

Where two worlds met

Efforts to marry public policy to social science created problems and a new perspective for both

by Patricia McBroom

In mid-December last year, five social scientists finished a paper called "The Harvest of American Racism" and turned it in to the staff of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders.

Two weeks later, four of the five were abruptly released from further commission work.

With them in December went 34 other members of the staff, mostly field investigators, released in a major budgetary cutback. Simultaneously, the riot commission decided to go for a single early report and skip its interim report, of which the Harvest paper was to be a part.

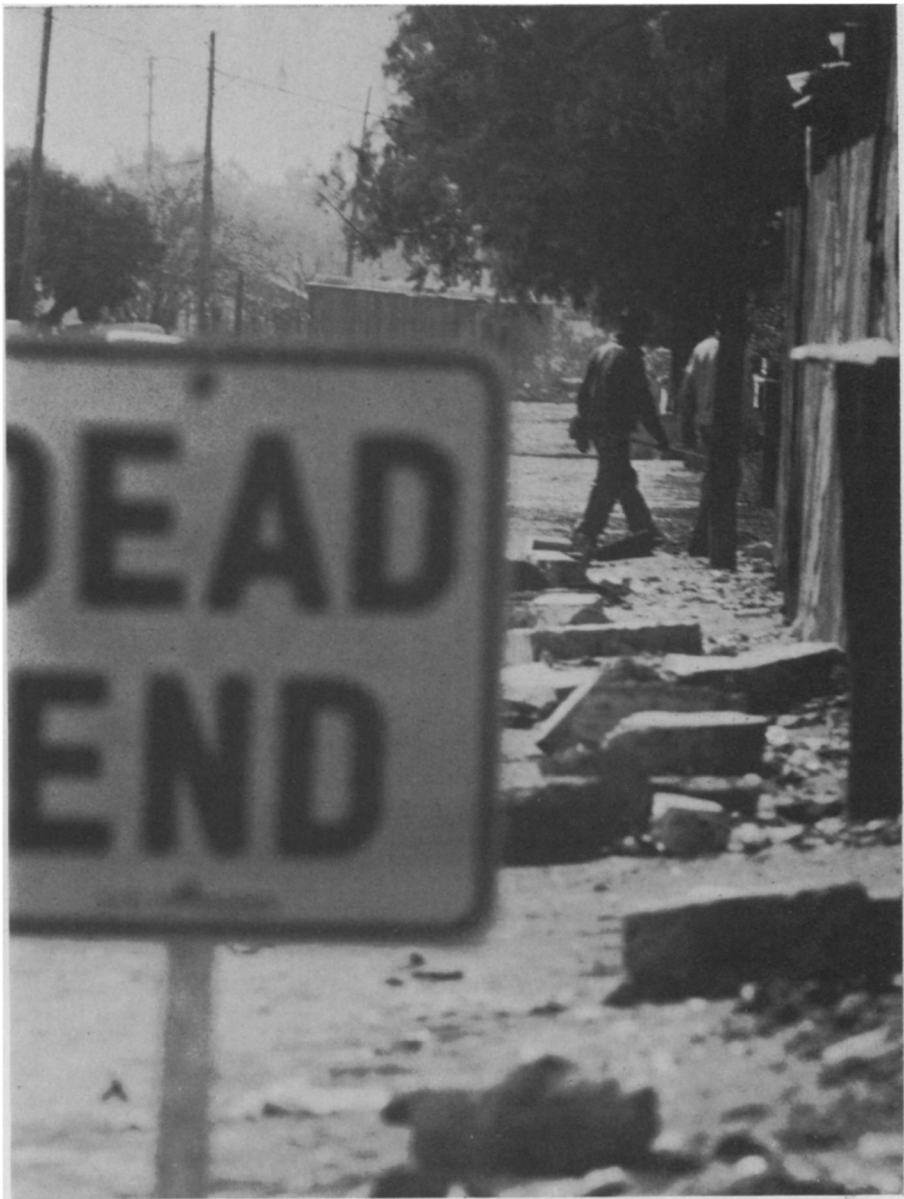
None of these moves, as it happened, was aimed at edging social science out of the riot investigation. But to social scientists, watching from the sidelines and already suspicious of the commission's willingness to deal with racism, it looked bad.

A few began to cry whitewash. The commission was accused of burying data and bending to the will of the President, who, it was assumed, had seen and vetoed the Harvest paper. That product, meanwhile, turned up in various accounts as a "secret report," locked away in commission offices.

The sniping lasted through January at which time Commissioner Roy Wilkins, executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, wrote a public reply to one critic who predicted the commission would fail because it was composed of politicians.

Said Wilkins: "One is nudged to the view that both politicians and social scientists are specialists and should meet, perhaps, only tentatively and gingerly."

Then came the March document. If it shocked the nation with its bold attack on white racism, it surprised and delighted social scientists. Their common conclusion: The commissioners must



have experienced a change of heart, or, alternately, they had decided to ignore politics.

Possibly there was a change of heart somewhere among 11 commissioners, but it now seems clear the riot panel was never engaged in a whitewash effort, nor was it controlled from the White House.

Nowhere does the bipartisan panel give credit to existing Administration domestic programs and the President revealed his displeasure, first by virtually ignoring the findings, then by attacking them through the comments of Vice President Hubert Humphrey and Secretary-designate of Health, Education and Welfare, Wilbur J. Cohen. (Cohen has since reversed his stand. He now praises the report as "a valuable contribution to our thinking," and President Johnson's post-riot recommendations to the Congress are expected to be a melding of his earlier proposals and the riot commission recommendations.)

From the start, a good part of the commission and its staff seem to have known they would have to face the central dangerous issue—white racism—and would deal with the roots of disorder—namely, white refusal to allow blacks access to the American main stream.

Why then the trouble with social scientists who for years have been pressing this same theme with growing intensity in one forum after another?

The controversial paper, "Harvest of American Racism" and the commission report resemble each other in spirit, yet the first provoked a bitter professional fallout between social scientists and riot investigators. The struggle has implications for any future cooperative ventures between social scientists and public men.

The handful of social scientists fired in December were to have provided a scientific base for the riot investigation. Their efforts confused and angered staff members. Social scientists, it seems, misjudged their mission while the people

who called them in misjudged the social sciences.

The original task was to provide answers to such questions as: Who were the riot participants? What were their grievances? To what extent did the riots reflect those grievances? What was the level of violence and the local response? The staff did not want city profiles, but a theoretical analysis, backed with data, on the nature—political, economic and racial—of the 1967 disorders.

Social scientists had some 40 days to do the work while 1,200 interviews, collected in 24 cities, streamed in from field workers. If there had been available an extensive body of social data on the ghettos; if civil disorders had been under study for several years, the job would have been difficult. But little such work was on hand; the task of building a scientific analysis of social disaster very nearly from scratch in the time given was all but impossible.

The 180-page Harvest paper, disjointed and uneven, was difficult reading, particularly for those unaccustomed to the language of social science. Staff members viewed the paper as a combination of jargon and polemic, lacking documentation and overstepping its mission.

"We wanted data," says one member of the commission staff. "What we got was polemics. We had our own polemics; we didn't need theirs." The complaint refers to a final section, highly readable, in which the authors suggested that young Negro men have no real alternative to rioting.

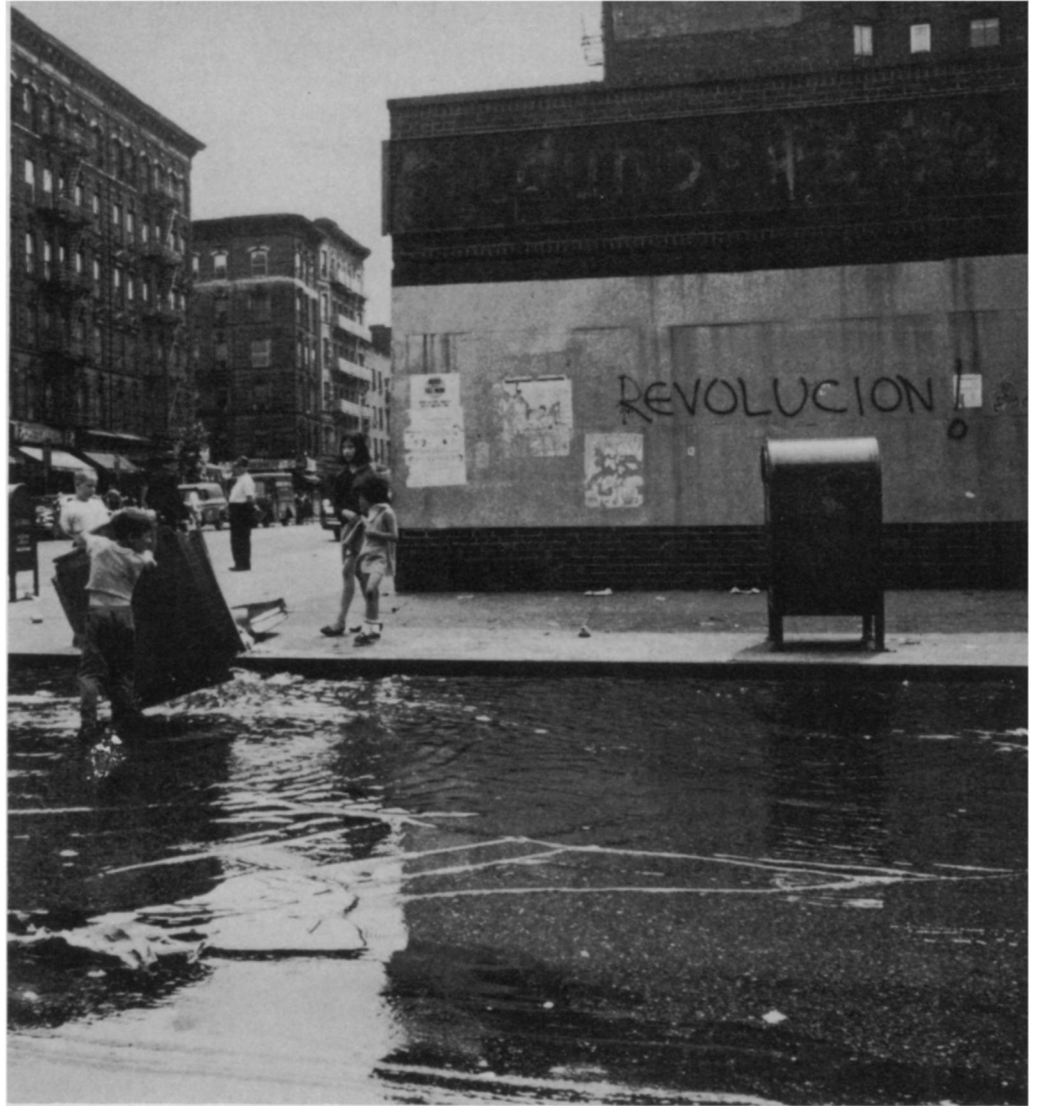
Shut off from normal channels of political communication, they can make their condition known only through violence. White repression, the social scientists warned, will force conditions in which young Negroes fight for their lives behind barricades surrounding the ghettos.

At this point, it seemed the commission would have to do without social science. Staff members turned to a new group, including Dr. Nathan Caplan, social psychologist at the University of Michigan. Although his colleagues warned him he was wasting his time—the work would be politically monitored—Dr. Caplan took the gamble and quickly rammed through a sociological analysis of rioters, counter-rioters, and non-participants, working from his own surveys in Detroit and Newark.

"I held my breath up to the end," says Dr. Caplan, who, like his academic colleagues, expected evidence to be politically screened.

It wasn't. The end product, says Dr. Caplan, "has to be viewed as one of the finest documents on social relations produced by a government." Other social scientists echo that sentiment.

But their early discord with the com-



mission leads to two basic observations:

- Social scientists are perhaps too ready to suspect political minds of bad faith.

- Political leaders do not understand what the social scientists have to offer and expect them to perform like engineers in finding critical data while avoiding policy implications.

The commission wanted scientific material to back up already-established conclusions, says Dr. Neil Smelser, University of California sociologist and an authority on collective behavior.

If policy makers and social scientists are going to work together, they should honor certain ethical obligations, Dr. Smelser believes. "Policy makers should not call on social science if there is no question as to what the policy recommendation is going to be. . . . Or at least the social scientist should know this."

A social scientist, on the other hand, "should not participate in policy making if his own mind is completely closed—and he should not oversell his expertise."

"Ideology overwhelmed the social scientists in this case," says Dr. Smelser, who was close to the action. "They

were as much hung up on ideological issues as the policy makers were." Ironically, neither knew it; there was no communication between the two.

"Once an issue becomes so heated, so crisis-oriented, the possibility of systematic input becomes much less, Dr. Smelser points out.

Both the social scientists and the commission interpret civil disorder in political and economic terms says Dr. Smelser. They might have looked at forces within the ghetto, such as the conflict between generations, the age structure and social patterns of ghetto life.

Had such material been available, it would not have changed any conclusions in this case, says Dr. Smelser, and other social scientists agree. The underlying causes of social disorder were perhaps all too clear, the solutions too obvious.

But that will not always be the case. "Many facts can be turned up to change conclusions," says Dr. Smelser. Both in this case as in general, the social scientists can lead policy makers to ask questions they would never have asked. But they need to ask the questions before finding the conclusions.