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Present Condition of Sociology in the United States

Ira W. Howerth

In a discussion of the present condition of sociology in this country, we must not confound sociology with social problems. Social problems are questions growing out of abnormal social relations. Sociology is the science which proposes to investigate social relations. There is at present a great deal of thinking about social problems, much of which is entirely independent of a sociological science. Our purpose is to set forth the present condition of thought about sociology.

Even among those who have studied the science most, there are vague and conflicting notions about its method and what it proposes to do. Some hope to extract from metaphysics a "golden medical discovery" that will cure all social aches and pains, or at least a formula that will solve the most intricate social problem. Others, mistaking a means for an end, think that the sole business of sociology is to go nosing about in the slums to find out how the other half lives. Some persons condemn the science because of this latter conception. This is the idea and the feeling of a certain professor of English, who is reported to have said, "What is the use of sending out students of sociology to observe the conditions of life among the poor, when Dickens and Thackeray have done all that work much better than they can hope to do it?"

Several years ago Professor Sumner, of Yale College, defined sociology as "the science of life in society; it investigates the forces which come into action wherever human society exists. Its practical utility consists in deriving the rules of right social living from the facts and laws which prevail by nature in the constitution of society"; and Professor Giddings, of Columbia College, says that "general or philosophical sociology is a broad but penetrating and

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thorough scientific study of society as a whole—a search for its causes, for the laws of its structure and growth, and for a rational view of its purpose, function, meaning or destiny.” We shall see that among sociologists there is a wide difference of opinion in regard to the content of these definitions. If one expects to find, in present sociological thought, a definite conception of the nature and function of the science of sociology, or a clear body of thought concerning its scope, its method and its object, he will be disappointed. It takes a science a long time to free itself from charlatanry and metaphysics, and to formulate precise definitions. This is the task which sociology is now trying to accomplish. And while it is thus engaged it cannot make great headway in popular favor.

With this preliminary suggestion of what we shall find, let us now examine the condition of thought among sociologists themselves. In order to determine this condition, I recently wrote to all the teachers of sociology in the United States, and to others known to be deeply interested in the subject and entitled to express an opinion, and asked them to answer the following questions:

1. Which term do you prefer, Social Science or Sociology?
2. Do you think the study is entitled to be called a science?
3. In what department does it belong?
4. What is its relation to Political Economy, History, Political Science, Ethics?
5. How much of the subject, if any, should be taught in the high school?
6. In what year of the college course should the subject be introduced, and what subjects do you regard as directly preparatory?
7. What is the nature of the course that should be offered to undergraduates?
8. Would you divide the subject into descriptive, statical and dynamic, and in what sense do you use each of these terms?
9. What relative importance does the treatment of the dependent, defective and delinquent classes hold?

Notwithstanding the disagreeable suggestion of an unauthorized examination which my letters must have raised, they received from most of my correspondents immediate attention. About forty have replied. Of these, three pleaded knowledge insufficient to entitle them to an opinion. All the others gave answers to at least some of the questions. From the nature of the case, answers could not be otherwise than brief. In this respect one reply is a model. One would scarcely think that the fourth question, What is the relation of Sociology to Political Economy, History, Political Science and Ethics, could be dealt with briefly. But one writer disposes of it as follows: “The relation of Sociology to Political Economy, History, etc., is *close*.” On the whole, however, the replies are far more complete and more carefully written than I expected to receive. A brief summary of the opinions expressed will illustrate the condition of thought about sociology among those who ought to be informed. Do not anticipate from this

summary a clarification of sociological ideas, but look rather to see the confusion in which sociological thought is involved. We shall take up each question separately.

In answer to the first question, only six expressed themselves as preferring the term Social Science. Among the reasons offered for preferring this term are its breadth and the popular prejudice against an increase in the number of the "ologies." Three find a use for both terms, two using them interchangeably. Still another writes, "Personally I prefer neither, but should like to see the term Politics used in the broad Aristotelian sense, reserving the term, Political Science for the narrower region relating to governmental relations." The great majority, however, are in favor of using the name Sociology because, they say, it is one word, and has also its adjective, Sociological. While not assuming so much as "Social Science," it suggests more unity, and distinguishes itself from several social sciences. Moreover, it has been adopted by such men as Comte, Spencer, Ward, Giddings and others. No objection was offered on account of the etymology of the word. The name, then, that seems to have the field is Sociology.*

But is sociology a science? Fully three-fourths of the answers to this question are in the affirmative. Some say it is a "becoming science." Professor John Bascom, of Williams College, writes, "It is a question of degrees. It will do no harm to call it a science if we do not abate our effort to make it one." The definition of science upon which these answers seem to be based is a systematized body of knowledge, or as Professor John R. Commons, of Indiana University, puts it, "The study and classification of a body of facts, with a view to discovering co-existences and sequences." But there is another point of view from which the question may be regarded, namely, is there a special field for sociology? Does it justify itself by showing a qualitative differentiation from antecedent sciences? Those who recognize this point of view think that sociology either is, or is rapidly becoming, a science.

How then, we ask, shall this new science be classified? In what department

*While adopting this term, some complain of its misuse. Professor G. W. Patrick, of the University of Iowa, writes, "The word Sociology has been much used in this country, unfortunately, I think, as synonymous with the science of Charities and Corrections." And Professor William MacDonald, of Bowdoin College, says, "I prefer the term Sociology, understanding by that term the science of human society. The use of the term to denote systematic inquiry into the subjects of crime, pauperism and labor seems to me narrow, and likely to withdraw attention from more important and more fundamental inquiries." The word "Sociology," as first used by Comte in the "*Cours de Philosophie positive*," was a "name for that part of a positive or verifiable philosophy, which should attempt to explain the phenomena of human society. It was exactly equivalent to 'social physics,' for the task of Sociology was to discover the nature, the natural causes, and the natural laws of society, and to banish from history, politics, economics, etc., all appeals to the metaphysical and the supernatural, as they had been banished from astronomy and chemistry."—Professor Franklin H. Giddings.

does it belong? Most of the teachers of sociology think it ought to form a department by itself. Some would place it in the department of the social sciences, along with politics, economics, jurisprudence, etc. Others would change the order, making all the social sciences divisions of sociology. On the other hand, Professor Giddings says, "General sociology cannot be divided into special social sciences, such as economics, law, politics, etc., without losing its distinctive character. It should be looked upon as the foundation of groundwork of these sciences, rather than as their sum or as their collective name." Scattering replies place it under psychology, moral and political science, political economy and anthropology. One teacher thinks it belongs under the "humanities," while two say it has no natural boundaries, and is therefore not included in any one department. A general feeling in regard to the question is expressed, perhaps, by Professor John Dewey, of the University of Chicago, who says, "I don't feel at all sure. It would seem well to have it a separate branch, in order to make sure that it received proper attention, but I think its separation a great pity if it means isolation from any of the great subjects mentioned in question four; i.e., Political Economy, History, Political Science and Ethics." "Sociology," he continues, "should be a sort of meeting place for the organized cooperation of these subjects, it supplying the general theory and principles and progress, they filling in the *media axiomata* and the special facts."

These answers indicate the opinion in regard to the matter inquired about in the next question, namely, the relation of sociology to political economy, history, political science and ethics. Those who believe that all these branches are departments of sociology content themselves by merely saying so. Those who regard sociology as an independent science think its function is to coordinate the results of these special sciences, or that sociology studies the same phenomena from a different point of view; that is, sociology treats of the phenomena of economics, etc., that are due to the existence of society. For this study history furnishes material. It is the medium through which sociological phenomena must be observed.* "History," says one, "is its material, ethics its guide, political economy its interpreter, and a rational system of political science its proposed

*But history is dependent upon sociology for its topics and its valuation. "I would like to emphasize this thought," says Professor James R. Weaver, of De Pauw University, "that history may be taught best through some such study as constitutional law, the theory of the state, international law, or sociology." To better indicate the points of view, I give a few answers to this fourth question in full. "I should adopt a classification like that of DeGreef. History is sociological evolution. I should say that ethics looked at, not from an historical and descriptive standpoint, but from that of improvement, is identical with Sociology. It is Sociology working toward the goal of human betterment."—Professor J. R. Commons, Indiana University.

"Political economy is not a department of social science, nor is political science. Both furnish materials to social science, but are to have their independence respected. This last is true of history as a fundamental discipline. Ethics is merely a related subject according to the Institutional Con-

end." Many express themselves as in doubt about the relation of ethics to sociology. Professor Anthony, of Bates College, says that "Sociology is Political Economy in practice, History in the making, Political Science as an art, and Ethics applied." And this view of ethics is held by Professor Peabody, of Harvard, who describes sociology as ethics applied to the economic situation.

Coming now to the opinions expressed in regard to the time when the study of sociology should be introduced into the schools, we find decidedly more agreement. Only six think any part of sociology should be taught in the high school, and three of these, owing to the absence of suitable textbooks,* think it is of doubtful utility. Professor Commons thinks the high school should teach "descriptive sociology, local, state and federal government, administration, labor, capital, pauperism, etc., the whole subject treated objectively, beginning with the best known facts in the locality and proceeding outward, one-half hour a day more or less during the entire high school course." "The teacher," he says, "could make it an exercise for the entire school, and by alternating the subjects, the teaching force would not have to be enlarged." Professor Charles R. Henderson, of the University of Chicago, would have a brief sketch course introduced very early.† This course should provide for systematic observation of familiar social facts. There is almost general agreement, however, that sociology proper is a branch that cannot be successfully taught outside of the college or university.

As to what year in the college course the study should be taken up, there

ception. Conceived in its evolutionary aspect, it is parallel with political economy and political science, as aiding social science."—Professor D Collin Wells, Dartmouth College

*History simply contributes material to this as to all the other social sciences. Ethics, understood not as a science of life, but as a science of conduct, is a department of Sociology. Political economy and politics lie partly within and partly without the field of Sociology, but they are so special, so highly developed, and moreover, comprise so much that is so technical, that they should not be regarded as branches of Sociology, but as independent sciences —Professor E. A. Ross, Leland Stanford Jr. University.

†Political economy and social science have to do with many questions intimately related, and so affecting each other that it is difficult to separate them History, recording the evolution of society, must take account of many causes and events, the laws and institutions entering into its structure. The study of social science gives opportunity for pointing out the results of certain forces operating during a certain historic period, and I, therefore, regard the relation of social science and history as very close and important —Professor H. L. Reynolds, Adrian College.

*Professor A. W. Small and Mr. George E. Vincent, of the University of Chicago, have recently published an excellent textbook entitled, *An Introduction to the Study of Society*.

†Professor Henderson says: "Sociology should not be introduced as a formal and separate study before the second year of the college course, and then only in a general survey to precede special social studies. But from the time that children begin to study geography and history in the schools, a teacher acquainted with sociological methods can train pupils in the habit of observing, classifying, naming and reasoning upon the social phenomena "

is some uncertainty and much difference of opinion. Twenty-four answer the question directly. Of these, four would have sociology taught in the Freshman year, two in the Sophomore, five in the Junior, and thirteen in the Senior year. Others were uncertain, or felt unprepared to answer. As a matter of fact, most of the courses in sociology offered in the United States are graduate courses, or Senior year electives. As preparatory studies, history takes the first rank, with political economy second. Ethics, psychology and biology are also named by many as desirable, biology, especially, for besides encouraging the scientific habit of mind, it gives a definite and concrete conception of the theory of development as worked out in that science, which is useful in the study of social evolution. Logic, political science, civics and anthropology are each mentioned once. Dr. A. W. Small would have descriptive sociology taught as a preparation for all the special social sciences, and then, after a preparation has been gained in biology, psychology, history, ethics, political science, and, if possible, anthropology, he would introduce the elements of static and dynamic sociology. Preparatory studies aside, the opinion seems to be all but general that every well-regulated college and university should offer a course in sociology to its undergraduates.

What should be the nature of that course? To this question I received few definite replies. "General summary," "elementary and stimulating," "only those topics which illustrate economics," and other like answers, are too vague to be effectively summarized. The implied opinion seems to be expressed in the reply of Professor C. H. Cooley, of Michigan University, which I quote: "In my opinion, such a course should consist of two parts: first, a concrete survey of historical forms of association from the primitive family—or horde—down to the numerous and complex associations of the present day. This survey should be something more than a condensation of the history of institutions. It should be unified throughout by applying to all institutions certain fundamental questions relating to their sociological character—such as how far they are free, how far coercive, whether vague and indefinite or formal and binding; the physical mechanism of their organization, as transportation and the facilities for the production and preservation of material goods; the psychical mechanism—means for the dissemination and preservation of thought, communication, law, custom, morality and literature. These things have been much studied in themselves, but little as factors of association.

"The second part of the course should attempt a searching and somewhat detailed analysis—a Theory of Association. To show what I mean I would cite the first two volumes of Schaffle's *'Bau und Leben'* as an attempt to work out such a theory. To accomplish an analysis of association is the main end of the study, but I believe that the concrete historical survey will be found indispensable as an introduction. Let the student pass from historical facts and proximate explanations to a more general and penetrating analysis."

We come now to the question whether, for purposes of study and investigation, sociology should be divided into descriptive, statical and dynamic. Out of twenty-three answers to this inquiry, nine are in favor of such a division, while fourteen are opposed. In the University of Chicago and in the Leland Stanford Jr. University this division is adopted. It will be interesting, therefore, to know in what sense the terms are used. Dr. Small defines the term "descriptive" as applied to sociology as the "correlation of historical and analytical facts about society as it has been and is"; "statical," as "the ideal society in equilibrium, essential social structure and needs being the criterion"; and "dynamic," as "the doctrine of the application of available social forces for approach to the ideal." Professor Ross defines the terms as follows: " 'Descriptive,' a preliminary survey to provide actual data; 'statical,' seeks to distinguish social types, and the forms of institutions, in order to determine the laws of their co-existence and sequence; 'dynamic,' studies the forces underlying social phenomena and causing movement and change, in order to ascertain the laws of their action, and thereby the mode of controlling them for the furtherance of social progress."* The objections urged against this division are that the terms are too vague, not co-ordinate, and that description is not a *division* of science. Professor H. H. Powers of Smith College, writes: "Description is a necessary part of scientific work, but not a division of the science. The science is necessarily dynamic in its fuller treatment, in that it treats of forces in action, evolution in progress. To lose sight of this for a moment, to explain the family, the state, religion, etc., as accomplished or fully evolved facts is the greatest difficulty we have to meet. To overcome this vicious habit of assuming momentary aspects of social institutions as norms of judgment, we cannot too often or stoutly insist that the science is dynamic, and all its elementary substances plastic, nascent, and ever entering into new combinations. Static studies are not co-ordinate with, but subordinate to this fundamental conception. They are valuable as giving us temporary and local phases of combinations instantaneous photographs of a moving scene in successive moments. But it takes many such pictures to suggest the moving and changing fact. There is no approximation to equality between a static and a dynamic study."

This point of view is taken by several. A few propose other divisions, as for instance, historical, practical and theoretical; and again, historical, compar-

*Professor Dewey says. "I thus divide it. The term descriptive seems to me necessary at present, but I think ultimately all material now put under that head should find a place under statical and dynamic. It appears to me to be a separate head simply in so far as there is a mass of facts whose significance with reference to general principles is not, as yet, seen. Statical, I consider the principles of social organization as such; the structural relations, the morphology. Dynamic is the theory of social movement as such; the functioning of the organs so far as they involve modification of structure—the physiology."

ative, or descriptive, theoretical and applied. Professor Giddings adopts the following division: Ethnographic, demographic, and social pathology; Ethnographic, in the sense of the general sociology of those savage and barbarous peoples who are organized in herds, clans and tribes; Demographic, as the sociology of the great modern populations which are politically organized in national States; and Social Pathology, as the study of abnormal social phenomena. "Many sociologists," says Professor Giddings, "would maintain that a constructive general sociology can be built up only on the basis of researches in social pathology."

And this leads us to the last question, in regard to the importance of social pathology, or the treatment of the dependent, defective, and delinquent classes, as a branch of sociology. "The treatment of these classes," says Professor Chapin, of Beloit College, "holds a place somewhat analogous to that of pathology in medical studies." And this is the opinion of Professor Henderson,* Professor Peabody,† and many others. To quote again Professor Giddings: "Social pathology has for the sociologist the same importance that physical or mental abnormality or illness has for the physiologist or the psychologist. The abnormal reveals and defines the normal." On the other hand, there are those who deny to social pathology this important place. "The treatment of these classes," says Professor James W. Cain of St. Johns College, "would come more fittingly under political science, or better still, under practical politics. With the treatment of any class sociology can have nothing to do." To the same effect and more emphatically, Professor Powers writes: "Sociology is not social pathology. The tendency to confound the two is contrary to etymology and all scientific precedent and experience. We shall never understand the abnormal till we have understood the normal and determined the norm from which to measure the degree of departure. The study of dependents, etc., has failed both of scientific accuracy and profitable reforms on account of the variously vague notions regarding normal man and the consequent direction which reform should take. Those who begin with the study of the abnormal, usually assume, at least unconsciously, that the normal is largely present in society and is static. The abnormal needs, therefore, to be conformed to it. As a matter of fact, the normal does not exist except as an evolving fact, and the abnormal is an incident of it, a lateral moraine of the moving glacier of society. Only the glacier and the law

*Professor Henderson's view is stated as follows: "As there is normal anatomy physiology and hygiene of the sound and growing body, so there is a morbid anatomy physiology and therapeutics of the broken and diseased body. Study of the abnormal must be carried on in relation to the study of the natural life of society, and social pathology thus comes to be a special department under general sociology; statical, and dynamical."

†"The treatment of charity," says Professor Peabody, "must be preliminary and subordinate to the larger question of those who can help themselves. It is the pathological side of the subject."

of its movement can explain the moraine. Social pathology is an exceedingly important science belonging to a secondary group—criminology, study of classes, etc.”

This brief presentation of many conflicting opinions is far from satisfactory. But my task is not to clear up ideas about sociology, but to show the chaotic condition of sociological thought.

The inability of sociology to answer certain questions, scientific and pedagogic, only shows what every sociologist admits, that the science is in a more or less undefined and tentative position. It does not disprove the existence of the science. “Sociology exists,” as Herbert Spencer wrote, “because there exists a social organism.” It is still a very incomplete science. The same may be said of all the other concrete sciences. Sociology is far behind many of them, but they have all passed through their formative periods, and faced the objections of irrelevancy and futility. There was a time when physics and astronomy “belonged to the divine classes of phenomena in which human research was insane, fruitless and impious.” But they have outlived these objections. And so also will sociology.