add to this tragic episode one that ended less seriously, about which I learned during my mission to an African territory. I visited a settlement in an isolated, hilly corner of that country. One primitive stone building stood out much larger than the surrounding dwelling places of these mountaineers. I was told it was the school. However, in reply to my question of how many pupils were attending I learned that the school was closed because an irritated father who preferred to have his children working in the terraced fields sent the teacher running, and for good, with his bow and arrows. The school teaching programme was not part of a U. N. project but it is obvious that the teacher, a European, did not take into account the local situation; instead of winning first the support of the natives for something that was new to them, he went about his job as if he were in a village school in his own country.

Once again, it all adds up to what was stated at the outset, namely: a basic knowledge of sociology, or at least a common-sense equivalent of such knowledge, is a prerequisite for the success of an expert’s assignment. It is particularly necessary for determining the scope of the project and for the timing of the successive stages in its implementation. It may be surprising, yet it is correct to say that sometimes it is preferable to accomplish less over a longer period of time than trying to do everything at once. An experienced expert evaluates the situation and the possibilities it offers in the light of hard facts, and not on the basis of a reflection he perceives through the coloured glasses of his well-meant good intentions. He has to keep constantly in mind the delicate balance given by the ability of the host country to absorb change, as well as the ever-present possibility that *secondary effects* might be set into motion.

upsetting the structure of the local society in sectors that are not the expert's speciality (e. g. technological innovations disrupting the existing web of economic, social and cultural institutions). It would seem that this and many other important things were left out of account in the technologically advanced countries of the Western World; ironically, the developing countries would be justified to ask, for instance: What did your industries do about water and air pollution?

For this reason, the internationally administered technical assistance often prefers the so-called "pilot projects" which offer a chance to see whether a proposed scheme works as expected, what difficulties it presents, what changes or adjustments are to be made. Then, in accordance with the experiences gained, it is decided whether the project is to be continued, amplified, and eventually "copied" by other countries with similar needs and problems. Under certain circumstances, a "feasibility study" is carried out to determine whether the proposed project should be approved or abandoned:

"Many have been the good technical solutions offered by foreign experts which were not accepted. Among them were designs for irrigation schemes not adapted to the system of land-ownership or local habits, methods of work which were not suited to the people, such as carrying burdens on the back or in wheelbarrows instead of on the head, working in a standing instead of a squatting position, and the like. Even more attention to the social and cultural environment is, perhaps, needed when advising on such problems as taxation, public finance, and social and health services."

The validity of the last sentence in the above quotation was demonstrated in the case of an expert specializing in the training of Social Welfare personnel, on assignment in an African country. Professionally, she was well qualified, with many years of experience in three European countries and a number of publications with sociological content. She was honest, hard-working, full of good-will and enthusiasm — but very impatient when dealing with people who were inclined to do things differently or less speedily from what was her idea of how it should be done. This proved to be a serious handicap. The day after her arrival I introduced her to the Minister of Labour and Social Welfare, himself a very competent man with a PhD degree from a French university. It took hardly two or three minutes before expert was launched on a long lecture, the theme of which was how she would reorganize this particular governmental Department. It was embarrassing and not at all diplomatic. I was not surprised to hear in future months the expert's complaints that the Minister seemed never to have time for her; he was not the only one who avoided her.

This case is noteworthy because it also shows that technical knowledge, in this instance also a good knowledge of sociology, may be insufficient if not accompanied by human qualities that help to translate theory into practice and facilitate the application of previously gained experience in a new social and cultural environment. The expert was for the first time on an assignment outside of Western Europe. She learned her lesson the hard way, recognized her initial mistakes and gradually found the right approach. The fault was not all hers, far from it; it may be difficult, perhaps impossible, to make headway with a project that becomes a bone of contention in local politics between two or more opponents, each of whom wishes the expert to follow a different path.

Even more difficult was the position of an economist in another African

country. His project was in a good shape and making progress. Then, as a result of the change in government, the new Minister decided to put a stop sign on practically everything that was originated by his predecessor and political opponent. Since it would have been difficult simply to cancel a U. N. project that was granted upon the special request of the government, the expert left the country on the understanding that this was a temporary interruption of his work, which would be resumed at a later date when the overall situation would be more auspicious for bringing the project to fruition; which never happened. Obviously, on occasions an expert might become a scapegoat in the internal political struggle of the country he only meant to serve to the best of his abilities. Fortunately, these are rare and exceptional cases.

I also recall the case of a young agricultural adviser on FAO assignment in the Middle East. From the beginning, and almost instinctively, he felt himself "at home" and *en rapport* with the local situation. He was congenial in his behaviour, learned some Arabic and had a sense of humour which probably was responsible for his being seen well by the peasants whom he instructed in the use of artificial fertilizers. Above all, he did not hesitate to use his hands in demonstrating how the task should be done; with good results. The farmers liked him so much that they even invited him to stay in their country for good and become a political leader — that they would vote for him. Being a good Dutchman, the expert politely declined.

Now, let us give more thought to the question of appropriate social behaviour in relation to "using one's hands" and "learning their language". The effectiveness of the first "... is borne out by the story of two technical assistance consultants who were assigned to demonstrate the sinking of tube wells in a large desert area, some hundreds of miles apart. When they came to their posts, they had some months to wait for their expensive gear to arrive. One sent back reports bemoaning his plight and frustration. His colleague, with wry pessimism, realized that he might not receive equipment before the end of his mission, and managed to obtain some lengths of steel tubing from a local army centre. He then hunted for scrap iron, including bits of bicycles, in the market of some neighbouring oasis town. Before long, he climbed onto what looked like a bicycle and pedalled steadily, boring through the desert crust. At times he lowered into the hole another length of the steel until he reached twenty-five meters below ground level. The local tribesmen, who came to watch, were astounded to see a jet of pure sweet water flow from the pipe, and looked on with amazement while the 'expert in overalls' prepared to take a well-merited bath."

As to the usefulness of the second (learning the local language), that seems to be a somewhat different proposition. It certainly may be helpful when done by someone who had already been accepted by the local population. They like to be greeted in their native tongue and appreciate the effort of the foreigner as a friendly gesture and expression of esteem. On a few occasions I have noticed, however, that they look with suspicion, even with animosity, on a newcomer when they discover that he knows their language more than it would normally be expected. He might then easily be taken for a "spy" or simply be considered to be an intruder who is eavesdropping. Obviously, an exaggerated or premature attempt to become part of the local community has its limits and could be misinterpreted. Instead of forcing friendly relations it is better to limit oneself at the beginning to a few words of greeting, and using for the rest a local

interpreter. In my experience such arrangement always worked satisfactorily. Of course, if the expert stays in the host country for a long time (sometimes for several years) and is "accepted", the greater his proficiency in the use of the local language, the better for him.

Tactful caution is equally advisable in respect of other attempts at becoming "assimilated". Once I witnessed the frustration of an author from Prague who took part in a sociological research of a rural village in south-eastern Moravia. He was gathering material on local folklore. Eager to be "accepted" and thus come closer to the source of information he was after, this man lost all sense of proportion. He started wearing locally produced peasant clothes (embroidered linen shirt and extremely broad trousers made of coarse linen cloth), completely unaware that this created an impossible combination with his city manners and literary polished speech, when contrasted with local forms of behaviour and dialect. He was indeed a bizarre figure that invited laughter behind his back among the young ones, while older villagers felt offended and avoided him:

"It is only natural that the consultant differs in many respects from the people of the country of his assignment. It is useless, therefore, and often harmful to conceal these differences. What really matters is his honest, sincere, yet unobtrusive willingness to be with, to understand and to help the people, while at the same time remaining true to himself. Thus, the consultant should earn the confidence and friendship of the people, not by artificial tricks, by particular efforts to be agreeable, or what is still worse, by over-kindly behaviour, but by his genuinely friendly attitude to the people and their problems."

The motives of human behaviour in inter-personal and inter-group relationships between people with different social and cultural backgrounds are often misunderstood. Even commonly used outward gestures might be misleading, as I can document by two examples from my own experience. As a young student I spent one of my summer vacations on the Black Sea coast in Bulgaria. One day a peasant was passing by the beach with his oxen-driven cart that was invitingly displaying a variety of fresh fruit. In reply to my question whether I could buy from him some pears he smiled at me but moved his head two or three times from left to right and back again, the way we do to say "no" without using our voice. I left him and realized only in the evening that he must have been puzzled by my behaviour as much as I was by his; a friend to whom I mentioned the incident over the evening meal explained that the peasant was actually saying "yes".

The other incident happened when I was on U. N. mission in a territory in Africa which was at that time administered by the United Kingdom. I was unhappy the first day when I was repeatedly "threatened" by people whom I was bypassing on the dirty road in an automobile. They raised their hand and clenched their fist. Thinking that it was because I left them in a cloud of dust, I asked the driver to slow down as much as possible when we were about to meet a group of girls. This time I noticed that their clenched fists were accompanied by a friendly smile. I asked the driver what was the meaning of this and learned that the "threatening hand" was a gesture of greeting commonly used by the native daughters and sons. They recognized the small U. N. flag attached to the right-hand front fender of the automobile and, therefore, knew that I was one of the observers who were visiting their country in connection with the U. N.-supervised plebiscite. From then on I kept replying equally

cordially — with the identical gesture of “threats” — as long as I stayed with these good people.

Other examples and illustrations could be added but I feel that enough has been said. The importance and usefulness of sociological knowledge in the service of internationally recruited experts could hardly be denied, irrespective of whether it is acquired formally in a university or as “common sense” wisdom gained in the school of life. I preferred dealing with the subject of the present article in this lighter but concrete vein instead of drowning it in the flood of high-sounding terminology of a purely theoretical discourse — the way my late Sociology teacher would have liked me to do.

SOCIOLOGIE VE SLUŽBÁCH ODBORNÍKŮ SPOJENÝCH NÁRODŮ

Autor tohoto článku jest jedním z bývalých žáků prof. In. Arn. Bláhy. S vděčností vzpomíná jeho přednášek v oboru sociologie, doplňovaných cyklem o “Praktické filosofii”, jenž byl podnětným a dorůstající mládeži — budoucím občanům — prospěšným návodem, jak aplikovat vědění na život individuálně šťastný a sociálně odpovědný. Zakladatel brněnské sociologické školy byl tak pokračovatelem tradice svého velkého učitele T. G. Masaryka.

Prof. Bláha zdůrazňoval nutnost nezaújatého, objektivního studia společenských jevů a procesů, jež jsou vždy podmíněny mnohými činiteli, a jsou proto charakterizovány odlišnostmi, mnohdy velmi podstatnými, v prostoru i v čase: Společenské skupiny, byť soudobé, existující v nestejných částech světa, jsou začasť velmi rozdílné, poněvadž jsou na různých stupních svého historického vývoje (hospodářsky, sociálně, kulturně); a táž společenská skupina, i když setrvává v témž geografickém prostoru, mění své instituce podle toho, jak se postupně vyvíjí. Profesor Bláha vysvětloval svým studentům tuto sociologickou relativitu, determinující rozlišnost a proměnnost společenských norem, včetně místních mravů, zvyklostí a předsudků.

U příležitosti šesti misí v Africe a na Blízkém východě, autor těchto řádků jako člen sekretariátu Spojených národů měl příležitost pozorovat řadu odborníků, pracujících na rozmanitých projektech technické pomoci SN územím technologicky méně vyspělým. Ověřoval si tak znovu, že sociologické vědění (ať už získané formálním studiem na universitě či nabyté — ve své předvědecké formě i ze zkušeností školy života) je nezbytné tam, kde jde o pokus navodit změny mezi lidmi “fungujícími pod jinými společenskými normami”, jak říkal prof. Bláha, než jaké jsou pravidlem v zemi toho či onoho technického odborníka. Konkrétními příklady je dokumentováno, že technické znalosti a zkušenosti samy o sobě nestačí; že novoty, i když mají uspět žádoucí pokrok, nelze prostě a automaticky “přesadit” z jednoho společenského prostředí do jiného, nýbrž že si to zpravidla vyžádá jistého uzpůsobení, adaptace; a že ke kompetenci odborného vědění a k sociologicky orientovanému chování se mezi lidmi odlišných mravů a kultury musí navíc přistoupit též některé čistě lidské vlastnosti, zejména úcta k druhému, trpělivost a skromnost. Ti z odborníků SN, kteří byli takto vyzbrojeni a kteří si tak na svých misích počínali, měli dobré výsledky: úsilí těch druhých vyznělo v částečný — výjimečně v téměř úplný — neúspěch.

