

The Politics of Pronouncement: Notes on Publishing in the Social Sciences

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Focussing on the estranged reaction of individuals to scholarly writings about their ethnic groups, Thomas Cottle explores a network of political implications surrounding publishing in the social sciences. This network extends from published content through the act of publishing itself. He describes the interactions of political motives, conceptions of the university, communication media, and the public to convey a sense of the political ramifications of publishing in the social sciences.

The journal closed on her lap. Erlene Menter lay back in her chair, her legs stretched out, her eyes wide open, looking high into the corner of the small room as if there might be something up there for her to read. "They sure do write hard English," she finally said. "By the time you get around to reading the thing, then understanding it, it sure seems as though you've been on a long, long, long trip. Now you tell me, do you really think any scientist or what you call doctor, is going to understand what my life is really like? Are you going to tell me that these fellows from Harvard with all their books and schooling are going to

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have the slightest eye full of this room, and the kids? Why, if they saw this mess they'd up and leave in a minute, and you know they would. The students, well, they're different. They come around here with their jabbering and all, all excited, ready to make trouble; they're gonna make war on the world if anybody'd give them half a chance. They're like you. They got these little pieces of paper for me to read about housing, and bussing and welfare laws. Some of it makes good sense, like they know those rules about welfare. Don't you kid yourself for a minute. They know those rules and most of them aren't even lawyers."

To read the essays, documented as they were with the figures of certainty and authenticity, was to be invaded, molested, as it were, swallowed up by the rough-grained pictures of professionals who, in a funny way, had no business being there at all. It was not the explicit political position of these articles that hurt as much as the sense that sacred proprieties had been ignored. It was as though curfew laws had been violated by the very men who had established them in the first place.

Evidently, Kathleen Cavanaugh had been waiting eagerly for my arrival. Though I was on time, she acted as if I'd kept her waiting three hours for our appointment. She was steaming mad, more upset than I'd ever seen her, even more so than the time we had spoken of Robert Kennedy's death. That had been several months after the assassination. Her self-proclaimed period of mourning concluded, a time of uncontrollable anger had overtaken her. She just didn't know what to do with all that anger, and my suggestion that we take a walk didn't seem to help.

But on this more recent occasion, the seventy-three-year-old widow was burning. She was all but ready to pounce on me when I knocked. Usually I would see her through the glass, descending the long staircase, straightening her skirt, just as she would reach the inside of the door. This day, however, she was peering out, surveying the street as if forewarned of an impending accident.

"I've read it. That pack of lies. Who in the name of You Know Who gave you something like that to give to me? Why the nerve of those people. Say, Thomas, they're not friends of yours, are they? That's good. Think of that. Here I am shooting my mouth off and maybe saying things about your friends. But they're not at Harvard? They couldn't be? That's good. A man's got to be real careful saying those things. Why there's not a morsel of truth in that. I've been alive on this good earth almost seventy-four years. Even a woman doesn't go to high school learns something in that time. You have to, raising your children and all. I

showed this to the boys upstairs. You know I told you I rent the upstairs to those Harvard boys. Well, they agreed with me. One said he's read something just the other day which says just the opposite. Now how's that possible? Either these are real facts or they're make believe, and scientists don't make things up, at least the ones on TV I see don't make things up." We laughed at that.

Two women, anyway, were unable to discover in these pages the truly valued aspects of their lives. Supposedly they were to see themselves on the neatly printed page, but all that emerged were tragic distortions of themselves and of their worlds. Somewhere the essence of their lives had been lost in the waves of categories, data analyses, and discussions of findings. Suddenly there had emerged on the clean, white paper mere content, samples, not of people whom they did not know nor barely recognized, but of themselves.

The trip to Hannah Brachman's was always interesting. Travelling down Blue Hill Avenue, the most direct route to her house, revealed a panorama of Boston's social history. How many students had come to this area to make their own studies, and then described their impressions of the soul food stores alongside the Kosher butcher shops or the Mogen Davids adorning the cement fronts of record and barber shops. Everyone knows the "story" of blacks moving in, Jews moving out, and the exodus of the young and the affluent to Brookline and Newton.

Mrs. Brachman was always waiting for me, some food prepared, a neighbor's child reading in the kitchen, eager to make friends with someone from a University. Our discussions usually centered on her feelings about her family, Jewish writers and scholars, events in New York, Jerusalem, and at Brandeis. Always she would have words of praise for the president of Brandeis and more harsh words for blacks occupying buildings and claiming that the University's name should be changed. Mrs. Brachman's loyalties were coming out more strongly. "Who helped us?" she would ask rhetorically. "Who marched down Fifth Avenue or sat in buildings or made revolution for us? They still don't do anything for us."

As a favor, Mrs. Brachman read a couple of articles written by social scientists on the activities of Jews in the New Left and the rather significant position of power they seemed to have attained. We both agreed that the pieces were written from sympathetic viewpoints, the authors presumably remaining as objective as possible. The data, I had thought, were well collected, thoughtfully analyzed, and presented without bias. "You can't argue with those numbers. It's hard to fight that. It seems pretty obvious." Soon her eyes moved away from the pages of the reprints, now wrinkled and torn. "You know, not a lot of people know it, but the

Jews have done a lot for this country. When you stop to think of all the doctors and lawyers, all the professors, it's really something. It's really some accomplishment. And look at Israel. Is that not something extraordinary? The fears, the wars. What these people have suffered. From one war right into that trouble. What's going to happen? What's going to happen?"

Where in this was the reality our students wish us to discover as they yank us into the world hoping that our observations might be more accurate, our recommendations for change more influential? How are we able to differentiate our research intentions from our policy-making intentions? And how can we separate our desire to make science from a publisher's or reader's desire to make politics?

"What about the article, Mrs. Menter?"

"Oh yes. Well, I don't care what he says here. I know about that Coleman report and this report and that report. You don't need to tell Negroes about that stuff. That's white man's words for white man's ears. When the Negro professors start writing things, you'll see a whole different picture. You go out and bring me some of their work and you'll get a different picture. You'll get a very different picture."

Erlene Menter knew full well the contents of the eight page article I had asked her to read. When all the grammar, paragraphs, and data had been pushed aside, she saw a terrifying message, naked and bleeding. She had read eight pages about black children growing up in ghettos, about absent males, the occurrence of incest and the impact of all this on children and on a race of really not so many people who were struggling to find a pattern that might simultaneously knit them together and then, bounce them all up, upward to where they wouldn't receive such devastating rebukes or, for that matter, such perplexing triumphs. The message she got, was that when this scientist ran his figures and numbers through a computing machine, it came out, as she said, "that the Negroes aren't getting anywhere in particular, too fast."

Debates on the possibility of "value-free" social science are becoming increasingly rare. Some social scientists believe that they can make so-called "value-free" contributions to fact and theory. Others are sure that this freedom from bias can never be achieved, if due only to the more subtle implications of the very act of publishing from a position within a university.

As effortful as each day had become in the eighteen years since Francis Cavanaugh died of a heart attack in the house where she still lives, Kathleen Cava-

naugh fulfilled her promise to me by reading twenty rather trying pages on the value and belief systems of working-class Catholic families. I picked the piece especially because we had spoken of such matters before, and because it seemed to me, anyway, that the authors had captured without obvious distortion the lives of people "sociologically similar" to Mrs. Cavanaugh. I had thought she would immediately read of a familiar world, accurately presented. Diligently and methodically she had read the assignment, even taking rather copious notes on the inside of the telephone book in that delicate thin-line handwriting of hers.

"Are they teaching this kind of stuff at your school, because if they are you could sure do a good thing for these students by telling each and every single one just what we do believe. And don't you let them get away with this. I'll bet you those professors never did speak with any of those people they write about. No one talks like that, unless he's composing something, like a story or poem."

Kathleen Cavanaugh was profoundly upset. The article had portrayed something insidious. Undeniably, she had felt betrayed. It was as though her pride had been extinguished, her very soul invaded and found dry and hollow. She had learned more, she would say later on, from television even though it too "favors what the rich people have to say and think. And buy." By what had seemed to me to be an insightful, penetrating glance at a community's social life, Mrs. Cavanaugh had been shot down, right in her steps.

The implications of disseminating the research findings she had read had not been lost on Mrs. Brachman, either.

"Do you know some of the things the students would like to see changed in society?"

"Everyone knows. Even in Washington they know. They don't like this war. Who can like that war? Can you imagine this business with the boat, this Pueblo business? The kids don't like that, do they? They think it's unfair? I can't blame them. Why are we fighting and spying and killing? Every night on the television that's all you see. Tell me, is it true what I read, Jews are really running these college things? Maybe someone should tell them it doesn't look so good. Do you think it's good for people to read such things, even though they say it's true, you know who I mean? A lot of people read articles like this, don't they?"

It seems almost impossible to publish a report that represents no political bias or implies no political action. Whatever our intention, whatever our assumptions of how "value-free" our research can be, the implications stay with us. Even

with our modest intentions to "advance science or knowledge," the popular media and its readers stand ready to greet the applications or the political implications. What, in short, they ask, are the products or profits and the statements of appropriate action to be found in these writings? What can I take and use of this? How can it be reduced to the solid, true laws of human nature that these scholars are, after all, supposed to be discovering?

To these questions, social scientists respond with troubled ambivalence. Pressures from many people have been put on academicians to derive with certainty the state of human nature and programs for the upgrading of everyone. Working against this, naturally, are the "limitations of the art" as well as, perhaps, a primordial reluctance to explain mankind, to explain so much variance that futures become predictable, presents explicable, pasts logical, and certainty guaranteed. There just may be a primitive sense in each of us that will forever prevent a total explanation or perfect experiment. Yet if such a sense exists, it may not be tolerated by audiences demanding exactitude in diagnosis and treatment.

Still, we do little to convey to these audiences the tentativeness and possible inaccuracy of our statements. There are those of us who qualify their televised pronouncements with "we know very little," or "our science is so young," only to proceed to deadly pontification. Others advance the most recently achieved knowledge while ignoring the attendant responsibility of their published words.

Recently, a young social psychologist bemoaned the overnight success of his first book. He had received letters from everywhere, even from soldiers in Viet Nam, asking him whether they could take his tests and undergo his experiments, which somehow were supposed to better their lives. What shocked the author, really, was the way people "could just take over my book and do with it whatever they wanted." No longer was he in control. From even a cursory reading they had come away with political and social strands he himself barely recognized. Where he had used data to reinforce hunches, they had clutched that data as proof of the book's "real" message. They had skipped over the pages where conceptualizations were embellished and had rushed instead to the meaty parts from which they might take something for themselves. Now they begged him to let them be a part of his grand scheme for change and success. There seemed to be nothing in their reactions suggesting an appreciation for any intellectual contribution. "They read that book as though it were a manual on how to ice skate."

His book was taken as a manual because in part the media of popular communication cannot always tolerate messages of what intellectuals think about, work with, or, indeed, play with. Popular media cannot always permit the luxury

of theoretical reasoning or development, nor can they spend time dealing with contributions to the history of theory when there are hard, cold facts to be gotten out and publicized. Moreover, there must be a splash, a glimmer, a scintillating explosion in each and every published pronouncement or it won't "catch on." There must be something that one can hold in his hand, a "fistful of reality," as Sartre said.

The conflicting needs of scientists as against those of their publishers, readers and, increasingly, the students, make it progressively more difficult to "get away with" pure and simple contributions to theory and methodology. Despite the many failures and the flood of contradictory books and reports, much of the public remains loyal to the belief that social scientists are experts, suppliers of the right kind of knowledge. In a word, their expertise renders them "solutionists." Their ideas cannot stay as ideas, but must be translated into facts and answers. As speedily as these ideas pass from the page to the eye, they lose their tentativeness and "hunchiness" and become certainty as well as plans for action.

Erlene Menter was laughing again, sitting up straight and pushing the journal back across the table. As it moved, she rotated it slightly, the letters now right side up for her. "Nice colors they use," she said, staring at the cover and fondling its smoothness as though the outline of each letter might stand up just high enough so that she could touch it, then read it with her eyes closed. She let the pages ruffle gently along the tips of her fingers, then a few times more. "The paper's nice too. Not like the newspaper."

The article had said as much through its authoritative, bookish appearance as it had through the statements on its pages.

Just as what we study represents a very real system of values, so too do the "products" of our studies perpetrate these values and hold them up as some ideal, however temporary. A popular conception holds that in science, publication implies certainty. Clearly, too much certainty is taken for granted. Among most readers, even editors, scientists simply cannot play with ideas. Tentativeness and unsureness cannot be accepted from them. Maybe that's why correlations too often emerge as causation and why summaries of findings get publicized as incontestible facts.

For Hannah Brachman, a mythic tradition of intellectualism and achievement, spirit and honor along with suffering, welled up within the soul she chooses to share with millions and millions of people. The two studies she had read were bad press; they could not be denied, shoved aside or forgotten. Scientists teach

facts, and the facts they had taught her were that Jewish boys and girls were being disruptive, causing problems, getting themselves into serious trouble and going to jail. For her, science is facts, undeniable, incontrovertible facts. "When a man with such education, such erudition speaks, he knows what he's talking about. Maybe I'd like to disagree. To tell you the truth I wish he hadn't written this. Or maybe I wish you hadn't brought it to me. But that's the world. That's the world. It seems a shame."

Some people, naturally, have "adopted" the findings of social sciences and found them valuable for their work and for their lives. But the day is not yet here when the "public" fully appreciates the playfulness of ideas or the fun and excitement of knowledge. Not enough people yet understand the little boy or girl, free from everything and everyone, alone in his room, deeply engrossed in a task only angels dare understand.

Surely there still exists the popular conception of the professor as the man who is "only" playing. This is the notion that speaks to his lack of any tangible product or of "an honest day's work" and concludes that the professor remains as childish occupied as the children he teaches.

This is hardly the same view as that held by academics about the playfulness of ideas inside the academy. The evolution of intellectualism, just as the development of cognitive abilities in the child, brings cultures to the point where ideas almost stand by themselves, unencumbered by political association with some greater shared reality. Indeed, the highest form of thought permits both the capacity to imagine the impossible or unreal and the capacity to play with ideas, to work with and sculpt them, even if the final product fails to yield anything but joy.

Now, as students argue louder than ever before, only the very elite can still afford the luxury of such playfulness and tentativeness. Only the elite can dare consider "intellectual contributions" sufficient. And yet they must be made. Many students have joined the public in crying for political products and not playfulness. And so, faculty members now fear the end of purely "academic days" as they struggle to defend themselves against what they feel to be an onslaught of anti-intellectualism, anti-rationalism, anti-objectivism and anti-science led by, of all people, their very disciples and apprentices.

"Think of the money spent trying to figure out what's happening in these neighborhoods. That other book you had JoAnne (her daughter) read was all about black folks in Baltimore and Washington. Think of that. They go all the

way to Baltimore just to look into their homes when they could come right here. They're all welcome right here. You tell them if they want to make some of their studies, they should come and see me. I'll tell them stories they can write ten books about, fifty books about if their hands don't get tired and those machines of theirs don't die."

"I think maybe those studies were done by people who lived in Baltimore and Washington."

"Maybe so. I thought JoAnne said something about going all the way down there to make their studies. You don't hear anything about this neighborhood, 'cepting that there's trouble with the welfare boards and those . . . Man, they've got a collection of people working for them, you wouldn't believe your eyes. Not too many of your Harvard folks, I'll bet."

Two sorts of familiar political spectrums, really, have emerged: the "horizontal" scale to the left and right of moderate and the "vertical" spectrum about which our students are teaching us. The "vertical" scale extends from elite privilege to disenfranchisement. Coming from a generation of objectivity, students have long advocated total awareness of this spectrum but now demand direct participation in the lives of disenfranchised and oppressed people.

The university model of detachment and non-involvement was seriously shaken by the Civil Rights movement of the 1950's. The initial student involvement in the lives of southern Negroes led to their emphasis on political intervention and on becoming implicated. Sit-ins quickly turned to voter registration and redistricting campaigns. But the intellectuals remained a step behind, some reporting on the events in the North and South, many banging out research documents investigating the parents, grandparents, school problems, and generalized psychopathologies of student workers. Nevertheless, the result for many scholars was a violent shift from playfulness and sovereign academic goals to a politicization of their research in a way that would, as they say, help mankind. At the very least, this new breed of social scientists was thinking about the concrete products of their enterprises and the implications these products might have in the political arena. For them, academia was a necessary home and tentativeness a necessary constraint, but not a way of distancing themselves from a population for whom they cared, and at times, for whom they grieved. They wanted and needed to be in touch.

JoAnne Menter sat cross-legged on the floor; two friends slouched on the sofa listening to her read sections from a book. As she recited certain passages care-

fully marked by her earlier, they all screamed with laughter, bouncing up and down from their scattered positions on the floor and furniture. JoAnne would start another passage, and they would cackle and jabber. "You better believe it, baby. This cat sets up right there on the corner . . ." And they would roar. I couldn't help laugh myself. Erlene, working about as though she weren't paying the four of us any attention, showed by an occasional glance that she would just as soon send all of us maniacs to some institution. But she too understood.

As Civil Rights movements and now Vietnam have exploded all students out of the narcissistic pleasantries of psychological reasoning into the more profane acreage of sociology and political or policy sciences, an implicit hope has developed that social science will not only be "relevant," but chock full of policy implications. Some scientists have responded directly by sitting on government commissions; others respond less directly by consulting, a tenuous process in which, almost rheostatically, they may control the amount of their commitment and involvement. Despite a prevalent anti-intellectualism, the contention persists, an almost spiritual contention, that knowledge is power and with it no limits need be set. Surely if we can get to the moon, we can get to inner cities, suburbs and Appalachia, southern Texas and Florida. Nonetheless, while some scientists dive headlong into the explicit politics of their research, others seek to wiggle out of the politics of certainty. Not wishing to participate in intellectualized politics of confrontation they strive to keep their distance, if not necessarily their "disinterestedness." They too, however, have become aware of the political implications of their work and are, perhaps, becoming aware of their place in that vertical spectrum.

Political self-consciousness now has grown to the point where we recognize and confess to the more obvious implications of our printed statements and of our acts of publishing. No one needs to be told, for example, that in such areas as "race relations" debates in the literature or disagreements over interpretations of data or over the assessment of methodological steps have more than a latent political impact. This we know. We have all shuddered a bit in the last weeks. But are we always able or willing to shudder at research pronouncements that do not seem to us to be so "touchy"—for example, studies of working-class Catholics or the activities of Jews in the New Left? Do we shudder, in fact, from the politics embedded in gigantic volumes of theoretical scripture? Are we not now reading theoretical expositions in part for the politics they might bequeath? Are we, because of the people who read us and publish us, becoming

aware of touchiness and relevance, discreteness and ethicality, against a backdrop which heretofore has been infrequently used? And, from all of these issues, may we ever again claim objectivity, or freedom from politics and from elitism?

"Did the articles remind you of anything, Mrs. Brachman?"

"The articles. The articles tell me two professors, two just like you, are telling me that this college business is being run by Jews. Jewish boys and Jewish girls. This part I can't figure out at all. What business is it of the girls? If they're going to get into trouble, at least it should be the boys. What do these girls know? They're so young. They're so small. Aren't they interested in . . . in . . . in growing up, with homes, with wives, with husbands, with children! What's it coming to with Negroes fighting with the police, with boys and girls in the schools fighting with their teachers? They should go without a little bit, they'd see how you fight with policemen!"

Some scholars now notice the more subtle political strains which silently contribute to the kinds of research topics chosen by scientists and the kinds of research "acceptable" to the publishing and reading public. While scientists need not think in these terms, no one can doubt the fads and ritualized sources of inquiry generated and perpetuated in the social sciences. In fact, they have been studied. But fads themselves are steeped in the juices of politics. Thus, journals and magazines propagate politics when they select topics or writers whose extravagant or subtle polemics go in the proper direction. One finds, for example, mountains of articles on inner city schools but nary a molehill on the problems in suburban high schools, apart from drugs, long hair, and dress codes. There is more than one can read on working-class patterns but surprisingly little on the upper middle class. As someone said, a bit severely, perhaps, to study the working class is sociology, to study the rich, exposé.

Kathleen Cavanaugh pounded her fist on the open pages: "They're just not going to pin me down that easily." JoAnne Menter, too, had rebuked the characterization of "her people." Her laughter hardly masked the poignancy of the book and her desperate attempts to climb out from under the shackles of categories, divisions of populations, and conceptualizations made by some "smart guy who thinks he knows us just 'cause he's been to school longer than us." As much as in their fight to stay abreast of groups, collectivities, cultures, and hordes of people they could hardly imagine—even after attending a giant rally for black people only—Erlene Menter and her daughter fought hardest of all to maintain a

single stretch of their own being and their own singular identities. "Before anything else," JoAnne would say, "I am always me. Somebody told me that God exists in each of us and that we should be proud just to be ourselves. So, I'm going to be me, and if people don't like it. . . ."

Politicized students have managed to convince many academics that even if they shy away from research that has explicit policy implications or from polemical pieces which unequivocally indicate their political persuasion, the very actions of research and writing can be deemed elitist. Our concern for the working class or the blacks is lovely to behold, they argue, but when we offer our ideas as weighted as they are by our proclaimed status they cannot help but be blistered by the dispositions of our enterprises and by the politics of our lives and life styles. Like air bubbles, politics has been pumped into the research of people who have worked diligently to make sure none would be found.

Indeed, the day may never come when students succeed in pushing all scholars into what they call reality. By reality they mean not only that intellectuals should become involved, engaged, politicized, but that they should be aware of the political electricity that illuminates their writing and acts to legitimate their cause and freedom. Students argue that universities cannot remain isolated unless people like Kathleen Cavanaugh or Erlene Menter have a place; and until that time they cannot condone the political elitism of studies and offerings which, in their very prose, protect and distance us from those we study. How often, they ask, would we admit to knowing our "subjects" and "respondents"? How often do we consider the pretense at objectivity which removes us from the world in which we observe and write and think? How often, they ask, do we take seriously the political positions from which our writings unwittingly take shape and from which policy statements ultimately are drawn? And always they throw that word, "elitism," at us, in an effort to extinguish our habits of playfulness and immodest indifference. They want us out of our offices and "into the world." Many of them want our voices to come together in what they call a "new politics."

One of many justifiable statements heard in rejection of assuming political stances or of doing explicitly policy-oriented research is that these actions too easily lead to governmental or societal restraints on research topics and operations. There is much to fear if research is taken over by the constraints imposed by any interest group.

A paradoxical result of current student focus on the politics of their professors is that one utterance can forever—publicly and inaccurately—nail a faculty mem-

ber to one political position just as he dares to step out of his office and into the realities of a stratified society or into what we call "the field." We have yet to realize fully that the profound political implications of our work do not lie on the left-right political spectrum in which our audience might stereotype us, but in our witting or unwitting participation in that other spectrum which contains poverty, racism, disenfranchisement, and oppression.

The most telling sign of this may be that Mrs. Cavanaugh and Mrs. Menter cannot find themselves in the articles they read. They cannot get the picture moved around so that it includes them. At least this is what they say. For it also may be true that the studies have found them too accurately, too penetratingly and, as sensitive human beings, they must recoil from the unintended stabs and stereotyping of these portraits.

Their reactions, therefore, might be what some call "denial." But if it is denial, it may have something to do with the fact that the studies' portraits bring them nothing more than reading materials from a teacher. Their reactions may well be natural protection against a hope that more might come, that something might happen. For while we in our debates over interpretations of data may take time out for reanalysis, reevaluation, or even for play, they dare not leave the apartments where their children will be raised, nor the houses where their husbands died, for even a moment of truly fresh air.

The self-insulated separation, the lack of sensitivity to the vast and subtle political implications of our publications in part come down to our not hearing the quiet phrases and the ritualized language forms which too often go unnoticed. *When I left Mrs. Brachman for the last time she walked me to the door of the apartment, always so neat and open to guests and family. She looked me squarely in the eyes without shame and without defiance: "When you're done with your work and you have a little time on your hands, you'll go with your wife and you'll get a haircut, and maybe you'll find some time to come back and we'll talk a little. The three of us. O.K.?"*

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