

[ Title to be decided by RR ]

by

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The broad theme of Science, Technology & Society has been very extensively studied and written about. There are entire institutes both in India and abroad devoted to the subject. So why is this piece being written, for this journal at this time? For those of my readers who might be, like myself, middle-aged professionals in the subject-area, I have a simple explanation: I was invited to write on this broad theme! For others who might be younger, it could be an appropriate time to attempt a short consolidation of the "received wisdom" on the subject. Such a piece could also perhaps serve as a base-line for structuring elective courses in the broad subject area. It is with this last possibility in mind that the text to follow has been given the format of a lecture-presentation rather than as an erudite piece of scholarship requiring extensive references and appeal to original work, or source of idea.

2. In what manner could sociologists usefully view the broad subject area?

The investigation of the universe through the portfolio of methods which is called "science", is a web of activities performed by human beings labeled "scientists". Human beings who apply the scientific method to answer questions presented by nature are called "pure" scientists; - and those who answer questions posed or presented by

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society are called "applied" scientists. Note however, that what is or is not worthy of the attention of scientists - pure or applied - is not, in any sense, autonomously "given". What is, or is not, considered worthy of the attention of scientists - pure or applied - is very much determined by the web of social relations that bind scientists among themselves; and by the very powerful webs of relations that bind scientists with the societies which provide them with material and intellectual sustenance; which confer approbation and reward; and which appropriate the end-results of their work for economic and political ends. These ends are themselves legitimised by complex socio-political processes, which "back-influence" what scientists consider worthy of their attention.

Viewed in the above way, three sociologically important facets of the theme-area reveal themselves.

First, science is a special type of performing-art; second, sociologists could usefully view scientists acting in their social context as performing artists enjoying very extensive state patronage. Like other performing artists, scientists continuously grumble about the conditionalities attached to the receipt of such state patronage! [Lest I be mis-understood, this grumbling is an excellent keeper of the collective moral ethos of the scientific community and even the state finds it useful to facilitate such grumbling albeit in a carefully controlled way - witness the state's patronage of "authorised" channels of dissent such as scientific societies which criticise governmental policies]

The third facet is that of property relations between those who own the traditional factors of production (land, labour and capital) and those who own the factor that cements these three, namely knowledge, also called 'intellectual property'. Scientists, as a class, are important owners of this form of property; they are the pre-cursors and progenitors of the crucial factor of production called 'technology'.

This much said by way of introduction, the "lecture-presentation" follows.