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On the Current State of Sociology

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Sociology today, much like other social sciences, is still alive and well but its actual place and purpose in contemporary society lacks much admiration. I suppose a legitimate question here is – is sociology really making a difference in society? Granted, the many practitioners and writers within the ambit of sociology, as a discipline, may find great pleasure in doing what they do (e.g., research and writing). But is that all there is to sociology – research, teaching and writing? Is the general US public, for instance, aware of any inroads made by sociology, if we can suggest that inroads and public progress is being made? Though sociology has come a long way since the days of its early pioneers, we're still not too far removed from the vision of early sociologists like Émile Durkheim and his hope for the ability of sociology to be able to resolve real social issues. In other words, it is not enough to simply address social issues, like rampant inequality (economic and otherwise), but actually making a difference in terms of achieving resolution seems to be a goal that is constantly outpacing, if not eluding, sociology altogether.

In looking at the current state of sociology overall, then, one ought to take into consideration its historical trajectory – its rise, progress, or lack thereof. As such, one can argue that while sociology has burgeoned in research and writing on an array of subject matter - as in family sociology (Farrell et al., 2012), much is left to be desired of such progress in the public sphere (i.e., for the benefit of the masses), or even for the people themselves upon whom research is done. In other words are the research subjects themselves, for instance, benefiting from the research in any adequate measure? If so, how?

It can be thus be construed as gross exploitation for sociologists to continue to simply collect data from the poor and underprivileged, etc., without realizing or even purposely aiming toward real change in the lives of these 'subjects.' Thus, as is quite often the case, sociology becomes too embroiled in sociopolitical conceits (cf. Beliaev and Burtorin, 1982), or ethnocentric malaise. This suggests that in its study of society, sociology should also be concerned with the public's benefit, as well as the public's reception of sociology. In looking at sociology as the study of social relations and society, one observer, for instance, considers that it is also important for sociology to pay attention to its public reception (Smelser, 2003). In other words how is the general public understanding what sociologists have to say? If sociology is to be meaningful (to benefit as many as possible), then interaction or interface with various issues and the public, becomes critically important. After all, sociology should not just be for sociologists but rather a dialogue that spans an array of topics and be made relevant to a wide variety of people.

But in taking a look at part of the heart of the issue, i.e., addressing where the discipline is going substantively, methodologically, and politically, it is rather crucial that we now step back a bit and actually define the term sociology. In a broad but accurate sense, sociology can be seen as "the scientific study of social relations, groups, institutions, and society" (Smelser 2003:6). This suggests that sociology addresses both the one-on-one (micro perspective) as well as larger structures or groups (macro level) in its attempt to study society in an empirical and systematic way. But aside from that sociology also attempts to address the many social ills in society (such as socio-economic inequality or victims of drug abuse) as seen in applied sociology, for instance (cf. Zajdow, 2005). The critical part here is seen in the 'attempt.' In other words, many sociological practitioners attempt to address social ills and human suffering, while not necessarily offering any solution to these pressing social problems.

Others, however, in their visions for sociology are committed to a more rigid scientific structure, remaining dispassionate and ‘objective’ in the process (Smelser, 2003). The point here is that in terms of where the discipline is going in the substantive sense, various sociologists think and operate differently in their vision quest. As such, although there are overarching methods and theories, etc., one would certainly not find every sociologist thinking alike in terms of their view of society and what that should be. Another way of looking at it is that some may place a heavier emphasis on maintenance of social structure, while others stress social change, and still others may pay more attention to the arts and aesthetics.

When it comes to the methodological sense, there is no one particular method that all sociologists use. In a more general sense, while the scientific method impacts both the founding of sociology as well as contemporary sociology (in terms of empirical outlook, etc.), various sociologists stress a variety of qualitative methods, quantitative, and mixed methods in their professional approach. In qualitative methods, for example, some emphasize the need for in-depth interviews for better understanding certain social issues (such as understanding Christian views on poverty and inequality). While it is true that quantitative analysis usually entails larger numbers (i.e., bigger samples) than qualitative analysis, it all has to do with the objective as well, for carrying out a particular research project. Thus, if a researcher’s goal is getting more at the rich information and thick description, then qualitative research is a more likely path to follow. However, it is also fair to say that multi-method approaches are not altogether shunned in the discipline (White et al., 2012). In terms of where the discipline is going methodologically, then, it all depends on the objective and research design of the sociologist.

Granted, more quantitative research attracts bigger amounts in terms of funding, and that also amounts to more publications. This seems to be a general trend that American sociology is following presently (i.e., leaning heavily toward quantitative research). In spite of that, some sociologists still see the benefit of engaging research ‘subjects’ in a one-on-one fashion, going in-depth to really get to the heart of an issue. But then again some practitioners will always find alternative ways to engage sociology in the real world. One sociologist did just that, as she saw herself more as a public intellectual, as opposed to one entrapped by the (sociological) institution (Gaines, 1998). From that standpoint, her (i.e. Donna Gaines) way of engaging sociology was by first finding that optimal freedom to engage; so that she wrote and spoke about social and cultural issues that were important to her – that which she found as really stirring her passion in and about the real world (Ibid.). No doubt, her experience having to address a suicide pact of four teenagers also impacted her worldview (Ibid.) and sociological methods as well.

This is very crucial in gaining a broader scope of where sociology is heading methodologically, seeing that one can still find sociologists who break away from the norm of having their goals and priorities set by the institution. From somewhat of an opposite angle, another sociologist – Lynn Smith-Lovin, offers her perspective on the type of life that the discipline should take on. She argues that the more similar sociologists are in areas like their basic assumptions, core concepts and methodological techniques, the more likely the association between them and the bonds strengthened (Smith-Lovin, 1999). This is from the standpoint of sharing a common work agenda, whereby allowing communication to be more fruitful. While this seems to be sentiments shared largely within the sociological enterprise, one should be mindful of what Gaines refers to as ‘insider trading’ (1998: 457). This refers to the notion of talking to each other while ignoring the masses; e.g. not writing so that the public could understand.

In terms of where the discipline is going politically, it seems as though there is pressure for sociologists to conform to the boundaries set by mainstream journals, since individual and departmental rankings are also based on that (Calhoun and Duster, 2005). Sociologists from

that standpoint are very careful not to upset the status quo. In other words, the idea is to toe the line so that acceptance can be gained within the institution. This is also the case since sociologists, like other professionals, depend largely on funding from outside sources, foundations, private donors, etc. And to receive funding also implies to go along with the established rules of the funding source. Unlike following the 'mainstream' for political reasons (such as funding, etc.), however, Burawoy shows how in the march of history, certain sociologists and social activists (like W.E.B. DuBois and Jane Addams) have left their definite mark both on society's imagination and social awareness (Burawoy, 2007). This is making the point that in its pioneering and historical trajectory, some figures stand out for following their conscience (whether or not it meant going against the mainstream) and have been noticed by the sociological enterprise for their outstanding courage.

Through it all, in my opinion, sociology is sending mixed messages to the public and is not transparent enough. By this I mean that on the one hand you find a handful of sociologists who are willing to be relevant, to adapt their research orientation and method to suit a particular social issue. But on the other hand, many practitioners in the discipline are not willing to go against the norm or expected boundaries of the (sociological) institution. This can be seen as contributing to a great lapse or perhaps more of an immense lack of reflexive sociology, which is actually desperately needed in order for the discipline to earnestly engage society. In other words, to gain wider recognition by fellow practitioners, to keep in lock step with the rules of funding, or to simply follow the mainstream in order to maintain identity, many are willing to sacrifice originality, creativity, intuition and conscience for the sake of walking the straight line of institutional expectations. The very few who dare to deviate from that line are considered to be taking risks and may or may not be rewarded for it in the end. But it is well worth it to grab the reins of sociology and take the risk if by that, some greater good is intended and realized; and that means the public benefiting in a real tangible sense because someone cared. From that standpoint, a sociologist shouldn't feel guilty for going the extra mile to see some burden alleviated to a great degree; for instance, helping single unemployed parents to get jobs to sustain themselves and their families. At the end of the day, then, sociology should be able to take an introspective look and feel good because someone walked the walk and not simply sat behind some office chair with only constant dreaming to call his/her own.

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