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# Fifty Years of Sociology in the United States (1865-1915)

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# Fifty Years of Sociology in the United States (1865–1915)

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*Albion W. Small*  
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This paper will plot some of the principal points of departure from which to map the main movement of sociological thinking in the United States during the period indicated in the title. It will incidentally write into the sketch certain details of a semi-autobiographical character. . .

. . . No excuses will be offered for rather liberal transgression of the conventionalities of impersonal writing. The years which I have spent in studying the social scientists of the last four centuries have lodged in my mind one indelible impression, viz. that nearly every one of these writers might have done more for the instruction of subsequent generations if each had left on record certain testimony from his personal knowledge, which he probably regarded as trifling and which his contemporaries would probably have pronounced impertinent, than they did by writing much of a more pretentious nature which they actually transmitted. . . So it has seemed to me more and more that one of the traits of developing historical sense should be increasing consideration for the historians of the future, One hundred, two hundred, three hundred years from now there will be students trying to trace the evolution of social science. No one who has sifted the monograph material of a past period can doubt that, so long as the volumes of this *Journal* are legible, here and there a historian will search for clues to interpretation of the period that produced them. . .

. . . Dr Harper (President of the University of Chicago) responded to another true prophetic instinct. He insured from the beginning mutual reinforcement between men who were primarily interested in the theoretical phases on the one hand, and the applied phases on the other, of sociological knowledge.

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Excerpts (pp. 721–22, 770–71) from "Fifty Years of Sociology in the United States (1865–1915)," *The American Journal of Sociology*, XXI/6(May, 1916):721–864.

In so far as the University of Chicago has been a factor in promoting the sociological movement, the evidence in my possession leaves no doubt in my mind that, without Dr. Harper, whatever might have been done for sociology at Chicago would have been an exaggeration of one of these phases at the expense of the other, and consequently in the long run to the discredit of both. Dr. Harper brought together, as the nucleus of the Department of "Social Science," two men who were not only strangers to each other, but whose approach to the common problem was from opposite angles. . . Dr. Henderson and the present writer were therefore the sociological staff until it was recruited by Dr. Vincent and Dr. Thomas.

Although Dr. Henderson's center of attention was social betterment, and mine was the methodology of social investigation, we never from first to last had the slightest difference of opinion about the division and correlation of our own work and that of our students. Each of us recognized in the other's program the correlate of his own. I have never had a shade of interest in abstract sociology except as a necessary preliminary to the most intelligent conduct of each and every part, from least to greatest, of the whole range of human life. Dr. Henderson took the same view of the relation between general sociology and concrete applications. While he devoted himself primarily to investigation of concrete conditions crying for immediate relief, he consistently regarded all plans for social betterment as tentative in the degree in which there is uncertainty about the underlying theories of larger social relations upon which the working plans have been based. So long as he lived, he was frequent in generous tribute to the basic importance of the more abstract phases of the work in the department.

How consistently and profitably the department has interpreted human experience in these blended phases of the general and the special is another matter. Moreover, as to both theory and practice, the relations in the country at large between general sociology and social technology still remain in an unsettled and unsatisfactory condition. Inability to do justice to the subject compels me to make this survey partial by omitting the whole history of the technological phases of the sociological movement. I restrict myself, first, to remarking that a comprehensive view of the sociological movement in the United States for the last fifty years would include such a survey as Professor Francis G. Peabody of Harvard, or Professor Graham Taylor, or Miss Jane Addams, or Dr. Devine might supply, and, secondly, to insertion of the personal profession of faith that it will be a grievous mistake, and in its results unfortunate for both as well as for the public whose interests must ultimately evaluate the work of both, if the representatives of the generalizing and of the concrete phases of the sociological movement do not develop consciousness in mutually appreciative and sympathetic co-operation. . .