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WHAT KIND OF SOCIOLOGY IS USEFUL TO SOCIAL  
WORKERS?\*

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Both social workers and sociologists have been trying desperately for more than a century to live down their miscellaneous ancestry. Both are still embarrassed that their disciplines are rooted historically in the work of old-time clergy, police, utopian philosophers, sentimentalists, reactionary manipulators, and radical thinkers and agitators. Nevertheless it was from those men's and women's concerns, their perceptions of social problems, their efforts at social amelioration and reform or revolution, and their inter-cult conflicts that the two corps of modern professionals sprang.

Both professions have sought to create modish images competitively useful in the evolving academic, political, and business worlds of the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Both have tried to buttress these images with protective educational and accreditational procedures as well as with the latest "scientific" fashions.

The principal image sociologists seek to project is that of being allegedly value-free scientists wedded to esoteric terminology, to impressive quantification, to statistical manipulation, and to theories of human interrelationships and social structure based upon what is claimed to be "hard data". Even the apparent rigor of genetic determinism and sociobiology as well as of behaviorism often tempts the scientific.

The principal image offered by social case-work professionals came at first to be an emulation of something hopefully resembling that of the physician or the psychiatrist. Then as critics tarnished that image with characterizations of authoritarianism and of monopolistic and entrepreneurial practices, social workers strove to depend upon the more generalized prestige of professionalism as the basis for their public image. Types of social worker other than case-worker attempt to partake of as much of the professions' changing image as they are able. Whether as case-workers, group-workers, or community

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organization specialists, they all try to have themselves seen as practicing healing arts dramatized by suitable terminology, routines, professional accreditation, and dignity.

How different these images are from what is often seen and felt by sociological undergraduates and graduate students, welfare clients, legislators, institutional board members, and administrators! Rarely does a distraught welfare "case" invade a board room in person. Rarely does a resentful B.A. in sociology complain to a university trustee. Few legislators ever really see the human degradation with which social workers try to cope. Nor do legislators want to become conscious of the degree to which they and their industrial sponsors contribute to that degradation. No one who really wants to obtain a Ph.D. speaks out during his or her comprehensive oral examination about experiences with personal dehumanization and exploitation suffered at the hands of the examiners or their colleagues. The smothering depersonalization of bureaucracies in any field should be an old story to social workers and sociologists, but—of course—"we all do all that we can" to prevent it from taking place here!

Such a producer of TV "reality fiction" as Frederick Wiseman scarcely gives a statistically defensible cross-section of a social-welfare center in one of his most recent productions, entitled "Welfare." Most of the "professionals" he deals with, too, are not fully accredited M.S.W.'s. His caricature, however, should unsettle the many professions who now hearten themselves by thinking of the show-pieces of their discipline and who shelter themselves from discomfort with ready rationalizations about the overwhelming tide of "unprofessional situations" for which personnel, finance, and facilities are lacking. Show-piece social work is not commonly available. The professionalization of all social welfare policies and practices is a tremendously complicated challenge but one that social workers can scarcely avoid facing.

A reviewer (Waters, 1975, p. 62) summarizes this TV fild thus: "Everyone in Wiseman's study—welfare administrators as well as clients—emerges as a victim of the system's bureaucratic horrors.... W World War II veteran despairingly plucks cards and forms from each of his pockets. 'Jesus, look at all these places I been,' he pleads. 'People keep sending me back here. And I still ain't got carfare.' Case-workers are robotized drones, their compassion deadened by frustration.... Downstairs in the records division, machines clack out a symphony of depersonalization; computers transform perforated tapes into digital readouts, lives are processed and filed. Upstairs, nothing works so neatly. 'What you telling me 'bout technicalities?' a black man tells a social worker. 'I'm talking 'bout eatin'.'" As another reviewer, an experienced and perceptive sociologist (Miller, 1975), wisely adds: "Everybody is caught. Welfare workers have little discretion. They are torn between administrative responsibility to prevent deception and follow rules and the needs and illnesses of people. But greater discretionary power might mean that welfare workers would have too much power over clients—though I was surprised," he added, "by

the number of welfare workers who were actively trying to help recipients."

Wiseman has not gotten around as yet to doing a piece of his TV "reality fiction" about sociology teaching and research. I hope that he does. It might or might not be more difficult to present such efforts in dramatic form, but the parallels between his welfare caricature and what actually happens in many research projects and teaching situations would become apparent. Too many tired, bureaucratized, and underworked senior faculty exploit non-tenured junior faculty and students. Overworked junior faculty buck for tenure of employment or an advancement by feeding their undergraduates slick and safe text materials, films, and lectures. They want their mobs of students to respond as required on examination forms that can be machine-graded. The result resembles mental programming or brainwashing. It has little in common with idealistic educational notions about developing the individual student's curiosity and motivation to grow intellectually. In all too many graduate schools, ridden by depersonalized scientism, sociology students come to identify research with grantpersonship—how to enter into profitable game-like relationships with fund sources—rather than with the more perilous "game" of doubting the accuracy of some aspect of traditional social knowledge or of questioning the human utility of some aspect of the so-called "social system." (Lee, 1966, chap. 14) Thus they never delve intimately and empathetically into the woes of an ignored or oppressed group, into the malfeasances and conspiracies so common among those in power, nor into ways common to the masses of manipulated "normals" who make social change so difficult. It is a lot easier to get an advanced degree by helping a graduate professor complete a bit of contract "research" (maybe "research and development" or "evaluation research" for a Federal agency, a corporation, a trade association, or a foundation) than it is to be so pretentious as to do independent research on a pressing social problem.

So much for the professional facades social workers and sociologists try to develop and maintain. So much also for brief glances into the chambers of horrors behind many of those facades. Just how should social workers and sociologists try to have themselves pictured popularly and to specific and relevant publics? How should they deal with their truly overpowering constituencies and their highly controversial intellectual, professional, and social problems? Are both social workers and sociologists now all too often merely symptoms of our society's malaise and/or tools of short-sighted social exploiters and oppressors? If so, do they have to be?

How should sociologists and social workers face up to such an accusation as that of the three Nobel prize-winning economists, Gunnar Myrdal of Sweden, Jan Tinbergen of The Netherlands, and Kenneth J. Arrow of Harvard University? They state:

"The wastefulness of Western economies—in energy, in food and in the despoiling of the environment—is not an oversight, but an inherent trend in a system which produces primarily for corporate profit. The economic crisis in industrial democracies raises serious questions about the very

nature of the economic system of these societies." (Quoted by Coffin, 1975, p. 1)

This crisis is not merely economic. It has deepset ramifications that are political and also more broadly social, cultural, and psychological. This wastage, these inconsistencies, this inadequacy of a mythological "system," these forces making for disintegration and for sweeping reorganization are the scene of social work and of sociological professional activities. The principal problem of both of our professions is that far too few of our professionals recognize this. In shrinking from perceiving it, we do not know whether we strive to lead creatively or are content with mere walkon parts dependes upon the extent upon rewriting outmoded scenarios in terms of today's and tomorrow's needs and then upon standing firm in acting in terms of the rewritten version.

The crisis of our times also raises another question: Since there are many kinds of sociology vying for preeminence, what kind of sociology best relates itself to the professional concerns and needs of social workers? Stated a little bit differently, since the various types of sociology appear to serve interests of diverse groups, whose sociology is likely to be most helpful to social workers?

In trying to reply to these questions, I should first like to insist that the alleged gap between social work and sociology is both an invidiously artificial one and one damaging to the two disciplines. For sociologists, the gap reflects their long struggle—mentioned at the outset—to disown their reformist origins. For social workers, the gap is symptomatic of their anxiety to be recognized as functionally useful professionals and not just as step-children of an omnium-gatherum college category such as they long saw sociology to be. It is true that social work can be defined as an application of sociology and psychology to individual, group, and community problems, but this makes the relationship look like a one-way linkage. That conception presumes that sociologists and psychologists develop the methods, perspectives, theories, and even techniques of application, the remedial measures, and that social workers learn from those specialists what may be useful in their profession and then go forth to apply the memorized formulas. But this leaves out consideration the highly significant contribution of praxis, of the clinical study of actual human behavior, to sociology and psychology not only in their application to human problems but also as theoretical disciplines. Dedicated social workers use their experiences to test and to modify not only traditional social wisdom but also as well the psychological and sociological theories they have learned. Individuals and group moving back and forth between practical social work and critical theoretical efforts in the social sciences have thus made crucial contributions.

How should social workers and sociologists now try to have themselves perceived: As I see it, both groups should discard their artificial facades and along with those facades their concern about fighting for the trappings of status within the antiquated hierarchy of older professions. Both that hierarchy and the basic definition of professionalism have long needed reorganizat-

tion and redefinition. The mystiques of science and of health practitioners are wearing thin from growing popular awareness of the human fallibility behind professional masques. Social workers and sociologists should willingly have themselves seen clearly for what they are: trained people who are seeking to understand and to cope with human problems in an outworn organizational setting that requires drastic revision. They should relate to their clients and students not as priestly authoritarians but as fellow seekers after helpful knowledge and solutions, not as co-participants in a game of bluff or of scrounging but as co-workers in the struggle to reorganize society. That's a tall order, one from which the entrenched in any calling or institution shrink, but society is being reorganized and will continue to be reorganized—sometimes drastically—again and again. The question is not whether or not to reorganize but whether will-informed policy-makers or charismatic opportunists will provide the leadership.

How then should our professions deal with our constituencies? Both social workers and sociologists are commonly routinized, co-opted, and even robotized by being overloaded with clients or with students. Great pressures develop to treat each client or student as a depersonalized unit to be handled as part of a bulk or to be subjected to handy formulas. A former case-worker (Jacobs, pp. 253-254) generalizes the situation in a manner that fits a great many in either profession: In response to a comment that a given person was "young and idealistic and wants to help people," his supervisor asserted, "Well, please tell him what the story is! And what is that 'story'? The former case-worker says it "means one must perform the everyday function, whether legitimate or otherwise, in a manner that is no secret to anyone who keeps his eyes open". Witness the myth of services.... [The] worker... receives an elaborate code of instructions for recording services he never really performs. The deception has grown out of the need to fulfill the terms of the reimbursement procedure of the federal and state agencies." Just as certain routines have to be performed to make college credits appear to mean what they are claimed to mean, so the welfare agency has to be able to "prove" that the prescribed services were performed.

How else can social workers and sociologists deal with constituencies? They can unionize and fight for adequate facilities, for professional freedom, and for sufficient colleagues. Is this possible within our society as it is now organized? I believe that most informed people would agree that it is now difficult. Then what should conscientious professionals do to correct the situation? Naturally I do not recommend "copping out." The problem of social workers and of sociologists do not differ greatly from those of other people-serving professionals in our society. To work for the reorganization of society so that social workers and sociologists, among others, can do the tasks they see need to be done is a conception that shocks and even terrifies many middle-class citizens. The time is passing, however, when we can hide from such a sweeping need by talking about an obstinate and self-perpetuating stratum dominated by a "subculture of poverty." We also have other subculture problems—those of the smug professionals and of the conspiratorial managers of business

and government among others. Changed conditions of life and control can modify any human group and its subculture.

As the Nobel prizewinners I quoted earlier put it, we are faced with "serious questions about the very nature of the economic system" of our society. Our depression of the 1930's ended only in the vast destruction of World War II. That war is estimated to have cost 60 million human lives, and six-seventh of those killed were on the so-called "winning side." Only one-seventh dies on the "losing" Axis side! We have been sheltered from looking realistically until lately at out basically continuing and growing crisis only by the still-continuing series of wars and by the fact that our military-industrial complex through our government's aid has become the arms manufacturers, brokers, and arbiters of the world. Will our present depression end only in World War III with a human cost even greater than that of World War II, a cost that might conceivably even mean human exterminations? (Lee, 1973, p. 80)

To continue a discussion of my questions, how should our professions now deal with our highly controversial intellectual and social problems? Quite briefly, I would say: forthrightly and radically. The human situation today is so grave that only such an approach to our problems can be justified. Only thus can we cease being symptoms of social malaise, cogs to social disintegration. In middleclass circles, these sound like hard lines, lines somehow to be brushed or rationalized aside, but we cannot avoid such a recourse much longer. The profligate waste of our so-called economic "system" is making radical social reorganization more and more pressing.

Now, to the basic question to which I am devoting myself: Among the many kinds of sociology—functionalist, neo-positivist, ethnomethodological, Marxist, cultural, ethological, sociobiological, symbolic interactionist, and all the rest—what sort is most useful to social work and thus to human welfare? I take the position that it is the kind of sociology—roughly called "humanist"—that will make a lot of social work as currently practiced a thing of the past. It is the kind of society as to make social work not only much different but much more important in the service of human goals.

In spite of the notable role in social science down through the years of concern to find human solutions to social problems, by the late 1940's sociology was under a cloud of repressive Joseph McCarthyism and another cloud of abstract, functionalist, and scientific Talcott-Parsonianism. The former stimulated a nervous dread of the controversial, of any basic or radical approach to human affairs. The latter, dogmatic and elitist, tried to erect the all-explaining sociology out of terms vague enough to avoid being contradicted by direct observation of human behavior. Pressing social problems then as usual concerned social workers and daring journalists, but sociologists were more likely to deal with ideas and symbols they looked upon as subtle and profound, the problems not of society but of sociological theory and method, or to spend their time on accumulating data for those in power.

The highlights of previous sociological history were quite different from what one saw so commonly in the 1940's. For example, even though W.G. Sumner's greatest contribution to sociology was his library-based cross-cultural work, Folkways (1906), his challenging essays written from the 1870's onward (1911, 1913, 1914, 1919) reflect his intimate involvement in the municipal affair of New Haven and in Connecticut's public educational facilities and with his concern about the growth among the nationally powerful of plutocracy and especially of plutocratic imperialism. Without that background, Folkways would have lacked the sense of life and living that it contains. Similarly, such great publications as Charles Booth's Life and Labour of the People of London (1889-91, 1903), W.I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki's The Polish Peasant in Europe and America (1918), and the studies inspired by the famous "Chicago school" of sociologists surrounding Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess (1924), especially during the 1920's and 1930's, reflect intimacy of observation and dedication to humane goals. The indebtedness of all these writers to professional social workers is quite evident and is acknowledged.

Park and Burgess (1924, p. 210) directed sociological research not toward the erection of a chimerical structure of abstract theory but toward "the diagnosis and control of social problems" in the service of humanity. On the other hand, subsidies for the solution of managerial or manipulative problems during the depression of the 1930's and especially during World War II turned the center of many sociologists' research concerns away from humanist or people-serving projects towards efforts useful to the powerful, towards work at special-interest problem-solving for a fee. Neo-functionalism and its variants provided its "value-free" scientific rationale for such an amoral and sometimes even immoral reorientation of the so-called "science" of sociology.

Then, in 1950-51, after increasing rumblings of dissatisfaction from those concerned with sociology's growing dehumanization and technocratizations, the Society for the Study of Social Problems entered the professional sociological and social work scene. (Lee & Lee, 1973-74, 1975) It represented outspoken evidence by many of its participants of strong concern for more human values, of a turn toward humanist sociology. Its appearance was greeted with cries of outrage from those then entrenched in control of the American Sociological Society (now called the American Sociological Association). As a representative of that (Blau, 1975) recently put it, "I have been concerned with the anti-systematic, anti-theoretical and anti-quantitative biases that seem to characterize many members of the SSSP." That statement might have been written at any time during the past quarter of a century by any of the scientific. It is the cry of persons who cannot assimilate the cumulative wisdom to be derived from the clinical study of actual behavior in situ of individuals and groups. It is the moan of persons who need a precise structure of ideas in which to believe, however chimerical it might be so long as it appears to them to be "scientific." Once that so-called "basic" intellectual fabrication has become part of them, accepted as given, they can tolerate their intellectual insecurities, their suspicion of the unbridged gaps between their abstractions and what actually takes place in human society. It is a grasping



for what looks so tenable, so secure, in the physical and biological sciences: "hard" and quantified data. They do not appear to realize how elusory the "hardness" of data is even in the physical and biological fields. No matter how contrived the "hardness" of social data might be, they think its "hardness" substantiates their conclusions, provides a platform for their elitist pronouncements, and boosts the marketability of their products to grantors and contractors. (Deutscher, 1973)

The philosopher Morris R. Cohen (1933: 394) discusses the similar habit of physicists and chemists "to distrust naked observation and to resort to various mechanisms, repetitions and mathematical calculations to establish their facts; for biologists to use controls to check their experiments; for philologists to verify their quotations and references....These cautions," Cohen notes, "are organized so that no one can omit them and maintain his professional standing. Sometimes indeed these habits become mechanical. We forget their rationality and oppose any extensions or improvements of them which men of genius discover." In other words, they become barriers as well as gates to scientific discovery. Little wonder that it is the great investigators who are puzzled by what others take to be obvious. As John Dewey (1929: 310) adds: "Every great advance in science has issued from a new audacity of imagination." Both Cohen and Dewey looked upon science of any kind as a way of exploring constantly changing realities, not as a way of building a rigid representation of "reality" and of its "laws" or of finding plausible techniques attractive as merchandise for the market place.

I would like to insist at this point that SSSP members who are humanist sociologists do not throw out the triplet babies—system, theory, and quantification—with their bath water. To humanist sociologists, system, theory, and quantification are useful tools, but they are not a holy trinity that should be permitted to dominate sociological research. Systematization of social observations must be done with care and with an intimate awareness of the nature of the first-hand observations discovered to possess some systematic relationship. Theories and methods exist in abundance. They are quite useful when employed with discrimination, with respect for social context, with an understanding of the continuous nature of social processes, with adequate attention to the cultural background of the people studied, and above all with painstaking regard for the observer-subject relationship.

The Society for the Study of Social Problems is a mixed collection of social scientists, social workers, and other concerned students and professionals. As an affiliate of the American and of the International Sociological Associations, it has given the sociological profession as a whole a substantial push towards rapprochement with both social workers and the more serious and less routine journalists, belletrists, and other involved in public affairs. It promotes a significant move forward from the traditional scientific image sociologists once constructed for themselves in order to obtain legitimacy for their profession in university and in intellectual, political, and business circles. In my estimation, it also facilitated the subsequent organization of

Sociologists for Women in Society, the Black and Radical Caucuses within the various sociological associations, the section on Marxist Sociology of the American Sociological Association, and other highly stimulating but less obvious organizational and policy developments.

This series of organizational changes over the past twenty-five years represents cooperative movement toward making sociology and social work both meet a little more adequately the frightening crisis of our times. Please note that it was achieved by forthright organizational innovation and not by the kind of "boring from within" so glorified in liberal professional circles and so often so delusory and ineffective—so much more rhetoric than action.

Social work has traveled far from the poor-relief philosophy of some three centuries ago and up to the middle of the nineteenth century. Its problems can no longer be capsulized as centering about the character weaknesses of the shiftless and irresponsible. Sociology, too, is no longer tied to the mystical positivism of an Auguste Comte or the simplistic evolutionism of a Herbert Spencer. A generation ago both fields looked upon the possibility of working for the reorganization of society as heretical, as an allegation damaging to the public image of their profession. Today few social workers or sociologists are utopians, but many realize that working for basic social change is not any longer a matter of choice. That is what they must do—as effectively as they can—in order to accept the responsibilities of their professions.

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