UNDERSTANDING SOCIETY

Social Sciences Foundation Course Team

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INTRODUCTION

THIS anthology of readings in the social sciences has been compiled by members of the Social Sciences Course Team of the Open University, as part of their Foundation Course 'Understanding Society'. It ranges across the fields of economics, geography, government, psychology and sociology, and includes both new and classic material in each discipline.

The reader is mainly designed for students of the Open University who are taking the 'Understanding Society' course; for them it represents essential reading. But it should be of considerable interest to other students of the social sciences, containing as it does a wide variety of extracts from books and periodicals, drawn from both British and overseas sources across each of the disciplines.

The Open University is concerned primarily with adult students in full-time employment or working in the home. It was set up to provide higher educational opportunities for those who, for one reason or another, were unable to benefit from a conventional university education, and who now wish to extend their studies. In the words of the original Planning Committee report: 'We took it as axiomatic that no formal academic qualifications would be required for registration as a student. Anyone could try his or her hand, and only failure to progress adequately would be a bar to continuation of studies.'

Students are not confined to one or two subjects; their work programmes are designed to embrace studies over a wide range of subjects and across several disciplines. Students are able to study both arts and science subjects and there are as few restrictions as possible on choice. Maximum flexibility and an interdisciplinary approach are the characteristics of Open University courses.

Each course is built up around correspondence 'packages', sent to the students by post and calling for the return of assignments by the students; integrated with these correspondence packages are series of television and radio programmes, short summer or weekend courses and a regionally organised tutorial and counselling system.

The correspondence courses use modern learning methods,

including programmed learning techniques where appropriate. The broadcast programmes also pioneer new paths; they do not reproduce conventional university lectures but experiment with all the resources of the media.

The courses are, therefore, carefully planned and integrated instructional systems, created by Course Teams which are made up of academic staff, educational technologists, broadcasting and media specialists. This reader is an essential component of the 'Understanding Society' course, and biographical notes on its editors can be found at the end of the volume.

'Understanding Society' is a course very much in keeping with the spirit of an 'open' university; it is an integrated and interdisciplinary approach to the social sciences. It considers five different views of man – the economic, sociological, psychological, political and geographic – in order to highlight these various facets of his life in society.

The course is divided into three parts which ask three fundamental questions: why people live in societies; how people live in societies; and what kind of problems they face. The first part looks at such questions as: What does man gain from being under government? What are the economic advantages man secures through living in society? What biological, emotional and social needs does he seek to satisfy?

The second and major section of the course is focused on how men live in societies. This is not simply a descriptive account of the various social, economic and political systems which man has developed or of the environments in which he has developed them. It also attempts to analyse, explain and, within limits, predict man's behaviour, drawing when appropriate on scientific skills and methods. Each discipline thus presents a range of its insights, and many examples are drawn from societies contrasted in complexity.

The final section of the course takes, by way of example, one of the major problems that faces the world today: the so-called 'population explosion'. This is a multi-faceted problem in the study of which all the social sciences have a contribution to make. As Barbara Wootton has remarked, it may fall to the social sciences

‘to bridge the chasm between the scientific and literary worlds, which is today so widely regarded as a threat to the integrity of contemporary culture. While our subject-matter links us to the humanities, our methods approximate ever more closely to those of the natural sciences.’

This anthology adopts the same pattern as the course itself and

includes materials which, in the opinion of its editors, have something particularly relevant or illuminating to say about the three fundamental questions posed. It should provide a foundation for further work and reading in the social sciences; in what it has to say about man’s role in society it should also be of interest to anyone concerned with the problems of the contemporary world.