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Special Issue: The ASA at 75

EDITOR'S PAGE

Inside Front Cover

ARTICLES

Graham C. Kinloch "Professional Sociology as the Basis of Societal Integration: A Study of Presidential Addresses"	2
Mary Jo Deegan "Early Women Sociologists and the American Sociological Society: The Patterns of Exclusion and Participation"	14
William B. Thomas "Howard W. Odum's Social Theories in Transition: 1910-1930"	25
APPRAISALS	
Stuart A. Queen "Seventy-Five Years of American Sociology in Relation to Social Work"	34
Matilda White Riley "How Old is Age 75?"	38
Robert C. Angell "Reflections on the Project, Sociological Resources for the Social Sciences"	41
Charles H. Page "The <i>American Sociological Review</i> , 1958-1960"	43
Robert Bierstedt "The ASA-1960-1962"	47
Robert E. L. Faris "Recollections of a Half Century of Life in the ASA"	49
Robert O. Carlson "The ASA in 1961-1962: Bringing in Managerial Skills"	52
Wilbert E. Moore "Can the Discipline Survive Its Practitioners?"	56
Charles P. Loomis "Parochialism in the ASA"	59
Philip M. Hauser "Sociology's Progress Toward Science"	62
Edmund H. Volkart "Seventy-Five Years of It"	64
ERRATA (From Volume 15, Number 4)	68

For information for contributors, see TAS 16(1, February), inside back cover.

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EDITOR'S PAGE: The ASA at 75

Why should sociologists remember their past? Is there not wisdom in Whitehead's observation that "A science that hesitates to forget its founders is lost"? With so many urgent professional and disciplinary issues competing for attention at present, what justification is there for a collection of papers on the history of the 75 year old American Sociological Association?

The Deputy Editors and I worried about these questions, and quickly resolved our doubts—mindful of the danger that a call for papers might elicit only recollections extolling the virtues of the Association. As it turned out, the past officers took seriously their invitation to comment on the positive *and* negative accomplishments of the Association, and their hopes for what it might become.

Commemorative events such as this anniversary provide an opportunity for delving into the past to see what, if any, perspective and wisdom it provides for the present. A common justification for reading history is that we learn from the past. What, or how, we learn is not always evident.

Without proposing my interpretation as definitive in any way, I nevertheless wish to note the benefits I discovered in reading about the past, and in this way to introduce the unsolicited papers and the solicited appraisals by past officers of the Association.

The first benefit was to gain some sense of which persons and events helped to shape the present structure of the discipline and profession. Kinloch, for example, shows how the leaders of the Association used the occasion of their presidential addresses to focus on both the major social problems of their day and the role they envisioned for sociology to ameliorate the problems. In spite of the diverse problems they perceived, one finds a persistent theme of sociology offering some "objective" basis for solving social problems through sociological theory and, especially, the application of scientific methods.

Despite the liberal, reformist bent of many of its leaders, the Association bears a darker side. Deegan exposes the persistent discrimination against women in the offices and activities of the Association. Women were welcome so long

as they stayed in their "special spheres"—in the sections on the family and social work.

A finely detailed biography of one influential President of the Association is offered by Thomas, whose paper on Howard Odum illustrates some of the persistent dilemmas of that office—bridging the gap between theory and practice, mediating the recurring regional strains within the Association, and contributing to the amelioration of a pressing social problem—racial conflict.

A second benefit I derived from these papers is a better sense of the context of recurring debates within the Association. The current argument of the proper place of applied and basic research, for example, is foreshadowed by the discussion of these issues by the founders of the Association. As Queen (whose professional life spans 61 of the 75 years of the Association) notes, the earlier close-fitting relationship between theory and application became more problematic as sociologists became more enamored with a value free sociology.

A third benefit is that the papers allowed me to trace some significant changes and ruptures in the Association. A common theme of several of the appraisals is that the social character of the ASA has changed fundamentally, even within the past two decades. In some of these appraisals, one finds nostalgia for the Association in which it was possible to know many of the members, and to converse with the leaders of the discipline at the annual meetings. But the loss of sociability was only one of the dramatic changes.

Surely, the most notable change has been the enormous growth of the Association, from 115 persons in 1905 to 13,388 persons in 1980. This increasing size, along with changing perceptions of the mission of the Association, have led to profound changes in its structure. In the comments of several of the previous Executive Officers of the Association—Riley, Bierstedt, Carlson, and Volkart—one finds a chronicle of the persons, policies, and events that shaped the growth of the Executive Office from a part time, unpaid position, to a full time, professional staff that administers many programs and activities.

Continued on Page 71

A processing fee of \$10 is required for each paper submitted; such fees to be waived for student members of ASA. This reflects a policy of the ASA Council and Committee on Publications affecting all ASA journals. It is a reluctant response to the rapidly accelerating costs of manuscript processing. A check or money order, made payable to the American Sociological Association, should accompany each submission. The fee must be paid in order to initiate the processing of the manuscript. Also, authors must submit 5 copies of each manuscript.

EDITOR'S PAGE

Continued from Cover 2

A fourth benefit of reading these papers is the insight they provide into the tension between sociology as a profession and a discipline. Growth in membership has led to growth and bureaucratization of the administration of the Association, which often finds itself responding to the demands of special constituencies of the membership. The leaders no longer can speak for a discipline that possesses a coherent body of knowledge. This fundamental contradiction of organizational success, but (apparent) intellectual disarray, poses the challenge that many consider to be the greatest threat to the survival of the Association.

Despite the practical benefits just mentioned, I must confess that the fifth benefit I derived was a sense of pleasure and occasional amusement. In many of the appraisals, I enjoyed a sense of intimacy with a colleague, the pleasure of reading some fine prose, and an occasional chuckle at misadventure (the loss of a manuscript on an afternoon's sail), and self-confessed professional delinquency (the burn-

ing of files, as the office of a journal is cleared away to make way for a movie company).

In a sense, this special collection of papers and appraisals might be seen as a recombination of the formula of Mills's sociological imagination. He proposed to show how the sociological imagination "enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society." Our editorial purpose is to present history and biography to show how the sociological imagination has been shaped within the Society/Association.

This issue contains the papers and appraisals that trace the Association through the 1960s. Part of the next issue picks up the story as of the 1970s when fundamental tensions within the Association became more pronounced. That part of the anniversary collection concludes with several contributors offering their appraisals of what the Association must do to survive the next 25 years, to its centenary anniversary.