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Bernard, Luther Lee

(29 October 1881–23 January 1951)

Robert C. Bannister

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Bernard, Luther Lee (29 October 1881–23 January 1951), sociologist, was born in Russell County, Kentucky, the son of Hiram H. Bernard and Julia Wilson, farmers. Although the senior Bernard showed courage fighting on the Union side in a border state, his petty tyranny contributed to the hardship and emotional turmoil of Luther's youth, which was spent mostly in West Texas and southwestern Missouri. A single bright spot was provided by two charismatic young teachers who introduced him to Charles Darwin and modern science at the ungraded high school he attended in Gordon, Texas. Otherwise, as his younger sister later commented, his attitude toward his family was "bitter" and "antagonistic."

Bernard earned a B.S. in 1900 at Pierce Baptist College in Missouri, where he taught science from 1901 to 1903. After two years as instructor of languages at Lamar (Mo.) College, he entered the University of Missouri, where he obtained a B.A. in 1907. There he studied with Charles A. Ellwood, a Chicago graduate already known for his theory that society possessed a "psychic" rather than a "real" unity, a psychological sociology influenced by Charles H. Cooley and John Dewey. Bernard's later attack on this view fueled a conflicted relationship with his mentor throughout his career, as Ellwood became an outspoken critic of what he termed sociological "objectivism."

At the University of Chicago, Bernard received the Ph.D. in 1910 for his thesis "An Objective Standard of Social Control," which was published in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1911. In this work he drew upon the work of Emile Durkheim among others to attack the tradition of psychological sociology from Lester Ward through Albion Small, now Bernard's major professor. A scientific "social control," he argued, required that sociology focus on the group rather than the individual, and on concrete realities rather than abstractions such as "instincts" and "social processes." Although Small once ranked him with George Vincent and W. I. Thomas as the best of his students, Bernard in parting displayed his lifelong maverick tendencies in a blistering six-page letter criticizing the Chicago sociology department for being aloof toward students, top-heavy in theory, and inept in finding jobs for its graduates. This was the first of many such confrontations during his career.

After being exiled, as he saw it, to a position at the University of Florida for three years, Bernard eventually taught at more than half a dozen institutions, including the Universities of Minnesota (1918–1925) and North Carolina (1928–1929), Washington University in St. Louis (1929–1946), and Pennsylvania State (1947–1950). Although his onetime colleague Howard Odum dubbed him "America's

favorite peripatetic professor of sociology," these frequent moves reflected a hypersensitive, often prickly personality, coupled with a penchant for womanizing that began soon after his first marriage in 1911, to Francis Fenton, a fellow graduate student at Chicago with whom he had one child. They were divorced in 1922. At Minnesota, Bernard finally resigned under pressure from administrators concerning charges of a common-law marriage, then illegal in the state. In September 1925, shortly before going to Cornell for a year, he married Jessie Ravitch, a brilliant undergraduate more than twenty years his junior, who later became a sociologist whose reputation as Jessie Bernard eclipsed his own. Although their marriage lasted until Bernard's death and produced three children, his continued philandering plagued their stormy union, while rumors of the events at Minnesota, combined with his combative personality, clouded his reputation for several years.

Despite difficulties securing a first-rate position, Bernard became a leading proponent of a radical variant of "objectivist" sociology. For William F. Ogburn, whom he regarded as his chief rival in the field, and F. Stuart Chapin, his chairman at Minnesota, "objectivity" demanded not only that sociologists confine their attention to the externals of human behavior and quantify wherever possible but also avoid value judgments. Bernard, in contrast, insisted that a positivistic sociology requires a "projective logic," akin to C. Wright Mills's later call for a "sociological imagination," whereby sociologists posit an ideal state as the goal of their analysis. For Bernard, this ideal was the perfect adjustment of individuals to their environment. In *Instinct* (1924), the work for which he was best known, he argued that since most so-called instincts are ossified customs and traditions, social progress is possible through manipulation of the environment.

During the 1930s Bernard turned his attention to the history of sociology, collecting "life histories" of his contemporaries and, with Jessie Bernard, researching the history of positivism presented in *Origins of American Sociology* (1943). He also played an active role in professional politics, mailing potential allies multiple carbons of letters on a variety of subjects—"L. L. B.'s onionskins," as they became known. In 1930–1931 he mobilized a group of "rebels" to oppose the policies of the American Sociological Society, particularly the increasing emphasis on narrowly quantitative research. Elected president in 1932, he shaped the annual program to include papers on contemporary social issues and attempted with limited success to increase the number of women on the program. In his presidential address he attacked the research establishment and their increasing control of funds through educational foundations. In 1936 Bernard found himself excluded from a newly formed "Sociological Research Association," which he viewed as an elitist plot.

At war with the American Sociological Association and its leaders through the remainder of his career, Bernard resigned from the society in 1938, carrying on the battle in the pages of the *American Sociologist*, the journal he edited from 1938 to 1947. Although his call for an "objective standard" appeared at times to undercut his populist defense of the "little man," he opposed what he viewed as a

business-dominated New Deal, once characterizing Franklin Roosevelt as “ninety percent Eleanor and ten percent mush.” He later spoke against the rise of fascism at a time when many American sociologists remained silent. Perhaps the best-known North American sociologist in Latin America, he held a research grant in Argentina in 1926–1927 and helped disseminate the work of South American sociologists as a frequent reviewer for *Social Forces*. In *War and Its Causes* (1944; repr. 1972), a work that later attracted attention during the Vietnam era, he denounced the barbarity of war throughout history. Bernard died in State College, Pennsylvania.

Although Bernard trained relatively few graduate students, he counted among his disciples the sociologist George Lundberg, whose “operationalism” carried the tradition of sociological objectivism into the post–World War II decades. *Origins of American Sociology* remains a major study of the Comtean tradition in the United States, and the private and public papers Bernard carefully preserved constitute a major resource for histories of the discipline. As with many academic gadflies, his activities won him more critics than friends. To undergraduate students from Minnesota to Penn State, however, Bernard was an exciting, dedicated teacher. To his allies in the profession, as to his later defenders, “L. L. B.” was an important if increasingly isolated voice for a more democratic, socially committed sociology in the interwar years.

Bibliography

Bernard’s papers are at the Pennsylvania State University. The manuscript divisions of the University of Chicago also holds many of the autobiographies Bernard collected for his unfinished history of contemporary American sociology. Other books by Bernard include *An Introduction to Social Psychology* (1926), *The Fields and Methods of Sociology* (1934), *Sociology and the Study of International Relations* (1934), and *Social Control in Its Sociological Aspects* (1939). Bernard’s life and career are detailed in Robert C. Bannister, *Sociology and Scientism: The American Quest for Objectivity, 1880–1940* (1987), and Jessie Bernard: *The Making of a Feminist* (1991). For sympathetic assessments of Bernard’s role as academic “radical,” see Arthur J. Vidich and Stanford M. Lyman, *American Sociology: Worldly Rejections of Religion and their Directions* (1985), and John F. Galliher and Robert A. Hagan, “L. L. Bernard and the Original American Sociologist,” *American Sociologist* 20 (1989): 134–43. Obituaries appear in the *American Sociological Review* 16 (1951): 262–63, 285–97, *Social Forces* 29 (1951): 480–81; *Sociology and Social Research* 36 (1952): 215–19; and the *New York Times*, 25 Jan. 1951.

See also

Ellwood, Charles Abram (1873-1946), sociologist

Cooley, Charles Horton (1864-1929), sociological theorist

Dewey, John (1859-1952), philosopher and educator

Ward, Lester Frank (1841-1913), sociologist and geologist

Small, Albion Woodbury (1854-1926), sociologist

Vincent, George Edgar (1864-1941), educator and nonprofit institution administrator

Thomas, William Isaac (1863-1947), sociologist

Odum, Howard Washington (1884-1954), sociologist

Ogburn, William Fielding (1886-1959), sociologist

Chapin, Francis Stuart (1888-1974), sociologist

Mills, C. Wright (1916-1962), sociologist

Roosevelt, Franklin Delano (1882-1945), thirty-second president of the United States