Author of seventeen books and numerous articles, Bernard Barber, Professor Emeritus of Sociology, Columbia University, is a determined scholar. A student of Robert Merton, Talcott Parsons, and Pitirim A. Sorokin, Barber has spent a distinguished career of over fifty years in the defense and advancement of that great tradition of American sociology--system building. Social constructs of reality smack of too much subjectivism for his purpose. He believes that a detailed and scientific analysis based on close and consistent definitions of concepts produces the most meaningful insights in the human condition.

Professor Barber's six chapters cover a wide range of topics and concerns. From identifying who is an "intellectual," and examining intellectual ideology, the chapters explain how high and low culture contribute to social conflict. Barber's last chapter discusses various tensions in the academy. The author draws on a wide range of material in defense of his mission. The historical material is often surprising and delightful reading, but it is a bit off the subject of sociological objectivism. After all, how often does one brief book contain both a critique of Newt Gingrich's To Re-new America and a close discussion of French intellectuals such as Camus? It is a case of going from the ridiculous to the sublime.

Professor Barber's intent is serious. He explains that "Two major aims drive this book: rescuing the concept of culture for constructive analysis of social phenomena in general and using this improved concept to understand some key processual aspects of culture, namely, intellectual pursuits" (p. 139). He grounds his definition of culture in a social-system theory that includes both the verbal and visual aspects of society. Values are products of the endless selection among alternatives in the interconnected web of norms, social, structural, and cultural components of the social system. Unfortunately, Professor Barber does not offer a definite answer as to how people arrive at or justify their decisions regarding values; people, he believes, invoke some sort of ideology in defense or explanation of their actions and values.

Barber's major concern is the "perverse theory" of science which in its extreme form "holds that western science is just another view of the
world, on a par with mysticism, superstition, quackery, and other cultist theories" (p. 126). He rejects that view with intellectual contempt and sees any notion of a socially constructed reality as the first step downward toward "perverse theory." As a man of science, Barber claims a universality of knowledge that the postmodernists see as local and situated.

In this brief but wide-ranging book Barber reveals his intellectual orientation: "I asserted that human life is as impossible without some sort of social science as it is impossible without natural science." Humans, he claims "have always had considerable rational commonsense knowledge of the sources and consequences of their behavior." Therefore, "the task for sociology and the other social sciences is to keep on making that knowledge more systematic, abstract (analytic), and comprehensive, as the natural sciences have" (p. 136). In this fashion, Barber's intellectual genealogy goes back to the Scottish moral philosophers, and then forward to William Graham Sumner and the scholars cited in the opening paragraph above. In today's university he sees two groups at work. The first seeks knowledge for its own sake; the second uses knowledge in seeking reformist and ideological goals. Barber believes that social system theory is the means for the unification of the two camps and, hence, it is the mission of his book.

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