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The Sociological Perspective Revisited

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The Sociological Perspective Revisited

Cover Page Footnote

This paper was inspired by a discussion of the status of sociology at the 2013 Georgia Sociological Association Meeting.

Introduction

“Two sociologists enter a bar.” This is either the beginning of a joke or a description of a sociology conference. Peter Berger (1963) suggests that the dearth of jokes about sociologists is tempered by the increasing number of jokes about sociology.

Seventy years ago, sociology was a growing social science that was making relevant contributions to understanding society and many of its constituent parts. Stouffer’s (1949) research on the “American Soldier” was matched by Thurgood Marshall’s ardent pleas in front of the Supreme Court as the lawyer for the NAACP invoking sociological, psychological and anthropological findings which ultimately led to the demise of school desegregation (Roberts, 1970). *The Organization Man* by William H. Whyte (1956) was hailed as one of the most influential books in the 20th century in its analysis and depiction of the postwar corporate and social world.

Today, however, Stephan Turner laments the current status of the discipline. He points out that “sociology once debated the ‘social’ and did so with public readership (1990).” Today, sociologists are quoted as experts on reality television shows. Recently, “Marriage at First Sight” invoked sociology to validate the nonsensical by claiming that the matchmaking was facilitated through the work of sociologists and sexologists (2014). Even before the Skokal Hoax (1994), the subject matter of sociology was being denigrated as an intellectual pseudoscience which prided itself on vocabulary more than serious social inquiry (Eveleth, 2012).

The “Sociological Perspective Revisited” addresses the past 70 years and the changes in the discipline which have contributed to a significant decline in the perception of sociology as a serious social science.

Prime-time Sociology

Sociology offers a framework to understand how human activity is organized (Ferrante, 2014). The sociologists of the first half of the 20th century sought to define the plane on which human action occurred and the types or forms of interaction which occurred. Ely Chinoy (1954) noted that the basic concepts of a discipline indicates its focus and the direction of its observations. During this time there was a growing consensus in sociology as to the basic concepts accepted and employed by most sociologists. The various theoretical traditions such as functionalism, conflict and symbolic interactionism remained important perspectives, but the concepts and terminology of sociology were largely accepted as the basic tools of the discipline.

From its earliest days, sociology was committed to the scientific model. This model, combined with the Weberian (1949) emphasis on value-neutrality, contributed to the

acceptance of sociology as a legitimate social science. Beginning shortly after WWI, American sociology focused more on narrowly circumscribed empirical studies than broader theoretical models of social behavior (Berger, 1963). The success of the Chicago School, with its studies of urbanization and modernization, provided the training ground for future generations of sociologists combining the statistical sophistication of the natural sciences with the descriptive power of modern cultural anthropologists.

American sociologists of the first half of the 20th century frequently came from the ranks of Protestant ministers or their children. They saw sociology as a scientific vehicle for the improvement of society (Farganis, 2011). George Herbert Mead and W.E.B DuBois were the liberals of their generation, but they were schooled in the traditions of early sociology, especially the works of Durkheim, Weber, Pareto and Simmel. The scientific model and organic functionalism shaped their perspectives and their inquiries.

American sociology in the 1950s and early 1960s was dominated by the structure-functionalist perspective. The writings of Comte, Spencer, Durkheim, Pareto and Simmel were channeled in the contributions of Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton (Farganis, 2011). *Human Society* (1949) by Kingsley Davis was a dominant textbook at many colleges and universities. The emergence of the Cold War and the Red Scare of McCarthyism insured that Marxist/conflict theory was not a visible part of the sociological perspective.

In 1950, the National Science Foundation initially sought to exclude sociology from its ranks. When it finally admitted sociology, it did so with the understanding that the discipline would be quantitative and apolitical (Turner,2007). Operating within these guidelines, the sociological enterprise of prime-time sociology actively pursued research agendas which brought forth an abundance of studies on the various fragments of interpersonal, social, and organizational life (Berger, 1963). However, the application of many of the findings of these inquiries became matters of significant public record. The previously mentioned role of sociology in early civil rights decisions, the development of practices and policies within the military and corporate societies, and even the private and personal world of sexual behavior attracted public interest and support for the discipline. Sociology became a visible force within American society and academe.

As a viable tool for the analysis of groups, organizations and institutions, sociology enjoyed significant success in both the public and academic world. Departments of sociology flourished and they were soon found in almost every college and university. In addition, many corporate and governmental agencies hired sociologists. With its interests in studying the forces of stability, equilibrium, integration and adaptation it provided guidelines and direction during a period of significant urbanization, and corporate growth and development.

Sociology Turns Left

In many ways, the successes of sociology as an agent of social change in the 1950s, especially in the area of civil rights, contributed to a crisis within sociology. The stasis of the functional 50s was not in agreement with the emerging social movements of the 1960s. The new generation of sociologists embraced modern conflict theory as a means to address the inequalities in American society. C. Wright Mills (1959) and later Alvin Gouldner (1970) declared functionalism dead. Sociology's inability to account for the forces of social change and the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s frequently took sociology out of the classroom and into the streets. With its focus on coercion rather than consensus, the social forces of stratification and inequality fueled the emergence of modern conflict theory.

Positivism and a commitment to the scientific, objective analyses of society were considered conservative and serving the established power structures and supportive of institutionalized inequality. The social and cultural changes of the late 60s and 70s moved the discipline towards a more political/activist perspective (Steinmetz and Chae, 2002). The infamous battle for the podium at the 1969 American Sociological Association Meeting in San Francisco during the height of the anti-Vietnam War Movement symbolized the transformation and the founding of the Sociology Liberation Movement. The disruption of the Presidential Address by Dr. Ralph Turner by about 75 left-wing sociologists seeking to memorialize the passing of Ho Chi Minh was a landmark event which moved the discipline, in the eyes of the general public, from its traditional value-neutral stance to one of left-wing activist (Roach, 1970).

Many sociology departments developed mission statements stressing the importance of race, class and gender as their primary focus of instruction and research. Value neutrality was replaced by moral responsibility. In the *Coming Crisis in Western Sociology*, Gouldner (1970) responded to the declining importance of Parsons and the repression of radical voices within American sociology. Though Gouldner does not offer more than a general alternative approach for the future of sociology, his "reflexive sociological" perspective declared that sociology was in a crisis situation. Attacked from both the right and the left for being either too liberal or not radical enough, his work marked a definitive break with the naïve optimism and conservatism of postwar American sociology and a recognition that modernity was not always a humane and democratic enterprise (Steinmetz and Chae).

Within the context of crisis, Gouldner (1970) suggested that larger political, cultural and social forces shape the development of sociological theory. Specifically, he argued that all theory is a tacit theory of politics. In addition, Wallerstein (2004) noted that social behavior was not amenable to the rigors of scientific inquiry and that mainstream social theory had neglected the centrality of social change.

After the high water mark of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam war movements, sociologists scrambled to find more topics and sub-fields to justify the continued growth

of the discipline. Robin Williams, Jr. (1976) suggested that sociology was engaging in “rag-picking” by looking for new topics on the periphery of the intellectual marketplace.

In this context, the role of the underdog became a focal point of sociological inquiry. Modern conflict theory emerged as the perspective of choice for this generation of sociologists and their study of minorities and social movements. Power, inequality and exploitation of the less by the more powerful emerged as the mantra of the new left both politically and sociologically.

The Fragmentation of Sociology

Gouldner’s call for a “reflexive sociology” did not go unanswered. However, it was not in the direction or form he had suggested. Building from critical theory, post-structuralism and post-modernism, the next wave of sociologists tried to explain a rapidly changing social world. Whereas prime-time sociology and left-wing/critical sociology were largely macro-social in their focus, sociology clearly moved from grand and even mid-range theories to ones which were increasingly micro-social.

Building on the early tradition of symbolic-interactionism, theories addressing issues of roles, action, discrimination and prejudice in a variety of social contexts were now in the forefront of sociology. Dramaturgy, ethnomethodology, phenomenology and the social construction of reality shaped the descriptions and analyses of studies of deviance, race, class, gender, media and culture (Agger, 1991).

Traditionally, symbolic-interaction sought to understand these issues from the outside looking in. However, this new interactionist perspective focused on the social psychological impact of these conditions and situations on the individual. Sociological inquiry increasingly promoted an inside looking out perspective. With meaning determined in the eye of the beholder, sociology quickly became fragmented. Sociology morphed into sub-cultural anthropology. The differences between the normative and non-normative were replaced by sub-cultural relativity. The “Sociology of...” was being challenged by subjective validity and deconstructionism.

During this time, sociology divided and sub-divided into a multitude of specialty and sub-specialty areas (Islam, 2004). With this proliferation of domains, numerous new journals, both print and online, emerged to provide venues for this new sociology and as vehicles of professional validation.

One common thread throughout this period of fragmentation was an atheoretical approach and belief that any theory pre-determines a true description of reality. Weber’s belief that sociology was an interpretive science (Farganis) was extrapolated to one of complete emphasis on interpretation and a disregard for science, since it was an instrument of societal repression.

Sociology Today

In the second decade of the 21st century, sociology continues to drift from its scientific roots with a commitment to synthesis. It no longer claims to be the N+1 discipline of Sorokin (1928) but a politically correct discipline which stresses insight and understanding of social forces.

Without developing paradigms similar to those in the natural sciences, sociology seriously limits its applicability to broader questions. Theory building is a rarely encountered effort in today's academic world. The use of sociological inquiry for public or organizational operations has become almost unethical to many in the discipline. Sociology as a useful social science has surrendered its rich heritage to universities schools of business who now claim the application of organizational and social theory as their domain.

Sociology, with its subject matter focused on self-discovery, is a narcissistic discipline in which practitioners attempt to generalize from the specific. The journal and texts are full of articles of micro-social behavior. This attention to individualistic experience encourages students to see sociology as something about themselves at a personal rather than a social level. Articles and papers are frequently "selfies" through which a "sociology of me" is presented as a significant social fact.

According to Jonathan and Stephan Turner (1990) sociology is an "impossible science," without an overarching theory, or at least a series of viable paradigms. Sociology's inability to either build or encourage theory has pushed the discipline from being relevant to increasingly irrelevant.

Burawoy (2005) notes that sociology has a moral obligation to critique the conventional, and especially the right-wing in matters of public interest. David Horowitz (2006), a former Berkley colleague of Burawoy, suggests that the politicalization of sociology further reduces its role and value as a social science.

Thus, today sociology is experiencing another "coming crisis." Our public acceptance is questionable in that we are perceived as a handmaiden to partisan participants in liberal debates. Our predominantly micro-social, atheoretical inquiries may be insightful and descriptive but they offer little understanding of the larger social processes which impact the majority and not the minority of society. Finally, Turner (2007) states that "the former goal of sociology was to get a seat at the table of sciences; the goal of public sociology is to kibitz at the table of public discussion."

A New Sociological Perspective

Sociology is now in a significant decline as an academic discipline and as a relevant social science. Our subject matter does not contribute to the development of useful theoretical propositions which may have important societal implications. For sociology to survive this crisis, it needs to focus more attention on some of the traditional issues and perspectives which supported the growth of the discipline more than 200 years ago.

Simmel's (Calhoun, 2012) concept of formal sociology is one approach which would be useful in redirecting the discipline from a narcissistic, descriptive and politically infused perspective to one of a more useful tool of social understanding. Identifying the forms and patterns of individual, group and organizational action and developing theoretical models of their relationships are not new ideas. However, this perspective offers utility and support for looking at issues and situations and their impact on potential social outcomes. Moving away from the micro, this perspective would again make sociology relevant for organizations and institutions. Unlike the public sociology of Burawoy, this applied sociology would bring the discipline back to its roots and the promise that it once offered to society.

This renewed focus on forms would permit a reconsideration of sociology in the tradition of Comte's original concept of social physics. Social forms and their patterns of relationship are never as consistent to the extent of mathematical or scientific laws, but they would lead to probability statements that would contribute to useful conclusions. In fact, this new sociology would facilitate scouting reports to promote individual, group and organizational improvements and successes.

Concerns about the fascist tendencies of social engineering must still be addressed as the discipline moved from an interpretive to an applied perspective. However, the discipline has wandered too long without a purpose other than self-perpetuation. We have abandoned the theoretical because we could not reach a level of acceptance commensurate with the natural or mathematical sciences. What we have failed to recognize is that sufficient sociology can be useful and valuable within a society.

We have work to do.

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Sociology Jokes

A sociologist, a philosopher, and an economist walk into a bar. The economist buys them all a round because the other two are unemployed

They say the difference between psychologists and sociologists is that while they were both unhappy as children, one blamed his parents, the other blamed everyone else.