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The Role of the Sociologist in Community Action in the Rural South

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In this paper, the author will endeavor to define and describe his conception of the rural South, community action, and the role of the sociologist as scientist, as a citizen, and as a person in the rural South and in community action programs in the region. He recognizes that there is no universal agreement as to the meaning of any one of the concepts in the title. For example, the South is generally defined as the population group inhabiting and functioning in the southeastern part of the United States. The Bureau of the Census puts sixteen states and the District of Columbia in the region. Some sociologists place thirteen states therein, while others include eleven. For some students, the South is "a state of mind."

In this paper, the rural South means the open country, villages, unincorporated and incorporated towns in the region defined as the South by the Bureau of the Census, and the population groups residing within. Included also are the large towns and small cities which function to a considerable extent as trade centers for the open country and village residents. Many of these large towns are inhabited by people who have moved from the open country, or whose immediate ancestors had moved, and who maintain close social connections with their relatives and friends who still reside in the open country and villages.

The urban South, as described by some students, has been, and still is, greatly influenced by the rural South. As a matter of fact, those who assert that the South is a state of mind hold that the dominant values, traditions, and behavior patterns of the South as a whole are primarily those of rural people. State legislatures in the South have been under the control of the representatives from rural counties. Legislation has been such as to protect and promote the interests of rural segments of the population, and/or to restrict the protection, participation, and development of urban areas.

In his volume entitled *Southern Tradition and Regional Progress*, William

H. Nicholls, a Vanderbilt University economist, lists five traditions which, in his opinion, had retarded the urban, industrial development of the South. The traditions mentioned were (1) the persistence of agrarian values, (2) the rigid social structure, (3) the undemocratic political structure, (4) the weakness of social responsibility, and (5) conformity of thought and behavior. Others have characterized the South as a region dominated by the desire to maintain white supremacy, to operate a laissez-faire economic system and a status-oriented educational system. In politics, there is the verbal commitment to states' rights and state sovereignty, and in religion to otherworldliness. These values, desires, interests, or goals have developed largely out of the experiences and history of rural people. Even where and when there have been urbanization and industrialization, rural values and patterns of behavior have been evident. In their study of the textile industry in the South, and of the textile workers and the communities in which they lived, Arthur F. Raper and Ira de A. Reid referred to the workers as sharecroppers. In the volume *Sharecroppers All*, they described the communities of mill-workers as resembling the agricultural plantations. The milltowns were essentially industrial plantations. In many of them the textile mill owners owned the houses in which the workers lived, and often they owned the commissaries or general stores, the schools, and the churches. When they did not own the schools and churches, those who taught and preached in these institutions were only those who met the approval of the mill owners.

When compared with the nation as a whole, or with the developing urban South, the rural South shows certain socio-cultural characteristics which are different, especially in degree, and often to the disadvantage of the South. For example, the educational opportunities are more limited, and the educational status or level of the population is lower. The health status tends to be lower; the morbidity rate is higher, and the infant and maternal mortality rates are higher. The per capita income and per capita wealth are lower; the average size of the family is larger. Social isolation resulting from lower educational development, lower economic wealth, lower population density, and segregation on the basis of race is greater. This lower socio-cultural development and greater social isolation tend to restrict the rate and quality of economic, intellectual, and social productivity, and to result in greater waste of natural, social, and cultural resources and efforts.

So much for the nature of the rural South. What is community action? In this paper, community action may be considered as the conscious, intentional, planned efforts of a community to study itself and its relation to other communities, and to engage in activities which the community thinks will contribute to its development or well-being. It will connote, also, the efforts of sub-groups within the community, when such efforts are intended to contribute to the realization of the comprehensive program of total community development or improvement. Community action may connote the effective social conservation,

development, distribution, and utilization of the natural, social, and cultural resources within the community, and available to the community, when such utilization of outside resources would contribute to the well-being of the community.

Persons in society, in the community, play many roles. The sociologist is no exception. In this paper, the writer will be concerned with only three roles, namely, the sociologist as scientist, as citizen, and as a person. As you know, it is the function of the scientist to create knowledge, to discover the relationship among variables. As a scientist, the sociologist engages in the scientific study of the processes and products of social interaction, the scientific study of the structure and functioning of the community, the scientific study of the status, beliefs, values, goals, problems, resources, and behavior of persons and groups in community and society. Some sociologists as scientists are engaged in helping persons and groups to study, discover, and understand relationships, social situations, and the possible and probable consequences of alternative courses of social action.

Many sociologists are *bona fide* citizens in the communities in which they live and work. As citizens, some are actively involved in community organizations and agencies which have as a major goal the improvement of life and living in the community. In making their contributions as citizens, they may draw heavily on their sociological knowledge and skills. If they are not *bona fide* citizens in the community in which they are working, and are functioning scientifically as participant observers, there are, or will be, times when they will be trying to imagine themselves as citizens, and trying to see and understand as citizens.

In the role of a person in a community, the sociologist may not be functioning as a scientist or as a citizen. He will not be trying to create knowledge, nor will he be engaged in working with other citizens in a program of community betterment. He may be looking at the community and community action as a person, seeking to understand for the sake of understanding, and, possibly, for the sake of deciding how best he can adjust to the community action, or contribute as a person to it.

Let us now consider the role of a sociologist as scientist and as citizen in a small town in the Deep South, which town possesses all of the socio-cultural disadvantages of the rural South mentioned earlier. The greater emphasis will be placed upon the role of the sociologist as citizen. The small town in 1960 had a population of 6,700 within the corporate limits, but 5000 plus lived outside the city limits, but within the police jurisdiction. Four-fifths of the population was nonwhite.

The first task of the sociologist as citizen was that of helping the citizens to define the situation in which they lived. What a person or a population group does depends very largely upon how the situation is defined. There was serious

and continuous study of the question "what is the nature of our situation?" A related question was "what are the statuses and civic opportunities of the different population groups within the community?"

After these questions were answered somewhat specifically, the community action group considered next the following question: "What status, opportunities, services, and/or goods are desired?" especially for the culturally disadvantaged group, which constituted the majority of the total population. The sociologist helped this group to consider its members as American citizens, and, therefore, entitled to all rights, opportunities, and services to which other American citizens were entitled. There was the development of the conception of the civic responsibilities of American citizens who expected to enjoy constitutional rights, opportunities, and services.

The third task was to discover the nature, the degree, or the extent of the difference between that which was desired and that which was, or that which existed. This effort enabled members of the culturally disadvantaged group to see, or to understand, the extent of the gap between their legal, educational, economic, political, and social status, opportunities, and services and those of the national population. The investigation revealed that the gap between the dominant group and the nation was less. In all indices except that of the percentage of voting age citizens registered, the status and the opportunities of the dominant group (whites) were lower than for the nation.

The sociologist and the community action group then sought to answer the questions "Do the groups want to change the situation? to raise their statuses? to increase their opportunities and services?" Because the Negro group in the community was the more disadvantaged, and because a higher percentage of Negroes considered themselves primarily American citizens, relatively more of them wanted to change the situation, to raise their statuses, and increase their opportunities. In the community, there is still a large number of white citizens who consider themselves (1) white, (2) Southerners, (3) Alabamians, and (4) Americans. As long as their statuses are higher than those of the nonwhites, and their opportunities are greater, they are not much concerned about their statuses and opportunities being inferior to those of citizens on the national level.

The fifth task was that of discovering what human and cultural resources were available for use in efforts to change the situation, to increase opportunities and services, and to raise statuses. In this process there was the definition of "human and cultural resources" and the listing or cataloging of the same. Human resources included not only the citizens desiring the socio-cultural change, but government officials on the federal, state, county, and municipal levels, newspaper editors and journalists, teachers and ministers, lawyers, retired citizens, and officials of civic organizations and agencies. Cultural resources included the federal and state constitutions, Congressional and legislative enactments, e.g. the Civil Rights Acts, the War Manpower Act, etc.,

executive orders of the President, decisions of the federal courts, journalistic reports of successes in other communities, literature published by social action agencies, reports and decisions of selected special governmental agencies such as the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights, the U. S. Committee on Higher Education, etc., money, public and private buildings where meetings could be held, automobiles for transporting workers and other citizens.

Having defined and cataloged the human and cultural resources available for use in efforts to change the situation, the sociologist and his citizen associates began listing alternative procedures, techniques, and activities which seemed appropriate for use in changing the situation. Possible activities included (1) study sessions such as short courses, institutes, workshops, (2) conferences, (3) preparation and publication of leaflets, booklets, and open letters, (4) mass meetings, (5) preparation and presentation of petitions, (6) conducting classes in consumer economics and political education, (7) selective buying, (8) voting and (9) legal action.

The seventh task was that of ascertaining the probable cost of the alternative programs of action in terms of time, money, and effort. Short term and long term costs were estimated under different circumstances. This was followed by the effort to decide whether or not the Community could pay the cost of executing the program of activities deemed necessary to achieve the goals set, namely, increased opportunities and services and raised statuses. When it was decided that the community could pay the costs in time, money, and effort, it seemed necessary to try to discover whether or not it was willing to do so. In the process, it was discovered that the nonwhite segment of the population was more willing than the white. This seemed to be what was expected, in as much as the nonwhite segment would gain relatively more than the white segment if the program succeeded.

In a community in the Deep South which had been rigidly segregated on the basis of race for more than one hundred years, and in which the dominant values were rural, the social relationship was of superordination of one group and the subordination of the other. In such a social environment it was very difficult to secure free and open study of the community by a representative sample of the population. The sociologist, some of his students, and a few of his fellow citizens who had listened to him began the observation and formal study, expanding the program as more and more citizens became active participants. Although white citizens who are participating actively in the program are still in the minority, some of the most industrious workers are white. Some of the whites who are not working on the total program are working on some minor part of it.

After estimating the probable cost of the program and discovering the number willing to pay the cost, or a considerable portion of it, it was necessary to decide when and where work should begin, and who should do what. The

steering or planning committee tried to arrange the different activities agreed upon in some sort of logical order. It was decided to begin the civic education phase of the program immediately. This decision was made on the basis that every one was a citizen, and as such was entitled to more rights, opportunities, and services than they were getting, and that they would be willing to learn how to get them. It was assumed, further, that as they learned about their rights they would also learn about their responsibilities.

The teaching of civic responsibilities led into the study of the citizen as a consumer. Since the average citizen is primarily a consumer during the greater portion of his first twenty-one years, it is relatively easy to help many citizens to understand that most of what they consumed during those twenty-one years was produced by others, and that if they want to be responsible citizens they must prepare themselves for producing and contributing more than they consume. Efforts were made to help the culturally disadvantaged group to see and understand that socially responsible citizens are industrious workers and economical consumers. Consumer economics was taught along with the civic and political education.

When the program of education for responsible citizenship was well under way in the Negro community, steps were taken to bring into the community action structure as many whites as were courageous enough to venture out of their segregated world. A few did venture forth, and the interracial phase began, and has continued, although with the whites experiencing some pressures from those whites who are determined to maintain "the Southern way of life."

The community action program continued to expand gradually until 1964, when there was the culmination of years of effort. In this year, Negro and white candidates for public office campaigned for votes from the same public platforms. For the first time, there were Negro workers at the polls on election days, and six Negroes were elected to five different public offices. Since the elections in 1964, six other Negroes have been appointed to public offices and seven have been employed full-time in public positions.

The desegregated school which was closed by order of the Governor was reopened and operated throughout the year. Business places are now employing Negroes where there were none. Now there is in operation a Community Action Program under the Equal Opportunity Act of 1964. There was a Head Start Program during the summer; a work-study program will be in operation during the 1965-66 school year.

The role of the sociologist in community action in the rural South seems to be that of helping the community to understand itself—its status, its desires, its problems—to discover and/or develop resources and procedures available and appropriate for use in solving problems or achieving goals. The sociologist can help community leaders to understand the nature and the consequences of social change, and how to organize members of the community for the execution of

programs agreed upon. He can also help the community to appraise its efforts, and to revise programs when such seems desirable.

The role of the sociologist, as scientist and as citizen, in community action in the rural South is hardly any different from that of the sociologist in community action in the urban South. The situations in the rural South, and some of its problems, may be different, but the behavior, the role, of the sociologist would differ only as would seem to be necessary in order to be appropriate for the situation. As scientist, the sociologist would endeavor to create knowledge about the rural South and its sub-divisions, and as citizen, the sociologist would endeavor to utilize as effectively as possible sociological knowledge and socio-cultural resources for community development and improvement.