

Editor's Message: Our Areopagus

These are propitious times for beginning the main work of *The Catholic Social Science Review*: the study and development of the social sciences within the context of Catholic social principles.¹ For Marxism and positivism, the two theoretical syntheses that have dominated and shaped much of our social science knowledge, have been severely undermined, leaving the social sciences dismembered. The absence of a hegemonic theoretical system in the field thus provides an unexampled opportunity in the history of the social sciences for an authentically Catholic social science to get a wider hearing.

The death of Marxism as a serious political force in the world has sullied Marxian social theory, which entranced Western intellectuals for the past century and a half, and provided a certain coherence, albeit a misdirected one, for the work of many social scientists, especially those working in Europe. Pope John Paul II wasted no time in connecting the political failure of Marxism with its inherent theoretical flaws, thus preventing the attempt of Marxian purists to salvage Marxist social theory from the crackup of the Soviet empire. Inasmuch as Marxism deprives persons of their “transcendent reference,” John Paul II told a gathering of Latvian intellectuals in 1993, its failure was assured. The pope immediately went on to advance Catholic social principles into the new post-Marxian intellectual milieu, by inviting Latvians, now no longer limited to only state-approved fields of inquiry, to study the tradition of Catholic social thought as an area of common intellectual interest. “I dare to presume,” the Pope told them, “that this [Catholic social doctrine] evokes your legitimate scholarly curiosity now that, in the new Latvia, it can be freely treated.”²

Another example of the Pope's quick efforts to take the high ground in the realm of the social sciences is his establishment in 1994 of the Pontifical Academy of the Social Sciences. In the *Motu Proprio* establishing this new Academy, John Paul described it as a “new expression” of the Church's historical interest in the ordering of human society, which over the past century had been expressed primarily and eloquently in numerous social encyclicals, beginning with Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum* and culminating in Pope John Paul II's *Centesimus annus*. Framing the historical context for the founding of the Academy, the Pope said, “After the collapse of the system of real socialism, the church and humanity find themselves faced with colossal challenges. The world is no longer split into hostile blocs and yet it is facing new economic, social, and political crises on a global scale.”³

Such crises are, of course, the *raison d'être* of the social sciences, yet social scientists today, ideologically fractured and aimless as they are, seem less capable than ever to meet them effectively. Indeed, the failure of political scientists and Sovietologists to foresee the collapse of the Soviet empire, which has unleashed social problems of a new order—the genocidal campaigns in the Balkans, and the

upsurge of chauvinistic nationalisms, for example, has led some scholars to doubt the efficacy and the validity of these disciplines, especially as they inform public policy. As Richard Pipes has written in a recent issue of *Foreign Affairs*:

Never has so much money been allocated to study one country [the Soviet Union]; never have so many academic and government specialists scrutinized every aspect of a country's life from evidence provided by published and unpublished sources as well as eavesdropping devices and satellites. Yet when the end came, the experts found themselves utterly unprepared. To the extent that political science wishes to be treated as scholarship, it clearly behooves its practitioners to confront this failure.⁴

Pipes's upbraiding of political scientists brings to a head thirty years of frustration over the general failure of social scientists to deliver the benefits they promised for their various social engineering projects. During the two decades following the Second World War, governments, businesses, and foundations invested millions of dollars in basic and applied social science research projects. To be sure some of these efforts bore fruit, but failures were more common—the disastrous Great Society programs, the unreliability of economic forecasting, the resurgence (not the end) of ideology, the failure of theories of modernization, revolution, and secularization to predict and adequately explain events in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere.⁵

This mounting dissatisfaction with the disappointing results of the mainstream social sciences has been accompanied by a sustained attack on their positivistic principles and methods. Positivism sired sociology, and, it has implicitly and explicitly informed the work of all mainstream social scientists. Positivism, like Marxism, requires its adherents to reject all explanations and interpretations that presuppose some ultimate, transcendent reality beyond what's immediately observable. It appealed to early twentieth-century American social scientists like Lester Frank Ward precisely because it enabled them to make generalizations about society without having to fall back on religious and metaphysical beliefs.

Positivism always had its critics, especially among Catholic scholars, but it weathered them all until the 1960s when secular philosophers, historians, and critical social scientists shredded the first principles of positivism, so much so that it lost its appeal among many mainstream social scientists, and consequently its position as a unifying force for their research.⁶ Over the past two decades the social sciences have fragmented into combative factions: poststructuralist, feminist, neo-pragmatist, historicist, to name a few. Meanwhile some social scientists, paid no mind to the mounting body of criticism of their first principles, and developed new, highly mathematized subfields of the traditional social sciences—econometrics, cognitive psychology, evolutionary biology.

These developments over the past three decades have shattered the theoretical unity the social sciences enjoyed for most of their comparatively short history, and left the prospects doubtful for the coalescence of a new theoretical synthesis. Whether or not the social sciences in their new desultory condition will be any more or less effective in their treatment of our present social disorders is also uncertain. But the discrediting of Marxism and positivism, with their stubborn refusal to acknowledge the reality of the transcendent, leaves the field more open than it has ever been to Pope Pius XI's idea of "a genuine Catholic social science." The present pope repeatedly exhorts us to seize this new opening. For the realm of the social sciences is one of our age's numerous and varied "areopagi," that John Paul II has referred to in his first encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*, and then again in his recent Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*. "The modern world," he wrote, "reflects the situation of the *Areopagus of Athens*, where St. Paul spoke."

Today there are many "aeropagi," and very different ones: these are the vast sectors of contemporary civilization and culture, of politics and economics. The more the West is becoming estranged from its Christian roots, the more it is becoming missionary territory, taking the form of many different "areopagi."

Inspired by the teaching and example of this great pope, *The Catholic Social Science Review* enters the areopagus of the social sciences bearing the highest standards of scholarship, intellectual honesty, and unflinching loyalty to the Magisterium of the Church.

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Notes

1. Taking an expansive view of the social sciences, the *Catholic Social Science Review (CSSR)* includes articles in anthropology, communications, cultural and social criticism, economics, education, geography, history, law, linguistics, psychology, political science, and sociology.
2. John Paul II, "What Church Social Teaching Is and Is Not," *Origins* 23 (September 1993): 256-58.
3. John Paul II, "Apostolic Letter Given *Motu Proprio*, Establishing the Pontifical Academy of The Social Sciences," *L'Osservatore Romano* 26 January 1994, 3.

4. Richard Pipes quoted in Irving Horowitz, "Are the Social Sciences Scientific"? *Academic Questions* 9 (Winter 1995-96): 55.

5. Terrence Ball, "The Politics of Social Science in Postwar America," in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, ed. Lary May (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 76-92. For the successes of the social sciences, see Karl Deutsch, John Platt, and Dieter Senghors in *Science* (March 1971), and then Alastair MacIntyre's critique in *After Virtue*, chap. 8.

6. For the Catholic critique of positivism, see: Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Scribner's, 1937; New York: Sheed & Ward, 1955); Henri de Lubac, S.J., *The Drama of Atheistic Humanism*, trans. E. M. Riley (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1950); Frederick Copleston, S.J., *Contemporary Philosophy* (Westminster: Newman, 1956); Denis John B. Hawkins, *Crucial Problems of Modern Philosophy* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958); Heinrich A. Rommen, *The Natural Law: A Study in Legal and Social History and Philosophy*, trans. Thomas R. Hanley, O.S.B. (St. Louis: Herder, 1947); Paul Hanley Furfey, *Three Theories of Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1937); and Stephen M. Krason, "What the Catholic Finds Wrong with Secular Social Science," *Social Justice Review* (January/February 1993): 5-11.

Among the more influential secular critiques of positivism are Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed., enlarged (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Garrett Barden and Robert Cumming (New York: Seabury, 1975); Richard J. Bernstein, *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976), and *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), and *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretative Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); Alastair MacIntyre, "Ideology, Social Science, and Revolution," *Comparative Politics* 5 (April 1973): 312-42, and "The Character of Generalizations in Social Science and Their Lack of Predictive Power," in *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

7. John Paul II, *Tertio Millenio Adveniente* (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1994), 60. The emphasis is John Paul's.