

January 1989

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## Recommended Citation

Lee, Alfred McClung (1989) "The Convergence of Science and Humanistic Intervention: Practitioners in the Sociological Struggles," *Sociological Practice*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/socprac/vol7/iss1/10>

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# The Convergence of Science and Humanistic Intervention: Practitioners in the Sociological Struggles

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Sociology, like all other intellectual disciplines, has its treasured myths. With many variations, those myths justify professional orientations that can be grouped under the labels abstractionism, scientism, commercialism and humanism. All four derive directly from nineteenth century roots in the social science movement, and that movement, in turn, has many more ancient sources that still benefit and haunt us.

The industrialization, urbanization and mass migrations of the nineteenth century disrupted many ways of life. As one consequence, innovative intellectuals perceived that existing conceptualizers were not providing “the answers” to many pressing social problems.

Scholars’ reactions to the pressing problems of social life varied markedly. Radicals like Karl Marx highlighted abuses of the masses and pointed to remedies. Reformers demanded changes that would help brush aside such outrageous notions as Marx’s call for a cataclysmic revolution; they wanted to make the middle class continue to feel comfortable. Defenders of the status quo saw the need or advantage of developing fresh rationalizations for upper class interests. And then there were the curious-minded and practical participant observers who walked the streets, talked with all sorts of people and delved clinically into social problems and concerns, organizations and family life. These folks did not distinguish between theory and practice. They were interested in both and the way in which they were integrated with each other. These sociologists

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This paper is a revised version of the Keynote Address entitled “Practitioners in the Sociological Struggles” that was given at the Sociological Practice Association’s “Celebration of Practice” on 31 August 1986.

brought a degree of realism and verification to findings that often upset many of the traditional sociologists.

With sociologists having such different motivations, how could a discipline evolve that would be sufficiently "respectable" to gain acceptance among both policymakers and academics in spite of existing entrenched viewpoints and vested interests?<sup>1</sup> As Louis Wirth (1953:53) noted: "When sociology made claims for academic recognition it did so under the great handicap of lack of clarity of the term and wide difference of opinion among its proponents concerning its subject matter and scope." Decking out theories in the garbs of philosophical abstractionism and of scientific terminologies and methods were available choices. In such ways, pro-establishment research proposals, findings, and textbooks took on some of the authority and even glamour of the other sciences. As an illustration of my point, let me mention Lester F. Ward. When Ward (1893), a paleontologist, invaded sociology about a century ago, he brought with him such biologicistic terms as "sympodial development," "social karyokinesis," "social synergy," and "social telesis."<sup>2</sup>

Another illustration of this tendency is the work of Franklin Henry Giddings (1900, 1915, 1918, 1920, 1924). Giddings seized upon Spencerian doctrines plus statistics to provide his work with "scientific" responsibility. In spite of this, Stern (1931:654) has noted Giddings "was inclined to base his judgments . . . on immediate impressionistic reflections" often on apparently opportunistic considerations. Thus, from the late 1890s, he welcomed the imperialism of the Spanish-American War and the militarism of World War I.

After World War I, Giddings' devotion to the status quo led him to crusade against any tendencies he suspected of being socialist. His influence through his texts and his students—fifty Columbia University Ph.D.s—has been a significant influence in American sociology.

Those to whom such camouflage was repugnant persisted in pursuing their humanist concerns even though many times they annoyed or embarrassed the established. In spite of the tactics of the established, sociologist Harry Elmer Barnes (1948:741) introduced a history of sociology by noting that the "largest group of sociologists are what are usually called 'social economists' or 'practical sociologists,' namely, those chiefly interested in social work and amelioration." Viewed in historical perspective, it has been the humanist observers and clinicians who have given sociology the vitality it has exhibited.

Another part of the garb of respectability that should also be mentioned is machismo. Barnes' 1948 history of sociology, for example, mentions among "well-known personalities" in the field Jane Addams, Edith Abbott, Mary van Kleeck, Mary E. Richmond, and Jessica Peixotto, but his book contains no further reference to any of these outstanding *female contributors* to social thought and action. He does not even mention Richmond's *Social Diagnosis*

(1917) that Howard Becker (1952:624) insists "still remains one of the best systematic treatments of social case work as a scientific procedure."

Jane Addams' (1911, 1960) Hull-House, founded in Chicago in 1889, and Albion W. Small's Department of Sociology, founded at the University of Chicago in 1892, had related interests, but they were also separated, especially by male sociologists' need for "scientific respectability" unsoiled by the "uplift" attitude. Small sponsored a "drive toward objectivity," assured by the importation of European social theories. Thus sociology became "macho" not only in personnel but also by stressing theory and methods rather than participant observation. Social work, in contrast, was hospitable to female workers (especially volunteers) and was looked upon as "feminine" because of its humanitarian and moralistic "uplift" orientation (Deegan, 1987).

When the University of Chicago organized its own settlement in 1894, Mary Eliza McDowell became its first head resident, but she was not a member of the sociology department (Wade, 1958). One of the department sociologists, Charles R. Henderson, was said to be more "humanitarian" than "objective scientist," and his successor in 1916, Ernest W. Burgess, did make contacts and send students to study in social work and other community agencies. This was excused by the more pretentious because it made possible "great data-gathering efforts" (Faris, 1967:12, 52). The social workers gathered the data.

W. I. Thomas and Robert E. Park from 1913 through 1918 and then Park and Burgess on into the 1930s humanized the department and gave it its great days, but the department remained short of women (Bulmer, 1984; Matthews, 1977). A historian (Faris, 1967:126) also tells how the sociology department at Columbia University was similarly distorted by "old-boyism" as well as scientism.

As the foregoing suggested, the geneology of clinical or practical or applied or humanist sociology is more accurately traced to social workers, reformers, and explorers than to the vaunted philosophical sociologists of earlier periods. Actually it also would be wise to include among our forebears, as well as among our current stimulants, socially conscious novelists and investigative journalists such as Charles Dickens, Lincoln Steffens, Sinclair Lewis and Gore Vidal. The influential and scientific Karl Marx often is spoken of as an abstract theorist, but he was a perceptive observer and an investigative journalist as well as a scholar.

Clinical studies of the past that are too often neglected in sociological histories include ones by Engels, Booth, Kellogg and Galpin. In the early 1840s, Friedrich Engels (1976:323), as an immigrant in England, sought "more than mere abstract knowledge" about the underprivileged there. As he told those social victims later in his *Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, he "wanted to see you in your own homes, to observe you in everyday life, to

chat with you on your condition and grievances, to witness your struggles against the social and political power of your oppressors.”

Even though Charles Booth was the owner of a successful shipping line out of Liverpool, by the 1890s he had “developed the habit of exploring the East End of London, mingling with the people and becoming familiar with their lifestyles” (Kent, 1981:53). In consequence, he decided to undertake a comprehensive survey of the *Life and Labour of the People of London*, eventually published in seventeen volumes (Booth 1902–03). As the historian Raymond A. Kent (1981:59, 61–62) asserts, this was “a gigantic undertaking, unparalleled in its time and unsurpassed by modern empirical sociologists. Yet this work generally has been dismissed as mere fact gathering and unrelated to sociology proper. Such views, Kent insists, “are mistaken.”

Booth’s analysis contains “the pervasive conception of class as a ‘style of life’ involving a multiplicity of criteria and as a force in the community having considerable impact on various types of social institutions.” Booth’s work contains “no shortage of sociological insight and much of what he said was suggestive of what would now be regarded as in the best tradition of sociological research.”

A similarly significant investigation in the United States, Paul U. Kellogg and associates’ *The Pittsburgh Survey*, published in six volumes in 1909–14, “revealed to that community and to the nation at large the dangers to workers and citizens inherent in a community of rapid and uncontrolled industrial expansion” (Klein, 1938:xi). Its penetrating generalizations about city life are similarly neglected by sociologists, to their loss.

C. J. Galpin’s 1915 publication, *The Social Anatomy of an Agricultural Community*, based on studies at the University of Wisconsin, is one of a number of important clinical contributions of rural life ordinarily ignored by the typically urban-minded sociologists.

W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki attracted more attention with their five-volume clinical study of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* published in 1918–20. Later, the popular acceptance achieved by Robert S. and Helen M. Lynd’s *Middletown* in 1929 and *Middletown in Transition* in 1937 helped to convince more sociologists that such observational reports and analyses could provide more dependable knowledge than philosophical disputes and mechanized surveys.

The abstract and/or scientific establishment in sociology was far from being entirely academic. Many of its members have always had a strong commercial orientation. Especially beginning in the 1920s, the increasingly organized public relations concerns of financiers and industrialists resulted in support for research projects in sociology and social psychology by foundations, advertising agencies, and public relations firms. During the depression of the 1930s, commercially-minded social scientists turned away from individual research with a

welfare or reformist or just academic emphasis and toward so-called "rigorous empirical research" carried on under "provision of large-scale research by staff" and aided by "graduate study linked to ongoing research programs," to quote the social science historian Martin Bulmer (1982:191).

Bulmer rejects the idea that these tendencies imply "principally a reflection of the class interests of philanthropists" or that "foundation officials simply molded American social science in their own image." How protective of our dignity Bulmer apparently tries to be! What other class interests have been and are served by typical foundation grants or contracts? How do foundation officials manage to select recipients who do not share their aims and values—if they do?

Beginning just fifty years ago in 1936, the first of four organizations came into existence with which social psychologists and sociologists sought to rehumanize their disciplines. A group of controversial idealists, led by such people as David Krech and Goodwin Watson, organized the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI). Writing in 1937, Watson (1937:26) called "our SPSSI one manifestation of a more general determination of our ablest social scientists to be participant observers at the most strategic point of reconstruction." Many of us who were sociological social psychologists felt the lack of such organization and became active in SPSSI.

The three other organizations that have related goals are the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP), brought together in 1950–51, the Association for Humanist Sociology (AHS), dating from 1975–76, and the Sociological Practice Association (SPA), which began in 1978 as the Clinical Sociology Association. These organizations do not compete; they are complimentary and enjoy friendly working relations. Through these groups a great deal is being done to keep sociology relevant and vital in today's problem-racked society.

SSSP focuses on the realities of the passing scene plus their origins and possible consequences. AHS denies the possibility of so-called value-free research and analysis and advocates a commitment to human values. The SPA brings together those who are taking humanistic sociology into a variety of workplaces.

New social wisdom will come out of combining humanistic intervention and science. These associations are meeting the challenge identified by Nelson Foote (1974:128): "The best management consultants and the best organizational theorists ought really to be almost indistinguishable. Yet at present it is as if they inhabit two different worlds, or at least speak two different languages. And organization theory is only one example of the present gulf." As John Glass and Jan Fritz (1982:5) have pointed out, SPA is defining "problem areas where sociological skills and knowledge can be utilized." We can expect, as Glass and Fritz have anticipated, "the redefining of sociology to include recognition and acceptance of an interventionist role and a revitalization of the whole field."

## Notes

1. Annoying, but not instructive, to the established have been the significant contributions of such controversial people as Karl Marx, Charles Booth, W. G. Sumner, Jane Addams, Jerome Davis, Mary E. Richmond, Harry Elmer Barnes, W. I. Thomas and C. Wright Mills.
2. Ward's optimism about the human lot was contagious but he lacked contact with social realities. He became a professor of sociology at Brown University and his artificializing influence has continued to affect the discipline.

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