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The Social Work Mystique - Toward a Sociology of Social Work

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THE SOCIAL WORK MYSTIQUE – TOWARD A SOCIOLOGY OF SOCIAL WORK by Marie A. Matthews. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981.

Reviewer: Leo Miller

Dr. Marie A. Matthews is a sociologist with a background in social work. As the title of her book suggests, she has set for herself the task of historically tracing and analyzing the "mystique" in social work. She sees this element as resulting from a series of historical choices or options that were not recognized clearly "as selected solutions among other possibilities." These options included (1) an identification with the Charity Organization Society (COS) model and philosophy; (2) the turn toward psychiatry and the psychoanalytic mode; (3) the achievement of professional status based upon the search for the generic; and (4) social work's current relationship with the social sciences and with sociology in particular. The result of taking each of these fateful turns without sufficient consideration of alternatives has over the years been reflected in problems concerning the theoretical foundations of social work, a special methodology, and modes of practice.

Unfortunately, the author does not devote corresponding efforts to the analysis of similar historical and reality problems in the field of sociology. Both professions sprang from miscellaneous groups of clergy, philosophers, reformers, radicals, and those persons concerned with maintaining the status quo. Both have been concerned with erecting and maintaining professional facades, using esoteric terminology, and the manipulation of students and/or clients.

By strongly turning toward the COS model, which was established to organize and rationalize charity in the latter part of the nineteenth century, social work failed to give sufficient attention to the new positivistic source of sociology, as reflected in the empirical studies of Charles Booth on the laboring classes of London. It also turned away from the reformist orientations of the Fabian Socialists. The result was a concern with character and class consciousness, rather than with poverty and social reform. This imbalance was later furthered by the turn to the psychiatric, with a corresponding neglect of the social component. The generic concept is viewed as a magical element intended to justify professionalization by means of a common thread of social work ministrations and the development of specialties. Matthews finds no core content to this "will-o'-the-wisp" search, which tends to undermine real social policy concerns. She is, however, very concerned, as a sociologist, that social work incorporates the methodology and knowledge of the social sciences.

Matthews devotes considerable space to nineteenth-century human service pioneers such as Charles Booth, John Augustus, and the Barnetts; however, she does not see these "ancestors" as being in the direct line of social work development. One wonders also about the lack of emphasis placed upon the great period of social reform in America at the turn of the century, so well described by Robert Bremner. Perhaps it is a matter of definition as to what should be included in the direct line of social work.

The author appears to be sincerely committed to social work and desirous of facilitating its more rigorous development. She is to be commended for raising a number of issues in the field and for tracing their past and present connections. A social worker might be excused, however, for feeling that Matthews may have underestimated the worth of its practice, the skill of its practitioners, and real efforts which have been made to establish its theoretical bases. This applies especially to social casework, which comes in for much criticism.

Most of the references cited by Matthews are from the year 1965 or before, so that more recent works, such as those of Ruth Butler and Carel Germain, relating to integrated theory and practice, are missing. In addition, no mention is made of the definitive report (vol. 6) of the 1959 Curriculum Study of the Council on Social Work Education. This report together with a later council monograph by Butler on the Social Functioning Framework were designed to establish an approach to the Human Growth and Social Development Sequence. They address themselves to the knowledge and value basis of social work and to their integration in the provision of services.

Certainly social work is not the only profession that could be accused of having made wrong turns. The history of medicine, for example, might offer a similar example. In a larger sense, however, the concept of "wrongness" must be considered as relative and as influenced by hindsight. A related but perhaps more important concern might be the author's failure to specify what type of present-day sociology would be most useful to social work. Neither profession can escape a concern for real social problems and needed social reforms, if indeed these do not form a basic *raison d'être* for both. Alfred McClung Lee has suggested that humanistic sociology would be particularly helpful to social work, insofar as it is less concerned with scientism and the mystical "hardness" of social data and more concerned with human values, the continuous nature of social processes, the impact of cultural backgrounds and of the environment, the observer-subject relationship, and implications for social change.

Matthews does note some of the limitations of the social work approach in correctional practice. The effects of social structure and culture, of differential social organizations and social risk on individual behavior are noted as important principles for social workers. The discussion would be enhanced, however, by a broadened view of the special contribution of sociology as ap-

plied to both micro and macro types of social work practice. Particularly relevant fields for sociological contributions might lie in such areas as the systems and processes of social regulation as manifested in the activities of social and health agencies, social epidemiology involving especially the impact of social factors in the environment, the use of a group culture to foster and maintain nondeviant personalities, the societal reaction to deviant behaviors, and the study of the social and moral situations of clients and patients.

Matthews is probably justified in lamenting the field of social work's overdetermined concern with the generic-specific dichotomy. Perhaps it is the very breadth of the field of responsibility claimed by social work that makes it difficult or impossible to seek out a unified principal of methodology for all practice areas. One sympathizes with her strong call for a rapprochement between social work and sociology and for the continuing need to incorporate social science knowledge. One must be grateful to her for pointing up such thought-provoking ideas as social work's individualistic response over the years to problems badly in need of social solutions, its overconcern with self-determination and simultaneous underconcern with the availability of resources that would make the former possible, its professional posturing at the expense of a concern with the individuality and legal rights of clients, the need to set students free from a supervision too heavily grounded in ideology, and the concept of the social worker as the social servant.

The relationship between the two professions should be seen as a two-way process, dealing not only with the application of sociological insights to social work concerns but also with the contribution of *praxis* to the modification of sociological and psychological theories. The professions have a function in common — to enlighten and lead society to make needed changes in those out-moded social policies that maintain systems producing economic waste, human conflict, and social disintegration.