The Subject Matter of Sociology in College Education

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SOCIOLOGY TODAY is a generally accepted course in undergraduate curricula, but nobody can say what the proper subject of sociology really is. Some teachers hold that this is due to the fact that sociology as a science is so young that it has not yet succeeded in circumscribing its area, but that in due time the true meaning of sociology will emerge out of the growing compilation of figures and facts. Others accept the situation without scepticism or challenge, taking one of the textbooks of sociology and following the guidance of its author, or discussing all problems of actual interest in the field of the social sciences which do not have any other adequate place. Some teachers in sociology are aware of the basic and unique difficulty of teaching it; others consider the textbook and various selected articles sufficient authorization for continued instruction which calls desperately for clarification in method as well as subject. Teachers outside the field of sociology cherish the hope that sociology one day may die a natural death due to indigestion of unrelated facts, and college administrations stand aloof as long as students continue registering for the course. Some, perhaps, are amazed when, by chance, through a glance at different textbooks, they become aware of the fact that there is a definite lack of unity of opinion concerning what students of sociology are supposed to learn. "Is it possible," they ask, "that one can pretend to teach a science if there are no generally accepted principles, nor any common basis binding to every scholar in the field?"

This paper is an attempt to explain what sociology as a subject of instruction could legitimately accomplish and to indicate its proper place in the social sciences. We will discover, however, that it is not what some sociologists believe it to be.

I

THE ROOT OF ALL THE DIFFICULTIES about sociology—the lack of a basic agreement as to what it is, which methods ought to be used in teaching and research, which problems are to be dealt with, and what the limits of its proper field are—lies in the fact that sociology is supposed to be a new and specific science, a social science which is different from all other social sciences and which has its proper and exclusive set of problems. The ultimate ambition, either tacit or stated, of most sociologists is to discover and describe the "laws of human society." They usually assume that there are laws ruling human relations independent of the individual specific circumstances and conditions under which people live. They aim at drawing general conclusions from a broad variety of experiences. The results obtained are extremely meager, colorless, and trivial. They have brought about the opinion prevalent among social scientists who are not sociologists, that everything sociologists have to say is a bundle of banalities and that sociology is a science which tries to prove what everyone knew before anyway.

As long as sociologists use their effort and their admirably refined methods of research for these ends, the result has of necessity to be disappointing. Whether there are *general laws* in social relations and social development is a problem which only the *social philosopher* may pose; he may try to answer it by way of his own interpretation of social development, but it never can be solved by compilation of facts and methods of research. In other words, it will always remain a personal evaluation of social development.

The origin of the mistaken ambition of sociologists to find laws governing human relations in general may be traced to the fact that those scholars who are considered to have laid the foundation of "sociology as a science" actually have been social philosophers (Comte, Marx, and Spencer) who attempted to interpret social relations according to their own preconceived philosophy. Marx's analysis of social development, for instance, grows out of the hypothesis, "All history is the history of class struggle." On the basis of this statement he attempted to interpret social relations and conflicts, to come to conslusions about future social development, and to find devices as to effective social and political organization and action. To Spencer, on the other hand, social institutional evolution is part of the cosmic process of development. "Sociology" to him is one phase of the application of the evolutionary formula which led him to believe that social development cannot be controlled by human intervention and guidance.

The conclusions which these original founders of sociology finally drew from their investigations concerning society and social relations are the direct derivation of their own concept of society. Whether they are right or wrong is and will always remain a matter of our speculation. Whether we consider them right or wrong depends on our own consent to their interpretations and the evidence they have succeeded in gathering to support them. Laws of society, social relations, and social development as a general proposition are subject to scientific study only for the social philosopher who attempts to show by his analysis a verification of his own original philosophy of history.

If sociologists who claim that the field of their study is a special science consider it untenable to subscribe any longer to one of the attempts of former original thinkers, they have

to be genuine social philosophers themselves and to offer an original theory in order to provide the indispensable methodological basis for any meaningful specific investigation concerning "general laws." It is obvious that most sociologists today do not meet this prerequisite. They do not have any convincing theory about society at all. They completely disregard or are not even aware of the fact that without a preconceived concept of social relations they never will be able to give any meaning to the actual operation of such relations.[1] Their concerted effort attempts by minute research and statistics to explore and explain the interrelations of individuals in groups and their "working to, for, and with each other," with the aim of piecing together sometime the whole puzzle of society and the laws ruling it. Collecting facts, ordering, counting, and measuring them, and drawing correlations, however, will never help to understand "the laws ruling society." The assumption on which this type of research is based, that fact-gathering eventually leads to a synthesis, is certainly erroneous. Much of the endeavor put into sociological studies at present, on the basis of this assumption, is therefore a waste of time and energy, mostly spent on research of a merely descriptive nature in social behavior, social relations, and institutions, which presents nothing but a collection of factual data without even trying to open a view into the forces which contribute to the development of actual social problems. No wonder that clear-minded people become more and more skeptical about the road sociologists are travelling! Since we do not have any workable theory to offer, and since merely a compilation of social data cannot be expected to reveal "laws" of human society, we have to change completely the focus of interest in a study of society.

[1] Some nevertheless pretend to find a way to regulate social life scientifically by "insight" into the laws operating in society; hence the term "applied sociology."

II

THE REASON WHY *teaching* sociology today presents such a confusing task, highly unsatisfactory to teachers who care for intellectual honesty, rests with the fact that authors of textbooks usually approach the material with the definite idea in mind that sociology has been accepted as a science of its own, and that the establishment of laws of social relation is unquestioned, a presumption which enforces a predominantly biological approach to the problems presented.

To illustrate the point, let us consider the material offered in a course in "Introductory Sociology" as organized by most of the textbooks in use. Man, here, is conceived as one peculiar kind of all the living species. The less he deviates from "typical behavior" the better he presents material for sociological study. To become a proper subject for sociology his individual traits, be they personal, national, ethnic, or historical are put aside. Thus man, in the "science of sociology," is taken predominantly as a biological unit. Not by chance, therefore, introductory chapters in textbooks are heavily loaded with facts and results drawn from recent experiment in biology, a heritage of the Spencerian approach. Special situations in social group-relations with reference to competition and co-operation, crowd behavior, propaganda and the like, are used mainly as examples to illustrate general statements; never are they as a unique phenomenon to be explained.

Why is this kind of approach so highly unsatisfactory? Why does it lead to trivial platitudes only and neglect to give students a firm basis from which they would be able to understand and progress in exploring sociological problems with which they are confronted today? Because—preoccupied with a biological viewpoint—the method in presenting material has been taken over without questioning from the natural

sciences: it is assumed that general standards for the study of human society can be established; it is assumed that "mankind," as a whole and as different from animals, is the object of sociological study;[2] it is further assumed that one can establish a "historical vacuum" (which in itself is a *contradictio in adjecto*) to figure out how people behave and how they should behave in order to eliminate "social problems." It is obvious that these assumptions are indiscriminately taken over from the natural sciences. In dealing with human society this method is utterly inadequate. Human group life differs from any other not primarily in the fact of language, but in that it reflects *spiritual values* which makes every concrete society different from any other. Human social life is always conditioned by different values, beliefs, and environment, resulting in different attitudes which do not lend themselves to generalizations because they are unique historical phenomena. There is no such thing as a "standardized" human society, whose sound working could be considered "normal" and from which deviation gives rise to "social problems." Whether a social problem exists can only be measured by our ideals and not by an arbitrarily set up normalcy of social life. For example: a high divorce rate constitutes a problem only if we hold the family as a valuable basic institution for a sound society; the same proportion of divorces would not have been considered serious in Soviet Russia during the Twenties due to a different concept of an ideal society. Problems, as, *e.g.*, unemployment, slums, substandards in health, etc., change their character in causes as well as remedies if we are dealing with societies built on different value premises.

Does all this mean that there is no place in our colleges and universities for the investigation and discussion of sociological

[2] Frequently textbooks state the command of language as the basic difference between man and animal, ignoring completely that language and all its uses are something essentially different than a physical skill—namely: a vehicle to express and convey thoughts.

problems? Far from it. There is a vast variety of them in past and present societies which we may legitimately pose to sociologists. They are worth while investigating, and, according to our present scheme of departmentalization, are better taken care of by a special division than by any of the others (history, government, political science, or economics) in the social sciences. What we have to discard, however, is the pretense to present a "special science," the "science of society" with a unique task and a particular subject within the social sciences. If we are willing to accept this limitation, to resign to never being able to figure out the "laws of human society" by sociological study, and to look upon sociological problems as *one part* of the concrete problems posed to all social scientists, we may find a proper and significant place for both teaching and research in "sociology."

III

THE SEARCH FOR GENERAL LAWS cannot be accepted as a legitimate purpose of sociological studies, but this ambitious approach including all mankind can be replaced by focusing interest on *social problems of any specific society* and by attempting to understand and explain their origin and their nature. This would account for the undeniable fact of their differentiation under different circumstances. Today it makes an understanding of the economic trends and forces at work indispensable, because in a capitalistic society almost all social problems rest on economic relations. But notwithstanding this dependence on information in economics—especially with reference to contemporary problems—sociology has its specific task, because it breaks down the assumptions which force the economist to argue in a vacuum unless he oversteps the boundaries of his own "science." Sociological studies, then, have to be focused on the understanding and explanation of *specific* situations of our—or any other—actual society.

Sociology, therewith, is apt to become a branch of the social sciences which has much in common with history, and also political science, especially in its modern cultural approach. However, it distinguishes itself from history proper by very definite features. Let us take, for clarification, the rise of National Socialism in Germany as an example to show what a sociologist has to contribute to the analysis of a recent historical event. While the historian is predominantly interested in describing the different singular events following the movement and the influences of different personalities in the leading group, the sociologist will approach the problem from the social angle. How was it possible—he may ask—that in these specific years in Germany a doctrine and political slogan could be accepted by a large majority of the people? From here he is apt to move into an analysis of the class structure of modern society and the peculiar social situation and mentality of the lower middle class in Germany. Sociologists, for their purpose of understanding social developments, more or less eliminate the influence of outstanding individuals on history and tend to focus interest on the rôle played by social situations and social behavior. Inasmuch as the situation is not completely unique in Germany, and as similarities can be shown in other countries of western culture, they may legitimately raise the question of Fascism as an international phenomenon, a problem in which a historian would only be interested *post factum*. Such an attempt at "generalization" can be considered legitimate; it is basically different from the type of generalization criticized before, which disregards the conditioning of action and attitudes through specific social situations, as in this case Western culture in the twentieth century.

The race problem may provide another example illustrating the effect of the change in interpretation of "sociology" on

subject and methods of teaching and research. Sociologists certainly are authorized to study race relations, since they present one of our most pressing social problems today. There is a definite need for clarification of the issue, the facts pertaining to it, the attitudes towards it, and the measures which might be taken in order to materialize the desired pacification. The race problem is in its very nature a genuine sociological problem, because it is a problem of group relation and group behavior, tied up with the specific structure of our society. Most sociologists today, however, approach the problem of race and race relations from the biological viewpoint.[3] Races are understood to present types of physical appearance differing in color of skin, form of skull, slant of eyes, etc. Attempts have been made to correlate these types with certain psychological traits and behavior patterns. But they are looked upon as derivatives only. Regardless of whether or not "race," in this biological sense, is a useful concept, or whether or not modern science has to discard it, discussions of this kind do not have any legitimate place in sociology as a social science. It is the privilege of biologists to fight them out. If sociologists in their analysis of race relations confine themselves to quoting the findings of biologists, they deprive themselves of the chance of making a contribution of their own. They also miss the point that the social problem of race relations begins where the biological leaves off, that race prejudice is a phenomenon as prominent as any biological fact; it develops under specific social conditions and lives a life of its own, independent of any valid biological basis. Paraphrasing a Marxian statement[4] one could say, "Races are races, *only under certain social conditions* they become castes and outcasts."

[3] An outstanding exception is the recent publication, "The American Dilemma," by Gunnar Myrdal, which also is an excellent illustration of the suggested sociological approach.

[4] "A Negro is a Negro. Under certain social conditions he becomes a slave."

How can the continued existence of tension between the races be explained although the biological basis has been proved to be wrong? In order to answer this question, sociologists will have to turn their attention to historical developments, economic situations, and social institutions instead of physiological traits. In their research they will have to accept the fact that problems of race relations—as far as the social sciences are concerned—are determined by social conditions which can be understood only as a result of historical developments. Thus the problem of race relations in Nazi Germany derives its specific character from the social and political history and the class structure in Germany. The Jewish problem has different facets in England, in France, in Southeastern Europe, and in Palestine; it has its peculiar features in the United States, and here again it is essentially different from the Negro problem in this country. Thus far the U.S.S.R. has succeeded in handling her minority problems very successfully; she has done this without any reference to biological findings, merely on the basis of her political ideology. The implications of the race problem can only be understood, and a constructive policy enacted, by evaluating the concrete social and political factors involved in any particular case. Biological knowledge simply will not suffice.

IV

ONE MORE ILLUSTRATION may be added in order to indicate how the proposed change in approach will affect the method and material under discussion in "sociology." Take, *e.g.*, the family as one of the social institutions which command high interest among sociologists. Which problems concerning the family ought to be elaborated on, if it is taken up in "sociology" and even taught in special courses for advanced students in the department?

Traditional textbooks—general as well as special—begin with analyzing the family as a general institution of human society on the basis of sex and blood relations. Here again the point of departure is a biological one, since this is the only common denominator of all human societies with reference to the family. This approach obviously implies the existence of, or aims at finding, general laws and behavior patterns of family relation. Sex relations are frequently discussed at length; even research papers with statistics regarding sex relations are published as "sociological studies." They are of no legitimate interest for sociologists as social scientists as long as they are not seen in relation to a *specific social situation* under scrutiny. That is to say, a sociologist should look upon the family as an institution functional to other social facts. Sex and blood-relation *in general* are the realm of the biologist, physiologist or maybe the social psychologist. Sociologists have to begin from another point of departure. They have to explain the *variations* of family life under different social conditions. They have to aim at describing differentiations of family relations in connection with the changing pattern of society. Legitimately the sociologist might ask, "What are the factors which contribute to the increase in divorce rate in recent years or to the decline in birth rate for several decades, and how have these changes again affected, for instance, other social changes like housing or the acceptance of women on the labor market?" There are enough problems of the family worth study by sociologists even if they leave physiological facts to whose ever domain they belong; they even gain in attractiveness by concentration on specific situations and do not lose anything but their triviality if we discard the attempts to generalize.

Examples could be multiplied to make still clearer what is understood by sociology as a true social science; most of the

traditional topics remain important even after eliminating the generalizing tendency. What has to be changed is primarily *the way of approaching them* after we have gained clarity about the main issue—that the task for the toilers in the social sciences is to attempt to explain *differences and changes* in the course of social development rather than to understand "human society in general."

The subject and method of sociology thus described will also indicate a more satisfactory way in which sociological material may be offered in undergraduate courses. Students today frequently feel unable to grasp what they are supposed to study due to the vagueness of the approach and the lack of a firm methodological basis. Although we cannot expect them to be able to specify the true source of their grievances regarding the subject matter of sociology, their complaints should be taken seriously as an indication that something is wrong with the presentation.

College students who choose sociology as their major usually want to go into social administrative work or into social research regarding present social institutions and situations. Courses in sociology, therefore, will meet their needs and interest in making them acquainted with the basic social problems of our time and the near future; that is what they expect to get and what they are eager to learn.

The same is true for the large number of registrants in sociology who take the course out of intellectual curiosity as one of the electives without intending to make practical use of it.[5] They all want to understand the Why and How of the social problems which confront them here today or tomorrow. What we know so far about general laws of social develop-

[5] Those who continue to do scientific work in sociology have to be confronted with the complexity and even with the confusion prevalent in the field, because only through their direct contact with it chances may develop to outgrow the present unsatisfactory situation. It is desirable, however, that they meet these problems as graduate study students only.

ment is of no avail to them; an attempt to expose them to what is written about these "laws" in sociology texts today serves only to undermine the highly needed clarity of thinking and fosters an attitude of false pretensions.

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