

CAN THE DISCIPLINE SURVIVE ITS PRACTITIONERS?*

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Some years ago a senior colleague, a political scientist, at Princeton University, commented that disciplinary associations, at least in the social sciences, seemed to fail most notably in their own areas of professed excellence. The political scientists could not solve problems of constitution and political structure, the historians had grossly deficient archival records, the geographers could not decide where to meet, the economists required university subsidies for their journal (and the sub-disciplinary American Finance Association was running a deficit), the sociologists could not manage problems of complex organization, the psychologists could not understand one another, and the anthropologists had vainly sought a common culture.

Though offered with the suitable cynicism that those of us of advanced age believe we have earned the right to voice, the playful comment has a close enough approximation to the truth to provoke some invited ruminations—mercifully brief—on the 75th anniversary of the American Sociological Association. Is the discipline (and its largest national association) sufficiently disorganized to predict its demise, or can it survive, untidily, in an untidy world?

Polarization or Fragmentation?

At the 1978 Ninth World Congress of Sociology in Uppsala, Sweden, I had an extremely gloomy dinner conversation with a former student and colleague, who (despite these handicaps) has become a highly respected sociologist. My small contribution to the gloom arose only from the customary chaos of world sociological

congresses, including the extremely modest predictability of actual papers and events from the printed program and the arrogant incompetence of the local arrangements staff. My friend's pessimism was more extensive. He had been contemplating the state of our discipline in Great Britain and Western Europe, and had become convinced that sociology was faced by increasing polarization between Marxists and non-Marxists. (That could scarcely be a confrontation between radicals and conservatives, as nothing could be more conservative than the stubborn adherence to dogma displayed by latter-day Marxists, and few non-Marxists would defend any contemporary society as either unblemished or immutable.) I shared my friend's despondency about the state of the sociological art in Europe, as I shared his sense that a kind of neo-Marxist orthodoxy was increasingly a criterion of professional placement and recognition. Now, among sociologists, only a fool would fail to attend to social conflict, the dialectical character of many social processes, and the fact that part of the divisiveness in contemporary societies is rooted in competing and conflicting economic interests. But equally, only a fool can take seriously historical materialism, the labor theory of value, inevitable class polarization in so-called capitalist economies, or neglect the reality of religious and ethnic conflict, and forget Marx's own admonition about the relativity of historical circumstances.

Despite a considerable number of vulgar Marxists and sophisticated neo-Marxists among card-carrying American sociologists, I cannot foresee any way that American practitioners could be polarized on that dimension, since only a small fraction of them are concerned with such doctrinal matters. My sense of the course of American sociology for the last several

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decades is not that of ideological polarization but rather of ideological and substantive fragmentation. Were it not for the American Sociological Association, which indulgently (or impartialistically?) extends its protective custody over an increasingly heterogeneous agglomeration of intellectual interests and ideological orientations, and the departments of sociology that fearfully abandon mere scholarly standards for faculty recruitment in order to accommodate diversity, any resemblance to a central disciplinary identification would be difficult to detect. The identification becomes limited to organizational memberships, with scant regard to a shared body of knowledge.

Specialization, Vulgarization, Populism

Sociology is not alone in facing a proliferation of specialties internal to the claimed intellectual territory (if those boundaries can be drawn) as well as at the frontiers with other settlements. Now specialization (increasing differentiation) is not some sort of evolutionary universal, to be taken as a natural law. Rather, it is normally a joint consequence of increasing size, making specialization possible, and cumulative growth in relevant knowledge, making specialization necessary. The increasing numbers of formally certified sociologists (and, for a time, of college and university positions to employ them) was especially marked beginning with the mid-1960s, when the exceptionally large post-war harvests of babies were starting to enter colleges. A great many of these recruits to the discipline, whether well or poorly trained, assiduously added their intellectual output to that of their predecessors to create a "literature explosion," which shows scant signs of abating, but perhaps some signs of not escalating exponentially. I carefully write "literature explosion" rather than "knowledge," as of course a substantial but not carefully measured proportion of the published writing comprises trivia, error, and redundancy. It is a situation where no one can literally "keep up with the literature" across all specialties, to say nothing of maintaining normal teaching schedules and "collectivity duties" or ad-

ding immodestly to the spate of published words. Even one of the older or newer specialties, if neglected for a few years, may be extremely difficult to claim again conscientiously as one's own.

For those of us whose professional existence antedates the deluge (and are thus antediluvian), we barely manage to keep up with a perhaps dwindling set of already established areas of competence, being, if we are honest, also thankful for tenure. But what of the young? Since time, money, and patience are less than infinite, they (students) and we (professors) must settle for training in a diminishing fraction of what is available to learn. Under these circumstances there is a strong temptation to indulge in the "quick fix:" immediate specialization to the neglect of whatever common intellectual core that justifies disciplinary identification and provides a rationale for claimed sovereignty over part of the intellectual landscape. Of course specialization threatens the cohesive integrity of all knowledge-based disciplines and professions. What provides one principal source of commonality among mature proponents and practitioners is the "fellowship of past suffering" represented by a common training prior to specialization. If that is by-passed on grounds of efficiency, nominal adherents of a common discipline would find no arena of discourse that would distinguish their encounters from those with the laity. It is my impression that this is, with increasing frequency, characteristic of the current state of American sociology. (If my dinner companion in Uppsala were dedicated to his depression, he could argue that ideology, particularly a vulgarized one requiring no deep study, would provide at least an arena of discourse, not available for intellectual discussion among those lacking shared knowledge or intellectual orientations.)

I believe that the disarray I perceive within American sociology owes much to a loss of unifying themes, interests, and shared theoretical orientations. Yet there are other sources of discontent and disaffection, more nearly American in context and temporally prior to either the shadow of Marxist theology or the rampant specialization that I have just discussed.

America is a remarkably non-deferential society, not only by comparison with the more ancient and long rank-ordered cultures of Europe and Asia, but also by comparison with the modern, nominally socialist countries. We are by no means an equalitarian society, but we uneasily wear conspicuous signs of inequality. In the years prior to and including my presidential year of 1966, when I was deeply involved in "governmental" affairs of the American Sociological Association, the natives were increasingly restless with respect to what came to be called the "Eastern establishment." (Closely examined, some members of that perceived establishment professed their discipline in Chicago, Seattle, Berkeley, Los Angeles, but mainly otherwise not in the rest of the midlands, the south, the southwest, or the thinly populated mountain west.) There was undoubtedly some "old boy network" based in the prestigious private universities—the Ivy League—and places like California at Berkeley or Michigan at Ann Arbor that recruited their faculties from those universities, and a delay in recognition of the exemplary intellectual qualities of the burgeoning state universities of the mid-west. That cultural lag has fortunately long since cured itself.

However, in my visits to the various regional societies with the dual intent of selling a revamped constitutional structure for the association and palliating some of the wounds inflicted by unconscious arrogance on the part of the "establishment," I came to realize that regionalism was partly a token of deeper resentment. Whether from poor luck, lack of ability and driving ambition, or cruel injustice, a great many sociologists who have achieved neither national recognition nor the working conditions and institutional setting that would have facilitated success, deeply resented the formal recognition (and modest power) accorded the elect. Given the density of population along the Boston-Washington corridor, the large number of non-prestigious colleges and universities (some of them very large), there were almost certainly more discontented and partially alienated sociologists in the east than in the noisier midwest or the subdued south.

What regionalism in the first part of the 1960s anticipated was a populist wave that came close to enshrining mediocrity as a moral virtue. No one, to my knowledge, suggested selecting elective officers, Council members, and elective committees by lot (a truly egalitarian solution). Yet a far-reaching attempt was made, with some success, to politicize the Association on irrelevant issues such as American foreign policy, partially relevant issues such as the character of Federal funding, and strictly relevant issues such as the internal governance of the Association. Some of the reforms were no doubt overdue, and I cannot find it in my conscience to say that broadening the bases of participation and responsibility has damaged the quality of the Association's professional activities. And, with a few exceptions, we still nominate candidates and elect presidents who command intellectual respect and whose work stands somewhere near the central core of the discipline. Again with a few exceptions, at that exalted level at least we have persisted in the pattern of recognizing admirable scholarly work, with a fortunate freedom from partisan platforms and ideological stances. I should like to believe that the pattern will endure, but if we are in danger of losing our relatively shrinking commonality of knowledge, our bases for identifying what constitutes exceptional merit through ignorance concerning who is doing what, or if we think that distinction (even if rewarded only by prestige and onerous responsibilities) is immoral, the future seems distinctly lacking in charm.

The Association itself might endure for its convenience in booking hotels for meetings, its sponsorship of an array of specialized journals, and being the holding company for a variety of specialized caucuses, sub-disciplines, and committees for this and that. I suggest that it is perilously close to that now, and if specialization and populism continue to erode commonality of both intellectual interests and the criteria of what constitutes merit, its activities will be singularly joyless and uninspiring. How can one celebrate unknown heroes?