

Social Science and Human Nature

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BOOKS REVIEWED:

Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

Barrington Moore, Jr., *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt*
White Plains, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1978.

Has the time come to liberate ourselves from the social sciences? And, if it has, what will be involved in freedom from an intellectual persuasion that has held sway for nearly a century? More to the point of this review, what relevance do such insurrectionary questions have to Barrington Moore's *Injustice* and to *States and Social Revolutions* by his brilliant student Theda Skocpol? The temptation is great to unload twenty years of idiosyncratic stewing onto them, but this would be fair neither to the books nor to the issues they raise. The social scientific perspective, I believe, exercises an unexamined power over our collective intelligence, and these two works offer an excellent opportunity for exploring this proposition. The fact that they reflect a Marxist approach only improves the occasion, for I shall argue that the essence of the social scientific enterprise, Marxist and non-Marxist, is the conviction that human behavior is rational and consistent and hence susceptible to causal analysis.

On their own terms, *Injustice* and *States and Social Revolutions* are so dissimilar as to make risky their review in a single article. They are joined by the close intellectual association of their authors and by their common belief that the violent outbursts of social passion that we label revolutionary can be understood through an analysis of social structure. *Injustice*, however, is a rambling monologue, while *States and Social Revolutions* presents a tightly argued thesis about the structural constraints operating in revolutionary France, Russia, and China. In calling *Injustice* a monologue, I intend to conjure up not the megalomaniac frequently encountered at political fund raisers, but rather

the professional monologist who charms with his informality and commanding presence. This style invites tolerance for what is certainly a perplexing study of moral outrage. The problems involved have both theoretical and empirical roots. Using a Marxist approach, Moore assumes that the culture created by a dominant social class will distort the basic and universal nature of men and women. This concept of a second nature, or false consciousness, enabled Marx to reconcile a belief in a universal, human rationality with the historical record of lower-class submissiveness. Workers were prevented from acting on their own interests because their exploiters had laid on them their own perception of reality, and this perception, as worked out in laws, literature, science, and religion, justified the disproportionate share of power enjoyed by the culture-producing ruling class. More a *deus ex machina* than an analytical tool, the theory of false consciousness offered no hint of when or how the "true" human nature would manifest itself in concrete situations. It did, however, mock the pretensions of those nineteenth-century capitalists who viewed their own ethical preferences as a set of eternal verities. Now, a hundred years later, the cultural relativism of the original Marxist formulation has boomeranged, and the belief in socially determined values threatens to undermine the moral concern at the core of Marx's thought. With this in mind, *Injustice* can be seen as an effort to save Marxist humanism by proving the existence of a universal sense of justice, while marshaling social scientific evidence to explain why men and women have so frequently acquiesced in their own oppression. Moore draws from research on concentration camps, on the plight of India's untouchables, and on the way ordinary Americans have behaved in clinical experiments on authority to sketch a theory of obedience. These rather diverse explorations of oppression, persecution, and ritual humiliation are then brought to bear on three episodes in German labor history: the revolution of 1848, the period of industrialization prior to the First World War, and the reformist revolution of 1919-1920.

As a social scientific study, *Injustice* doesn't work, and Moore, with engaging candor, manages to convey that he shares this judgment. The argument sprawls outside the conceptual framework; the theoretical foundation is cracked with exceptions and contradictions, many of which are left to the reader to ponder unassisted. Rarely does the revolutionary consciousness that Moore expects to form appear. Dislocating social changes and economic exploitation fail to ignite the sparks of collective fire, and the moral outrage of workers more often becomes a piteous cry for help: "Once again we see that the workers' idea of a good society . . . is the present order with its most disagreeable features softened or eliminated" (p. 370). Although one is told at the outset that the book will take a series of soundings into "exotic societies, both literate and nonliterate" in order to build up a picture of uniformities, none in fact turns up. The gap between generalization and exemplary detail remains wide. Comment-

ing on a Chinese rebellion under the Sung, Moore confidently says that "the ring of universality comes from the likelihood that any set of subjects will have certain ideas about the proper tasks and obligations of the rulers . . . whose flagrant violation will produce a sense of moral outrage and injustice" (p. 27). But the history of the iron- and steelworkers in the Ruhr suggests to him instead that human beings may have to be taught what their rights are. Moore's comparison between Germany's failed revolution and the successful establishment of the USSR points to the even more imponderable role of a single individual. Of course, all of these variations in human behavior can be understood, but not in the same terms. In fact, the more attuned one is to the specific context of events, the less puzzling become deviations from some norm. Yet these unanticipated outcomes do not build confidence in theories that treat human beings as the agents of social class or as the bearers of universal traits.

The unresolved tension between the humanist's temperament and the social scientist's assumptions mars the logic of this book. The political sociologist in Moore deftly summarizes the literature on behavior modification, or on cross-cultural Piagetian research, while the sympathetic observer of the human scene studies the ambivalent signals coming from actual protest. Aside from some chatty remarks, no serious attempt is made to reconcile these two perspectives. What comes through instead is Moore's readiness to follow his insights wherever they lead, and sometimes they lead him to kick some very sacred cows. Unwilling to idealize the social solidarity of premodern villages, Moore reaches the startling conclusion that "by and large the destruction of community may be the most valuable achievement of modern civilization" (p. 420). Such a tough-minded observation reflects the importance he attaches to individual autonomy, and it is exactly this commitment that silently saps the vitality from the analytical framework of his thesis. Assumptions about a universal human nature undergird all structural arguments—indeed all notions of an objective reality—yet it is the subjectivity of the human being as a moral agent that moves Moore. The lack of coherence between evidence and theory is but the most apparent flaw in an approach riven by this inner contradiction.

Skocpol's goal, on the other hand, is not to take the measure of a social passion, but rather to reveal the inadequacies of several prominent theories about revolution. Because of this goal, *States and Social Revolutions* is a good deal more like Moore's earlier *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* than it is like *Injustice*. She has fashioned an excellent comparison of revolutionary France, Russia, and China into a brief for the structural approach to the study of social upheavals. Two examples will illustrate what she means by structural. The late eighteenth-century economy of France provided no commanding

heights for the state to occupy. Hence the Jacobins' piecemeal efforts to set prices and wages offended as many *sans-culottes* and peasants as they satisfied. Without support from below the Montagnards could not retain their power when the exigencies of governing conflicted with the demands of their revolutionary constituents. In an analogous situation, the Bolsheviks made major policy changes and remained in power because the more industrialized structure of the Russian economy gave them factories to control. Similarly, the revolutionary zeal of the French peasantry abated after the destruction of feudal obligations in 1789. Peasant property rights then became obstacles to further social reform, whereas, in Russia, a more egalitarian village structure prevented this stabilization of the old rural order around what Moore criticized as the status quo with its abuses removed.

Skocpol consistently criticizes the reductionism in most theories about revolution. Whereas other models collapse society into the economy, or the state into the ruling class, hers draws out the diverse components of the social structure to permit an inspection of the relevant distinctions. She examines the conflicts among the groups in a particular national elite, as well as the more fundamental struggles between the exploiters and the exploited in the old regime societies. Equally important to her ultimate finding is the fact that governing a country involves imperatives that divide those who actually wield power from the putative ruling class. These emphases upon the complicated interplay of groups in a revolutionary situation make for a textured account of the events. Her syntheses of recent scholarship on revolutionary France, Russia, and China are masterful. Indeed she is at her best when she writes as an historian, first examining concrete details and then turning them into a form appropriate for comparative analysis. The conclusion she presents is that these classic social revolutions were essentially political. Despite their origins in economic grievances, and their fulfillments in new class alignments, they were made possible by governmental crises, shaped by the struggles inherent in ruling a country in turmoil, and secured only when the coercive power of the state had passed into the right hands. The social transformations that turned these rebellions into revolutions occurred when new leaders—not necessarily the initiators of the upheavals—began state-building anew. Napoleon, not Robespierre, prefigured Lenin. Differences in revolutionary ideology and timing pale a bit, Skocpol implies, beside the uniform consequence that all the revolutions left the government more powerful at home, more menacing abroad.

Since Skocpol attends to the neat rows plowed by fellow social scientists, and not to the untidy terrain of human experience, she is able to contain her argument and concentrate her efforts. Her strictures are principally aimed at erring structuralists: modernization theorists who trace all social change to commercial development; structural-functionalists who exaggerate the importance

of the cohesion supplied by social values; and Marxists who have strayed from the objective pastures of class conflicts into the quagmires of hegemony and ideology. What is particularly culpable with all of them is their flagging faith in the determining power of structures. Her critique entails a direct attack on the purposive conception of social action. This conception fails at two levels, she says. First, there is the assumption that political power rests upon the consensus of the ruled, a proposition she dismisses with an unconvincing reference to South Africa. More telling as an argument against the purposive image is the contention that neither the beginning nor the end of civil struggles can be traced to programs or propaganda: "The cognitive content of the ideologies in [no] sense provides a predictive key to either the outcomes of the Revolutions or the activities of the revolutionaries . . ." (p. 170). Having toppled these two straw men, she raises a counterthesis that assumes human passivity. Revolutionary situations emerge; existing institutions define situations; diverse groups are objectively conditioned; and the intermeshing of these social agencies shapes the revolutionary process. What is at stake here is more than the analysis of social revolutions; it is a basic view of human existence. Are men and women moved by their intentions? Do they act, or do socioeconomic forces act through them?

The validity of the structural perspective in *States and Social Revolutions* depends upon vanquishing the subjectivity implicit in the realm of belief, feeling, and choice. Skocpol sidesteps this problem. Although she criticizes the voluntarist view of how revolutions take place, what she is really talking about is how political rhetoric affects decisions. Finding no successful social revolutions planned and executed by radical vanguards, Skocpol dismisses ideas themselves without examining the responses and decisions of the groups whose interactions she says determine revolutionary outcomes. The fact that Chinese peasants worked for concrete goals and not for socialist aims does not impugn the purposive image. Nor is it a disproof of the centrality of intentions that men and women make unforeseen decisions, or that groups act at cross-purposes and produce results no one wished for. Skocpol has confounded the control of events with the issue of human choice. Having laid to rest the ghost of all-powerful ideologies, she has raised instead the phantom of passive men and women reacting to life situations predetermined by previously passive men and women, in an endless retreat of structural causality.

Much of what Skocpol describes as a structural constraint turns out to be the influence in the present of decisions made in the past. This power is a many-faceted force. It works through memory, preemptive social arrangements, child-rearing practices, and inherited institutions. The agricultural productivity of one generation, for instance, will set limits to the range of economic choices open to the next, but so too will the aversion of rural families to buying clothes from townsmen rather than making their own. A certain level of technology ob-

viously constrains, as do cultural norms, but there is no place in Skocpol's model to weigh these differences, for her structures have become reified into something called *objective conditions*. These conditions are presented as more fixed and rigid, less open to rupture and rejection, than the amalgam of human decisions that create the only structures we encounter in society. People, moreover, have multiple identities, which confuses the structural picture. Within the French peasantry, women, as Olwen Hufton has shown, turned against the civil religion with a sudden fury that helps account for the conservative reaction after 1795. A structuralist might reply that French peasant women form a separate group; but, carried far enough, the logic of distinctions leads back to the particular and the personal, which have been banished from the analytical framework. Nor can ideologies—those socially organized purposes—be dismissed as forces because they tend to break and change in revolutionary situations. What is thinkable is affected by the influences of time and place, but what is actually thought is nonetheless a powerful determinant upon what is actually done.

States and Social Revolutions is not about revolutions, but rather about theories of revolution. At the end of her book, Skocpol assesses the long-range applicability of her model derived from the French, Russian, and Chinese examples. Its limits arise from the historical epoch, she says, but this in no way invalidates the structural approach. Indeed she confidently goes on to discuss the structural obstacles to social revolutions in the Third World today. There are two new ones. Now even the frailest states benefit from the high level of military technology available to them. In addition, the personnel for these repressive military establishments are drawn from social groups connected only tenuously to their societies. Both structural factors will work to inhibit social revolutions in the future, Skocpol concludes. Read with the megawatt illumination of hindsight, one thinks of Iran and the events there that have thrown such judicious generalizations into a cocked hat. Skocpol can, of course, take comfort from the company of equally baffled pundits, State Department experts, native observers, and academics of every stripe. But the fact remains that all social predictions—as distinguished from predictions about particular societies—are premised upon untested, and possibly untestable, assumptions about human nature. Clearly one of the best of its genre, *States and Social Revolutions* succeeds, by its clarity, in focusing attention on the flaws in the entire social science enterprise.

There are two dubious propositions that undergird the social scientific search for truth: the idea that human behavior is sufficiently uniform to understand through abstract generalizations, and the assumption that the number of influences playing upon society is small enough to be comprehended

within a single analytical framework. If these assumptions are not true, then their acceptance in our society (for these convictions are limited to the modern West) becomes a question of culture. We know that the idea of a single, unvarying human nature was on its way to becoming an article of modern faith when Edmund Burke predicted to Adam Smith that his theories would last because they were "founded on the nature of man which is always the same." By the time an awareness of humanity's similarities had hardened into an axiom about human uniformity, the study of man was ready for science. A consensus soon formed on the definition of people as economic rationalists, utility maximizers, and individual competitors in the great game of life. A once rich literature on the subject of men and women—their passions, humors, and essences—then drained funnellike into a unitary theory of behavior. If the timing for these intellectual changes is clear, their source is more elusive. They certainly did not come from the stage or pulpit where men and women continued to appear as the problematic custodians of their own best interests. My own research points to the dramatic transformation of the Western European economy as the principal stimulus to reworking thoughts about human nature.¹

In the economic writings of seventeenth-century England, an instrumental conception of human motivation begins to appear. The expansion of trade, the elaboration of a domestic market, bigger harvests, and sustained investments in farming and manufacturing brought more and more people into new patterns of work and exchange. Many quite ordinary men and women—cheesemongers, cattle drovers, teamsters—initiated new trades. These small fry of an expanding commercial economy carried the productive ideal down the social ladder and out into the countryside. The relative abundance of food relieved the magistracy from the age-old concern about food shortages, while the protracted political upheavals weakened the authority of both statute and custom, those venerable restraints upon economic innovation. As men and women guided themselves toward new patterns of work and wealth-getting, they brought into being a social system that appeared to be uncoerced and undirected. At least this was how contemporaries construed it. When they began to look for the silent regulator of this orderly system of exchanges they thought they found it inside the human being—in an unvarying human drive to seek self-interest. Not only did the pursuit of profit not produce that "desolation of the whole" the Puritans talked about, it channeled constructive energies into the market, where more and more could be bought for less. The voluntary and seemingly uniform economic responses of men and women suggested a natural tendency toward economic growth. Of course, the poor, the timid, the tradition-bound—the vulnerable in general—found no place in this fluid economy, where everything

¹ Joyce Oldham Appleby, *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

moved according to its price. But it was easy to ignore these nonconforming examples when contemplating a system of "natural social laws" at last coming to light. This apparent regularity of human responses had been observed only in the economic sphere, but from the eighteenth century on, economic concerns encroached insistently upon other domains of social life in the West. The enthusiasm with which a later century greeted Thomas Malthus's equations linking procreation to food supplies reveals just how easily the sweet mysteries of life could yield to the scientific impulse.

There is a certain irony in the fact that this belief in a single principle of explanation of human motivation emerged from observations of a novelty: the way some English men and women acted in a freer economy. The irony, however, is an illusion, for the idea of natural social laws exerted extraordinary ideological power. Like a magnet it attracted the loose particles of scientific and moral thought set adrift in a changing society. And while there were certainly many ways that the new capitalistic economy could have been interpreted, the dramatic shift of economic initiative and control from the public to the private sector encouraged the belief that this new system of free enterprise sprang from natural drives in the individual human being and not from the state. The seemingly inexorable spread of commerce, pulling with it new techniques and tastes, only fortified the impression that here was a force as irrepressible as nature itself. Specialization, standardization, and the commercial penetration of political boundaries all worked on the imagination of contemporaries, many of whom had reason to promote the idea of a natural system of social laws. At the most obvious level of interest, liberal reformers could use the vision of an automatically functional society to mount an attack on economic regulation. Critics found the fusion of science and innovation an explosive weapon against traditional society. The new model man, *homo faber*, launched a thousand bourgeois hopes. Even John Locke, no romanticizer of the poor, once calculated how the elimination of a leisure class could cut everyone's workday in half. God's curse on Adam had been turned into an engine for change. The capitalistic economy had arrived to save mankind from the terrors of theodicy.

In the older view of humanity, the one of essences and capacities rather than persistent pursuits, what men and women actually did was considered indeterminant. Even the proneness to sin ascribed to the fallen sons and daughters offered no basis for predictions. When, however, there developed a belief in the ineluctable drive of self-interest, a science of man was made possible. Effects could be inferred from this cause and causes for effects attributed. From this headwater came the nineteenth-century disciplines of sociology, economics, psychology, and political science. Passing around the towering figure of Marx,

the ideas flowed into left and right streams, but the basic premise remained. Individuals are naturally self-interested and rational. From the Marxist perspective, exploitative economic systems made the identity of interests of classes more salient than the human potential for individual autonomy, while liberal thinkers continued to build their models on Adam Smith's economic man. So confident did social scientists become after World War II that they developed the theory of modernization that explained the process through which the rest of the world was going to become like us. Only recently has it become clear that not all people carry the acorn of the great Western oak within them. And now the French anthropologist, Louis Dumont, has turned the tables and claimed that belief in a uniform human nature represents "a radically aberrant world view shared by no other culture."²

It is not that structured relations and patterned behavior—what Emile Durkheim called "social facts"—do not exist. They do, but because society's impress must compete with other, more personal pressures, generalizations about external qualities are necessarily partial truths. There are no laws of human nature like the laws of aerodynamics that inhere in the nature of things, because all human events are shaped by unpredictable purposes and unanticipated reactions. The equilibrium of *ceteris paribus* does not exist in society, and the disruptions are the very things that elude the social scientists' nets: the norm that fails, the unexpected decision, the innovation-provoking circumstance. The single human person that is the basic unit of analysis is the carrier of innate tendencies given specific direction in particular social settings by means we ill understand. The fact that we split the myriad of factors playing upon personality into dichotomies of nurture and nature, biology and society, environment and heredity only reveals the tyranny of the scientific ideal of simplicity. The unwarranted assumption that human experience is divisible, moreover, has encouraged scholars to abstract from the real person an aspect—sexual identity, ethnic background, political loyalty—and to compare it with similar aspects from other persons. Dependent parts are given independent existence. They are said to constitute objective reality when in fact these generalizations merely reflect the positivist tendency to take the measure and run. Of course, we need to study the continuous and repetitious along with the unique and exceptional. Indeed we need to learn as much as possible about lives already lived, but our observations will be retrospective, not predictive, unless we gain access to the realm of human choice where all of these factors exercise their influence.

The dangerous illusion that there exist objective conditions exercising independent sway in society is strengthened by the rhetoric of the social sciences. The medium here is indeed the message. In literature, words are selected to

² Louis Dumont, *From Mandeville to Marx* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

evoke concrete images, to resonate in the reader's mind by unloosing vibrations of meaning. In science, quite the opposite is the case. Words are chosen to convey a single thing: one sign, one referent, one meaning. In the social sciences, neither the poetic nor the scientific aim prevails. Resonance is avoided by the constant replacement of familiar terms with unfamiliar ones. Words are coined, but rarely for exactitude. The phrase "structural/conjunctural causes" currently expresses the idea of a coming together at one time of many systematic influences. "Macrophenomena" refers to the elements in a social situation treated as a whole. "Stadial" has now taken the place of stages in a process, just as "modernization" means progressive development in the modern age. These terms are not like pristine slates upon which new meanings are written for greater analytical rigor. They are less intelligible than ordinary language, their referents are less certain. Such language does more than obfuscate; it contributes to the mystification of our social arrangements. As Marx so astutely observed, mystification alienates us from the very things we have created. A nonconforming example is illustrative of the impact of diction. John Dunn once described revolutions as performances of great complexity. The signal of multiple meanings is immediate. Performance calls to mind the theater of public meetings and crowd rituals. It evokes the size and variety of the cast in political upheavals, as well as the centrality of the sentient beings who are the actors. Thus words not only convey sense; they also form sensibilities. A generation that has grown up under the intellectual aegis of the social sciences comes dangerously close to admiring the style of the neologist. And since social scientese is also the tongue in which we often discuss national issues, our public discourse has lost its curative power, promoting instead that estrangement of language from experience that is the bane of contemporary thinking.

Would the liberation from the social sciences that tantalizes men mean the elimination of sustained, systematic investigations of society? Certainly not. Such inquiries go back a very long way in our history and are responsible for a tradition that has nurtured a distinguished group of eccentric scholars in recent time. The liberation I have in mind is akin to the nonseparating Puritans who dissociated themselves only from the evils of the Church of England. I propose freedom from the egregious errors that mainstream social sciences foster: assuming uniformities, reducing real complexity to artificial simplicity, treating fragments as independent parts of an indivisible whole, counting incommensurable things, and reifying obfuscating abstractions in words that torture the English language.

The great achievement of the social sciences has been moral. Without the positivist thrust toward certain knowledge, few would have had the courage to tackle such unwieldy subjects as class formation or political mobilization. Assumptions about the overriding importance of the systematic have embold-

ened thousands of scholars to track down the variables of social life that lie hidden in the archives. Our knowledge has been immeasurably refined and expanded by these studies. In the past twenty years, there has been a particularly extensive testing of major hypotheses, and because of this we have a bumper crop of disconfirming cases. The more we learn about specific instances, the more rapidly come unraveled the broad categories of structure and function that support our grand theories. Here is foundation for hope. It may become clear that the social sciences are actually exemplifying what they should be studying: the modern tendency toward mindless system-building. Liberation from this intellectual inheritance would then be at hand, and our imagination freed to think anew about the human enterprise.