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History of Applied Sociology: Some Interpretive Notes

Albert E. Gollin

. . . The search for scientific legitimacy led many sociologists in the early decades of the society to want to put as much distance as possible between its historical roots in social reform and its aspiration to status as an academic discipline. Several proposals, for example, were presented at the 1931 annual meeting for the purpose of changing the society's public image from one of a "religious, moral and social reform organization" to one of a "scientific society" and of "prun[ing] the society of its excrescences and . . . intensify[ing] its scientific activities." To achieve these goals, tighter control of membership and limitations on programs and publications were urged. But such initiatives toward scientific purification were countered by a concurrent, lively interest in applying sociological knowledge to the social problems of the Depression and in taking up the research opportunities presented by the New Deal. The research committee appointed to broker this dispute noted in a report in 1932 that the proposed changes would hinder the society's function of promoting sociological research and would, moreover, encourage others (presumably nonsociologists) to address the issues posed by the Depression, with an eventual loss of opportunity for and control over sociological work (Rhoades 1981, pp. 25–28).

The twin orientations reflected in these early debates—inward toward the development of sociology as a scientific discipline and outward toward its engagement with problems of the wider society—have continued to influence the course of the discipline and the programs of its professional association. Several objectives were being sought simultaneously during this and subsequent periods: to strengthen sociology's academic legitimacy and multiply opportunities for teaching and research on campuses; to widen the range of job opportunities outside academia, as the Depression and then World War II restricted hiring

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by colleges; and to enhance public recognition of sociology's contributions to knowledge and practical affairs as a means of defending and promoting the wider professional interests of sociologists. These objectives fluctuated in importance over the ensuing decades.

By the 1950s, the battle for academic respectability had largely been won, and sociology entered a period of sustained differentiation in subject matter, theoretical tendencies, and methodological approaches. In time, this differentiation intensified the stresses and conflicts within individual departments and across the face of the discipline over styles of sociological work. The concern with sociology's practical applications became more deeply politicized, with most of the criticism of applied sociology in the period from World War II to the mid-1960s coming not from the "scientific center," worried about the diversion of discipline-building energies caused by involvement with public-or private-sector concerns, but from the "qualitative left," sociologists concerned with the conservative stance and trivial or inhumane uses of an increasingly potent social science (Lynd, 1939, 1940; Mills, 1959; Gouldner, 1965).

On occasion, these tensions were expressed in especially revealing ways. In 1960, Paul Lazarsfeld, as president-elect of the American Sociological Association, was given the opportunity to propose a theme for its 1962 meetings. In line with his long-standing belief in the analysis of case studies as a basis for theoretical and methodological advance and, I suspect, as a direct challenge to those who viewed his interest in applied work critically, he proposed a theme that could be variously entitled "Sociology in Action" or "Applied Sociology." The Executive Council of ASA found the topic "a bit undignified" and changed the title to "The Uses of Sociology." Moreover, Lazarsfeld had to formulate a special justification that session chairpersons could use in soliciting papers, in which the value of this theme as a means of answering doubters or critics of sociology was stressed (Lazarsfeld and Reitz, 1975, pp. 30-31). The whole effort was beset with difficulties, the most significant of which were the problems most authors of papers had in identifying concrete applications of sociological ideas or findings. Eventually, an ASA-sponsored book on the topic appeared (Lazarsfeld, Sewell, and Wilensky, 1967); despite Lazarsfeld's own disappointment with the outcome (Pasanella, 1979), many of the essays deserve careful study, not only for what they tell us about sociology in the 1950s and early 1960s but also for their detailed appraisals of work in various specialty areas or fields of application.

A decade later, in 1972, another ill-starred effort was made to build bridges between the discipline and the practical demands of social policy. In the intervening years, the issue of relevance had shaken and galvanized academic sociology as well as other social science disciplines. Domestically, a long agenda of unmet economic, social, and political needs was posing insistent questions whose urgency was underscored by protest, conflict, and a wave of urban

disorders. Internationally, the Cold War had heated up; confrontations in Berlin, Cuba, and then increasingly in Southeast Asia produced waves of campus anti-war mobilizations in which sociologists often took leading roles. These issues and the heightened visibility of individual sociologists as scholars or activists contributed to an accelerated growth of students and academic programs.

As in earlier times of societal stress—depression, industrial or racial strife, war, urban disorders—sociology's claims of relevant skills in diagnosis and problem solving won for it increasing public interest and support. Federal funding for research and training that was explicitly applied in orientation grew significantly in this period. But demands for accountability accompanied this quickening flow of resources. The case for increased federal financial support had to be made and remade, and a stream of advocacy or stock-taking reports issued forth in response to this need (President's Science Advisory Committee, 1962; U.S. Congress, 1967; National Research Council, 1968, 1969; National Science Foundation, 1969; Lyons, 1969; Orlans, 1969).

As an offshoot of this trend, sociologists in departments with graduate training programs supported by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) were brought together late in 1972 at a conference held under the auspices of the American Sociological Association. The conference was convened partly in response to pressures "to demonstrate the relevance of their work for the public good. Still another consideration was that federal funding agencies appeared to have more interest in research with some practical value than in research with theoretical value alone" (Schuessler, 1975, p. 4). Papers and commentaries were presented on a restricted set of problems in areas that fell within NIMH'S mandate, all of which were devoted to explicating the links between sociology and social policy. Just as a decade earlier, however, the claims of relevance were hard to document. The reasons for sociology's limited contributions to social policy in these and other areas were pinpointed with greater clarity and in greater volume than were the contributions themselves.

Apart from its solidly negative conclusions, another noteworthy feature of this gathering is that not a single sociologist working in an applied setting was invited to attend. To fill the void, a paper by Nelson Foote, presented a year later, that sharply rebuts such conclusions was reprinted in the book of conference papers. (By that time, Foote had returned to academic life after a lengthy career in industry as an applied sociologist; see Foote, 1974.) To be sure, many of the tensions felt by representatives of both the academic and applied sides of sociology were registered during the course of the proceedings (cf. Demerath, 1975). But, unlike Lazarsfeld, who had made an effort in 1962 to include the perspectives of sociological practitioners, believing that they would probably be better able to identify and analyze instances of use, the conference organizers saw no need to go beyond a roster of academic sociologists interested in graduate training issues and programs. Once again, the official disciplinary perspective

on the question of sociological applications was dominated by the experiences and concerns of academic sociologists.

The foregoing sketch of key events in the organizational history of sociology's involvement with issues of application can serve to set the 1981 workshop sharply apart from its precursors. Many of its features were similar to those observed at earlier conferences—reports of worsening academic job shortages, questions about the relevance of graduate training, a concern with the practical applicability of sociology. This time, however, the issues were discussed by both academic and applied sociologists, and the latter were recognized as strategic resources in dealing with the issues raised, a recognition unique in the history of the discipline. That this important advance is, nevertheless, only one step toward the fuller integration of sociological practitioners will presently become clearer. . . .

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