



Inquiry and Change: The Troubled Attempt to Understand and Shape Society

Charles E. Lindblom

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How do ordinary citizens, government officials, opinion leaders, or social scientists attempt to solve social problems? This book analyzes our attempt to understand society so that we can reshape it. In so doing, the author largely bypasses both epistemology and contemporary highly abstract theory on knowledge and society in order to achieve a far more concrete analysis of discourse and inquiry in social problem solving. There is a tragic discrepancy, argues the author, between our abilities to solve problems and the difficulty of the problems to be solved. We must make do with inadequate information and inconclusive analyses, for the task is less one of learning the truth than of proceeding in inquiry and decisions when the truth cannot be known. He discusses the many obstacles that prevent us from solving social problems, focusing in particular on learned incompetence. According to the author, parents teach children not to think certain thoughts, and schools often engage more in indoctrination than education. Political rhetoric and commercial sales promotion feed a steady diet of misrepresentation. Social science does help. But because it is dependent on popular thought, it shares the impairments of thought found in both political figures and ordinary citizens. It also develops its own distinctive impairments. Although social science can be improved in ways that the author outlines in his book, social inquiry calls for such significant contributions from lay thought that it renders many conventional ideals of scientific problem solving inappropriate. The author contends that the route to better social problem solving is not through either scientific or popular consensus or agreement, however much they are valued in the world of science and social science, but through a competition of ideas. The index of a society's competence he states, is in its discord over ends, values, or purposes.

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