

## COLLECTIVE ACTION IN SCIENCE AND SOCIETY :

### INTRODUCTION

Two numbers of this Journal, dedicated to the study of the problem of collective action, its explanation and its criteria of efficiency, are to be presented to its readers.

The concept of action is without doubt a key concept in the social sciences. All too often however, attention is exclusively given to the concept of "individual action", an emanation of the person. But in many social and political theories, as well as in history, reference is made to collective *actors* (organisations, states, groups, classes, movements) and to collective *actions* (ranging from fashion trends to organised economical activity).

It is clear that neither the concept of "*collective action*" nor the concept of "*collective actor*" is immediately evident. Even if we had a useful typology of such actors and actions at our disposal, we still should have to solve the problem of the conditions of *rationality* and *efficiency* for collective actors and actions.

If one thinks about this problem, both with reference to attempts towards social reorganisation, and with reference to scientific inquiry considered as a type of social action, one is immediately confronted with normative problems, on the one hand in politics and ideology, on the other hand in logic and methodology. In both cases (social reconstruction and collective scientific inquiry) ethical considerations are moreover relevant.

It seems on first sight reasonable to interpret scientific inquiry as a form of social action, and scientific methodology as an attempt to determine the conditions of efficiency and rationality of this type of social action. It seems also reasonable to interpret, at least partially, normative ethics and normative politics as attempts to find conditions of efficiency and rationality of specific types of collective action. Even a comparison with the development of the arts, considered as collective undertakings suggests itself.

A centrally important problem in the field has been since long the *aggregation* problem, where attempts are made to construct a social preference function on the basis of existent individual preference

rankings, taking into account certain postulates that express the requirements of democracy. Discussion about the unsolvability of the aggregation problem, and about the inexistence or/and instability of individual preference rankings make a rethinking of this problem urgently necessary, the aggregation problem being essential as much in scientific inquiry as in rational ethics.

When the aggregation problem is solved, the *planification* problem for collective action has to be tackled, and is of equal magnitude.

In any case, when is it possible and desirable to mobilise large numbers of individuals in collective undertakings? These seem to presuppose the existence of well balanced power structures. Presumably an efficient power distribution, making possible the collective mobilisation is partially independent from the aims of the undertaking itself. To what extent? Is a non alienated collective action possible and if this is to be the case, under what conditions can it occur? Asking these questions, we are confronted with the problem of the synthesis of collective and individual rationality, and it seems certain that our answers about these topics will strongly influence our ethical and political views, as well as our convictions about the methodology of science in growth.

To return to our starting point: one should compare the method of description of individual actions with the method of description of collective actions, and one should compare the explanation of individual actions with the explanation of collective actions. More specifically one should examine the distance between the explanations of events by causes and of actions by reasons the same for collective as for individual actions?

Is the theory of collective action logically reducible to the theory of individual action, in some sense of the notion of reducibility (methodological individualism) or inversely is the theory of individual action reducible to the theory of collective action (methodological collectivism), or are the two theories irreducible to each other, but compelled by their very object to collaborate?

Or can intermediary theories be found (for instance the theory of role taking) that can lie at the foundation of both individual and collective action?

The different difficulties mentioned suggest a few precise questions, which, without being exclusive of others, appear especially relevant from a philosophical point of view.

1) An attempt towards the development of an exact and precise theory of individual action has been made in recent logico-philosophical literature (Von Wright, Chisholm, Aquist, Nowakowska, e.a.). What are the relations between this field of

inquiry and the equally precise attempts towards the development of a theory of participation in collective action (Olson and Buchanan in economics, and Dahl or Downs in political theory), the problem of aggregation (much studied since Arrow's contribution), the theory of committees (Farquharson, Riker).

More specifically : what are the possibilities of interaction between the theory of group participation, aggregation and committee functioning and what is often called "action logic" ?

2) What are the conditions of rationality and efficiency of different types of collective actions ? How could a rational typology of collective actions be developed ? In particular, *what type of collective action is scientific inquiry* ? Several models for scientific inquiry have been developed (Carnap, Popper, Kuhn, e.a) some of which refer clearly to social action, without deriving specific criteria for its efficiency from the general rationality conditions of social action. Can we go further in this direction ? Is it possible to consider certain ethical and political (ideological) principles as attempts to solve the problem of efficient rational collective action ?

3) If it is necessary (to guarantee the possibility of collective action) to introduce a minimal or maximal power structure, how should such a power structure be considered from the ethical point of view ? Can in answering this question, use be made of the different existing attempts to define and quantify the concept of power, and of the less numerous but nevertheless important contributions towards an exact ethics (for instance Rawls, Baier, Gert, e.a.).

4) The editors are of the opinion that the concept of alienation has an important function in the theory of collective action. However they are of the opinion that only few and not completely satisfactory attempts have been made, to make this concept operational and precise. Can alienation be measured and still fulfill the fruitful critical function it has in Marxist thought ? This being done, under what conditions is non alienated collective action possible ?

5) In recent analytical philosophy the explanation of individual actions by means of reasons or/and motives has been opposed to the explanation of events and processes by means of causes. What are the criteria of adequacy for the explanation of types of collective action, in view of this controversy ?

In this first issue the reader will find some papers dealing with various social and political aspects of the problem of collective action in "mass" societies. With the exception of Uslander, who analyses the probability of the occurrence of the paradox of voting in societies of

different size with the help of Monte Carlo techniques, all authors concentrate on the explanation or description of particular problems in the practice, rather than in the theory, of collective action. We are still very far from having a clear understanding of what would be necessary to ensure that collective action lives up, at least in theory, to the less cynical expectations of those who advocate it. But the problems of explaining various aspects of collective action in modern society prove to be stimulating challenges to the current approaches to social theory. Goodin's recasting of the "rational choice"-model is a case in point. The same holds for Lehner's modification of the "competitive" analysis of the democratic political process. Carlier provides a survey of the literature on social movements in an endeavour to clarify the position and prospects of minorities in a mass society. Lieberman stresses the role of deception in collective action. He reminds us thereby of the importance of studying the very interesting epistemic aspects of interaction in the context of collective action. The second volume on collective action will concentrate more directly on the concept of collective action itself, as well as on some of the normative questions which it gives rise to. In particular the role of collective action in science will receive a fuller treatment.

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