

**KNOWLEDGE FOR WHAT?**

*The Place of Social Science in American Culture*

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# KNOWLEDGE FOR WHAT?

THE PLACE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE  
IN AMERICAN CULTURE

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“And in this staggering disproportion between man and no-man, there is no place for purely human boasts of grandeur, or for forgetting that men build their cultures by huddling together, nervously loquacious, at the edge of an abyss.”

—*Kenneth Burke, in  
Permanence and Change*

## FOREWORD

**N**O one is wise enough or informed enough to venture with assurance upon the large task here undertaken. The only reason for attempting it is that such efforts at appraisal of the present work and potentialities of the social sciences, however faulty in detail, seem clearly to be needed at the present stage in the development of social science and of American culture. And if it was to be undertaken at all, it seemed desirable to push the analysis straight through the network of diffidence and respect for one's colleagues that tends to shackle frankness within an academic fraternity. For, as the reader will see, in the judgment of the writer this is not a time in which urbanity, trial and error, and the unseen hand of progress can be relied upon to make all things work together for good.

The reader may be puzzled at first glance by the fact that two seemingly independent lines of thought are developed in this book: the one an appraisal of the present characteristics of American culture, with particular attention to elements of strain and disjunction; and the other a critique of current focus and methods in social science research. They are here included together because they so inescapably do belong together. Social science is not a scholarly arcanum, but an organized part of the culture which exists to help man in continually understanding and rebuilding his culture. And it is the precise character of a culture and the problems it presents as an instrument for furthering men's purposes that should determine the problems and, to some extent, the balance of methods of social science research. It is because the writer feels that our American culture presents acute problems demanding

all the intelligence science can muster, and because social research appears to him to be falling short of meeting this need, that it has seemed essential to include here related analyses both of the culture and of the present state of our research.

Some of the single judgments made in these pages will almost certainly be proved invalid or subject to correction. But it is the hope of the writer that the central points at which the book drives will not be lost in the dust of umbrageous counter-charges. If the points appeal to the reader as in any respect well taken, it is hoped that he will correct them in detail and soften and modify the form of statement in whatever way will enable him to make constructive use of them. If this inadequate formulation succeeds in directing attention to the problems discussed and leads to a better statement and a more direct attack, it will have served its purpose.

The substance of this book was delivered in preliminary form as the four Stafford Little Lectures at Princeton University in the spring of 1938.

*Columbia University*

R. S. L.

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