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SPOTS ON A GNAT'S ASS, GOOD SOLDIERS, AND SOCIOLOGY DEPARTMENTS: STAN SAXTON'S PRAGMATIST APPROACH TO SOCIOLOGY

Dan E. Miller, Fred P. Pestello, and Patrick G. Donnelly

Most academics build their careers and establish reputations in the traditional manner, through research and publications. Certainly, this is not the only way to secure a place in the lore of academia. Some are great teachers who gather a large following of students. Still others get involved in professional organizations. While Stan Saxton had a respectable record of publications, was a masterful teacher, and a marvelous critic, his notable contributions to sociology came through his organizational work as a chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Dayton. After his tenure as chair, Stan continued to be a visible and moral corporate actor in the university, in professional associations, and in academia. His ability to employ sociological knowledge to organizational processes that worked to the advantage of sociology was truly remarkable. His clear vision based on a strong sense of justice was inspirational. Stan's success as an organizational player occurred during a period of transition for the University of Dayton. Up to 1977 the university was primarily a teaching institution and parochial in its orientation. When Stan was hired as chairperson in that year, a new administration aimed to make the university a leader in Catholic higher education. Stan's charge was to bring the Department of Sociology and Anthropology in line with the larger project. He found himself in the right place with the right set of circumstances to realize his vision of a sociology department, a vision that fit the conditions of work and the expectations of a private, Catholic university.

At the time of Stan's arrival, the department lacked cohesion. Even with heavy teaching loads, faculty seldom lingered in their offices. Interpersonal communication was civil between faculty members, but infrequent. There was far too much reliance on part-time faculty to cover the curriculum. Stan's intention was to establish an active, intellectual community by hiring the fight kind of faculty members, provide them with the materials necessary to do their work, negotiate a common purpose, put them together, and observe what happened. He wanted a department with a strong, humanistic commitment to teaching, research, and service. The new department was to have faculty who identified either with a conflict or interactionist perspective and who had a pragmatist bent toward solving social problems. In order for the department and its faculty to be identified as legitimate by the university and the local community, faculty members were expected to do empirical research. However, this empiricism was not to be confused with the quantitative positivistic science done by major research universities. Rather, the empirical work primarily, though not exclusively, would be qualitative in nature, culminating with processual and historically based knowledge based on thick descriptions rather than the thin, point-in-time descriptions generated through most quantitative analyses. Most importantly, he wanted sociologists with a passion for the discipline and a strong sense of social justice.

In the eight years Stan served as department chair eight new faculty were hired, each fitting the noted requirements. These new hires came from good graduate programs, though not

necessarily from top rated departments. More importantly, they were students of highly respected scholars who shared many of the values being implemented in the reorganized department. Expectations for these new faculty members were ambitious. They were to be productive scholars, good teachers, involved in University and community service, moral Corporate actors, and willing to take positions of leadership when those opportunities arose.

In time the transformation occurred. Scholarly productivity increased dramatically. An increasing number of papers were being read at scholarly meetings. Research grants were being written and funded. Faculty publications increased from only a few to a substantial number of books and journal articles. The department gained academic respect both inside and outside the University. Department members were being selected to serve on important boards and committees in the university and in the Dayton community.

In the second year of Stan's tenure a major curriculum revision was undertaken. The new curriculum established Social Problems as the major entry-level course. Courses were organized in terms of micro, meso, and macro processes and structures. Central features of the new curriculum included an urban problems orientation and a major student research sequence culminating in a Senior Seminar that focused on social problems in the local community. Advising was decentralized, new student organization was formed, and a faculty-student lounge was established in order to facilitate interaction and the development of community within the department. All these actions were based on Stan's sense that community exists as a consequence of interaction in rich and healthy social relationships (Katovich and Saxton 1984). These changes worked. The number of sociology majors steadily increased, and a sense of belonging and solidarity developed among faculty and students which continues to this day. Stan's idea of creating a benevolent and nurturing community in which sociology could be practiced and learned, though not revolutionary, was a welcome addition to a university dedicated to these principles.

PRAGMATISM AND HUMAN AGENCY

If a person spent any time in Stan's office s/he couldn't help but notice all the books on pragmatism. There they were--Mead, James, Dewey, and Peirce-- prominently displayed on the top shelf, and they had been read. It is one thing to read pragmatism, but Stan practiced it. The central premises of pragmatism formed the basis of most of his purposive actions with respect to sociology and social organization. These premises include: (1) the primacy of human agency; (2) the fact that humans engage in self-regulating, purposive behavior directed toward solving problems; (3) the belief that science is the most beneficial way of producing valid, useful knowledge; and (4) the necessity of participation in social organization for the development of self (Pestello and Saxton 1999).

For Stan it was axiomatic that humans organize their actions self-consciously in order to overcome obstacles and solve problems that confront them. He understood that humans are not just victims of present circumstances or past actions, but that they are able to consciously plan and act in ways that can improve their lot in life. When humans organize their actions in

concert with others, they can and do construct social situations and social organizations that serve mutual interests. Stan never saw complex social organization as the enemy, but rather as an untapped resource just waiting for the right people to get involved. After all, it is through social interaction that healthy social relationships and benevolent communities are formed.

Stan had little patience for fatalistic or deterministic explanations of human behavior. He understood that there is always hope. His notion of hope was based on a temporal distinction central to pragmatism. Whereas most social scientific conceptions of human action are based on the past experiences of the person (e.g., socialization theories and behaviorism), for pragmatists human action is organized as much by the future as by the past. As Stan often repeated, humans are pulled by their intentions as much as pushed by present and historical conditions. However, more than good intentions are necessary. People need a good sense of desired outcomes (or projected futures) and how to get to that desired state. Routinely, humans identify impediments to desired outcomes, generate accurate descriptions of the situation, and take action in order to overcome those problems. Of course, sociologists do this, too. For Stan it was only reasonable to use scientific knowledge in this process.

Stan understood that complex organizations and organizational processes could work for people. It gave them authority and the ability to control certain aspects of their life. In addition the organization itself gained wealth, power, and authority with successful purposive actions. He thought it was self-defeating to not get involved in social organizations. For him this was where the action took place. There was nothing mystical about it, just complex, coordinated, purposive action. Stan understood that holding a position in an organization provided a person with the authority to make decisions that would affect self and others. He felt that organizational people just as well could be moral corporate actors with a strong sense of social justice and an understanding of how to develop healthy communities. He did not agree with Weber (1947) that rational social organization necessarily defeated these purposes.

Stan had hope. He thought that sociologists should help people make sense of the impediments to desired outcomes in their lives, and to offer possible solutions when asked. He believed that sociologists occupy a unique position in contemporary society and with that position comes a responsibility. Sociologists have the necessary analytical tools, a sociological imagination (Mills 1959), and the time and ability to study social relationships and community. For Stan it simply followed that fellow sociologists had a moral obligation to help solve society's problems, not as detached, free-floating intellectuals, but as scholars involved in the community (Saxton 1993).

As a pragmatist, Stan believed that knowledge of interaction processes, social relationships, and community was best attained through empirical, testable science (Mead 1938). With clear, precise descriptions of social conditions and situations, obstacles to desired outcomes can best be known. Then, courses of action can be proposed (hypothesized) and tested through reflexive action. Like the pragmatists before him, Stan saw science, and specifically social

science, as a rational and workable method to construct an egalitarian and benevolent community.

SOCIOLOGIST AS CITIZEN SCHOLAR

Many of Stan Saxton's thoughts on the practice of sociology at most institutions are found in his 1993 article "Sociologist as Citizen Scholar: A Symbolic Interactionist Alternative to Normal Sociology." It served as a call to organize sociology, indeed academia, differently--to better serve the needs of our students, our institutions, and our communities. This paper is revolutionary in its strong implications for how departments of sociology should be structured and administered, and for how those departments should act.

Stan begins by noting that in the *Handbook of Sociology,* Neil Smelser (1988) describes the way sociological knowledge is produced at research institutions. It is a positive science that provides "objective facts" and rationalizations for use by its clients, usually government agencies, but also global corporations. For Smelser, sociology had conceptual and methodological expertise needed by government agencies, foundations, and the corporate elite. Smelser felt that sociology departments and sociologists should forge symbiotic relationships with these entities. By doing this and employing the model of quantitative positivism to produce necessary facts and rationalizations sociology would be more readily accepted as legitimate, thus protecting and, perhaps, expanding its funding sources. Stan noted that while Smelser's reasoning was sound, most sociologists were not located in research universities. Rather, they practiced their craft in more modest settings, at liberal arts colleges, comprehensive universities, and in community colleges. The resources and conditions of work at these institutions seldom are amenable for the type of research typically practiced at major research universities. Even so, Stan argued that highly significant, systematic, and organized scholarship was possible outside research universities, but only by recognizing significant organizational distinctions. Sociologists outside large research universities tend to be teaching scholars, "who serve the interests and needs of students and [those of] the academic and local communities" (Saxton 1993, p. 232).

Considering the differences between serving the interests of the state and corporate elite by research universities versus the interests of students, the academy, and local communities, Stan encouraged his readers to mount a challenge to "normal sociology." This new paradigm would be based on research that was useful for actors to improve conditions in local communities and, thus, to improve one's own conditions of living. He maintained that research that identifies problems and suggests possible solutions should be adopted (Bellah et al. 1985, 1991). In order to accomplish this new form of sociology Stan thought that alternative research methodologies and new forms of theory construction must be supported. He believed that professional organizations, academia, and community leaders would come to recognize the legitimacy of questions appropriate for qualitative and interpretive research methodologies.

Symbolic interaction, with its focus on agency and outcomes, appeared to Stan as the best perspective for accomplishing this challenge to normal sociology. For him the model example of the citizen-scholar was Symbolic Interaction's founder, Herbert Blumer. Blumer was a highly regarded teacher, an exemplary scholar, a withering critic, and an administrator who built one of the most distinguished sociology departments in the world. In addition to all this, he was an active citizen who received acclaim as a labor mediator:

The citizen-scholar approach is based upon four principles. First, sociologists should study local social structures and processes with the idea that the fruits of the research may enhance the quality of life. Second, "the community becomes a research site for theoretically informed, empirical research projects organized with the objective of creating a higher quality of community life" (Saxton 1993, p. 244). Third, the theories and research methods employed recognize that social relationships and community are constructed through the purposive actions and interactions of people. Fourth, Stan believed that research should not be detached from one's life. Rather, it must be integrated with one's teaching and community involvement.

In order to realize the citizen-scholar vision, Stan believed that it should be enacted at the department level:

Ideally, an effective strategy would be for departments of sociology to abandon their loose collections of individual scholars pursuing their own individual intellectual interests in favor of a more collective enterprise that provides more systematic knowledge of local settings. Given the atomized nature of most academic departments, a coordinated, cooperative approach is not likely to exist. Members of departments of sociology could make significant contributions to the information required to understand local social issues and problems better. Departments of sociology could provide informational services that combine the general knowledge of the discipline with specialized knowledge of the local community for purposes of improving the community's quality of life (Saxton 1993, p. 246).

The department of sociology at Dayton was to become a test case for Stan's vision.

DEPARTMENTAL FOCUS ON COMMUNITY

Several years after Stan stepped down as chair, the Department of Sociology and Anthropology was asked by the Dean of the College to consider reincorporating the Social Work Program into the department. Neither the sociology nor the social work faculty wanted the department to adopt the social work program simply as an appendage--as another bureaucratic dimension. Instead, an agreement was reached to develop a program that would fully incorporate each faculty into a unified whole. A unifying focus was necessary. The department developed a proposal promoting community as the organizing concept for the newly merged units (Pestello et al. 1996). This focus was consistent with the University's mission of service to the community and critic of society.

Stan was responsible for developing the "Research and Scholarship" component of that proposal. Drawing from his work on the citizen scholar, he identified four underlying principles behind a commitment to research in the community. First, many community problems exist that call for change. Work leading to a deeper understanding of these problems can contribute to a higher quality of life for all community members. Second, the scientific method is the most effective approach to the development of valid understanding of community problems. The department supported qualitative and interpretive methods as well as quantitative techniques in examining these problems.

The third principle Stan identified notes the possibility of making intelligent interventions in social processes and structures to increase the quality of community life. Recognizing the difficulty of creating deliberate social change, the proposal argued that valid data could shape the negotiations among different community interests and positively affect policy decisions. The fourth principle deals with the requirements of effective social intervention on the community level. A full command of the literature on a particular social problem is an important but insufficient component of intervention plans. Thickly contextualized and complex understandings of local conditions and circumstances, the history of the community, and its political structure arid rituals are required before any kind of success can be expected. Of course it was expected that the research generated locally would contribute to the broader sociological literature on social problems and community.

In addition to the switch to a substantive focus on community, the "Research and Scholarship" section of the proposal called for a more radical switch in methods. The citizen scholar approach was designed on an economy of scale to integrate teaching, research, and service into an integrated whole. By proposing manageable individual and team research, with faculty and student collaboration, the goal was to generate knowledge about community problems with faculty, students, and the community benefiting from the activity. Teaching, research, and service to the community could be accomplished in the research act. Over the last eight years, Stan's work demonstrated his commitment to this program. He participated in two community-based research projects. One collaborative project focused on the impact of parental involvement in their children's education. In this research he identified obstacles to parental involvement. Based on his interviews with teachers, administrators, parents, and students he helped design a program to increase parental involvement. This program was partially successful after the first year, increasing parental involvement at the elementary school level, but not at the upper levels where routines had been established. In the other project he and a group of students studied how a religious community could be established in contemporary society.

Stan brought his message to all who would listen. He taught two sections of Social Problems per term. In his classes he encouraged his students to recognize the world as it is, and that they could make a difference in enhancing the quality of life in their communities. He sponsored numerous independent studies each term, and had an informal student research seminar running continually. He challenged his students to lead a considered life, to be aware

of the rewards, the difficulties, and the potential obstacles they face in their social relationships and career development. He warned them of "dangerous individualism," and of "the perseverance and intensification of class bifurcation". He naturally assumed that the sociological imagination, sociological concepts, and understandings would be helpful to them throughout their lives. He implored his students to "do good work for themselves and for their communities or they wouldn't amount to a spot on a gnat's ass."

Every year the sociology department at UD ranks at or near the top in terms of the number of students taught per faculty member. We teach a lot of students. This is not due to some junior faculty teaching extremely large sections and other faculty members carrying light loads. Everyone teaches about the same number of students, including Stan, who was for several years the most senior member of the department. Stan not only pulled his weight in student numbers, but he was an incredibly gifted and influential teacher. He had a strong following among students and an outstanding reputation throughout the university, a reputation that was well deserved. For many students their education wouldn't be complete without taking Saxton's Social Problems course.

In many respects Stan's relationships with students was inspirational. He engaged them, inviting them into the conversation--to become full participants in intellectual pursuits. It was clear that he cared deeply about his students, spending endless hours talking with them, inviting them to his house for dinner, meeting them on their turf, and always listening to them. He allowed them to express themselves--to find their voice. This is not to say that Stan did not take strong stands on issues. He did. His take on it was that sociology couldn't be successful merely by standing in front of a classroom talking to students. The students must become engaged in the enterprise. Any good social psychologist would agree. Perhaps the most notable thing about Stan was that he engaged his students (and everyone else for that matter) in dialogue, always welcoming them "into the conversation" as equals. This practice of engaging people in conversation--inviting them to participate in the processes of interpersonal, community, and intellectual life was the main point for Stan. Reading and dreaming about these things were merely phases in the social act. Action was required, and a major requirement of community is that its members must interact with each other. Stan's pragmatism and humanism are clearly exemplified in his work, and all his work focused on how to develop healthy communities, healthy social relationships, and healthy selves.

HIRE WISELY AND TURN THEM INTO "GOOD SOLDIERS"

Although teaching is the most important faculty activity at a comprehensive university like Dayton, Stan realized that service within the institution also is vitally important. In one respect he simply felt that faculty members owe it to the organization that employs them. More significantly, Stan argued that sociologists too often failed to be sociological about their universities and their own place within them. Faculty service, although shunned by many, has implications for career advancement as well for departmental well-being. Any basic sociological analysis should make this point obvious.

Stan was painfully aware of the widely publicized closings of a few sociology departments in the early 1980s. As he said many times in person and at least once in print "on too many campuses few would care, or perhaps even notice if the sociology department was eliminated." Fearing an administrative slippery slide into oblivion Stan argued that sociology departments must work to ensure that they are not marginal to their college or university. More specifically, he thought that sociology faculty should get involved in the intellectual, governing, and administrative processes within the university. As a reflexive sociologist he understood that a major bargaining strategy is to make oneself a valuable, if not indispensable commodity.

By being a "good soldier" and doing one's fair share of committee work outside of the department, individual faculty members, and by inference sociologists and their departments, gain visibility, credibility, and respect. Colleagues and administrators see the significance of the contributions made by the individual, by sociologists, and by sociology departments. By situating oneself appropriately and getting appointed to important positions in the college and university, service work allows the faculty to protect the interests of their department and to use sociological knowledge pragmatically. The impressions made by individual sociologists and sociology departments follow from the interactions between sociologists, colleagues, and administrators. Many important decisions within the academy are made by committee. Administrators seldom make critical decisions alone and without counsel. They consult and rely on the recommendations of the select individuals and committees within the institution. Representatives from one's department must be part of these conversations for the department to fair well.

Stan did more than his fair share of committee and administrative work, and he did it well. He was a major moral voice within the university. Although he could and often did argue vigorously, even those who disagreed with him noted that he brought keen insights and questions to the debate. One always knew where Stan stood on an issue. He loved to challenge conventional thinking and complacency if for no other reason than to ensure against the onset groupthink. Stan was, indeed, a good soldier. He wrote passionate letters to the Dean, the Provost, and the President of the University concerning pending policies or worrisome trends. Administrators knew that in his heart he cared deeply for the university and its mission. His ideas and opinions carried considerable weight.

Faculty members hired over the past twenty-two years have gone on to take important leadership roles in the department, college, the university, and the local community in such positions as Associate Dean, Faculty Senators, Task Force Directors, Program Directors, Board Members and chairs of important committees. Sociologists now sit on several boards of directors of community agencies and act as consultants in local governmental and non-governmental organizations. Why has this department thrived during Stan's tenure as Chair and beyond? We believe it is because Stan began a pattern of hiring wisely and persuading the faculty to be "good soldiers." Stan used this deeply ironic term completely without irony. He truly believed in duty, honor, and justice.

Stan initiated a pattern of hiring that continued past his Chairmanship. All new faculty must fit with the mission of the university and the mission of the department. He was swayed neither by trendy theories nor heavily promoted data analysis techniques. Hiring procedures were based on substantive, theoretical, and methodological specialties that would contribute to the direction the university and the department was taking. Stan's acid test was to ask how the new hire would make the department better. As chair he established the practice (often used) that, if the department was not satisfied with a pool of candidates, then no hiring would be done. The search would begin, again, the following year.

During the recruitment process Stan was not shy in promoting candidates who might show him up. Without exception he would clearly state, "I refuse to hire anyone who isn't brighter than I am." Whether this ever occurred is open to question, but he sincerely believed what he said. That said, Stan did not suffer fools or showboats kindly. He argued for good colleagues and against perceived prima donnas. Once again, the measure was the goodness of fit between the candidate and the department. Stan understood that healthy communities require citizens who interact with each other, and who form complex, interdependent relationships with each other. Departmental citizens must cooperate and pull their own weight.

Few things infuriated Stan more than university faculty members whom he thought were ripping off the system, the free riders who do not do their fair share of the work in all areas including participating in the life of the institution. It was Stan's contention that we are hired to teach well, do sound scholarship, and perform service to the university and to the community. The better these things are accomplished the more impact sociology has on the university, the community, and the students.

The Sociology Department at the University of Dayton was well served, not only by Stan's direct participation, but also by the model for the sociology department and the practice of sociology that he established. He implored departmental colleagues to get involved in the conversation. He encouraged participation in committee and administrative work. He was instrumental in getting people placed in important positions, and he was generous with his time giving sound advice and support. Stan understood that everyone benefited from each other's service. His intention was to construct a benevolent and nurturing community in which sociology would stand out. It was basic sociology to Stan.

NOTES

1. The publication record includes three edited volumes (Saxton, Voydanoff, and Zukowski 1984; Couch, Saxton, and Katovich 1986; Miller, Katovich, and Saxton 1997), and several incisive articles on research methods (Saxton and Couch 1975; Saxton 1982; Katovich, Saxton, and Powell 1986).

2. Most of the criticism is in the oral tradition of symbolic interactionists. However, the reader can refer to his critical essay on the future of symbolic interaction (Saxton 1989).

3. The authors could not use the name "Saxton" to refer to Stan. It did not read well. Everyone who ever met Stan and talked with him, knew him as Stan. We will keep with this informal usage out of respect for him and for his ability to engage people on a personal level.

4. Stan's organizational skills were evident in several arenas. He was a founding member of the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction (Saxton 1997), and served as its President in 1995/1996. In addition, Stan was actively involved in the Midwest Sociological Society, serving on numerous committees. His organizational finesse was, perhaps, most notable when he served as ramrod in the New Iowa School writing projects (Saxton 1995).

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