

TOWARD A NEW SOCIOLOGY: RECONSIDERING THE CRITERIA FOR ATTRACTION AND SELECTION OF STUDENTS

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I

I suppose that for a long time a good-humoredly jaundiced viewpoint held by certain knowledgeable disciplinary affiliates and not a few able critics outside the discipline has been equally a favorite of mine: we hold simply that a good deal of the ineffectuality in research and teaching in Sociology is a function of poor training, and the related but difficult-to-assess effects of selective calling to the vocation.

A lot of these critics of training have singled out the university image of Sociology as one that generally serves to attract academicized old ladies of both sexes, and they go on to say that the sociologizing effects of training itself tend to produce just this odd result, irrespective of the nature and quality of personal input characteristics, sexual or otherwise.

It is our belief that we're not getting, and traditionally haven't, the students with superior abilities, traditionally measured. The brightest simply haven't usually come into Sociology to this point, and I suspect that it's going to take more than rosy news magazine articles to get them here very soon. Neither am I certain, however, that they are what the discipline needs, although I suspect that most sociologists would be overjoyed to see an onrush of the brightest students, traditionally measured, to their departments.

It is the social characteristics of most students deemed able in the usual ways, and their effects upon the discipline that disturb me: I don't have a lot of faith in the value to Sociology of more personnel of the same, only somewhat brighter,

calibre than those we already enjoy. I think it unlikely that the discipline will benefit too much if the old ladies are simply a little more able to perform in the mechanically academic sense.

The students we do need to attract in greater numbers are those who are not, and are not pre-disposed to become, repressed, old before their time, and wont to dress themselves in the shabby garb of functionalism or scientism, just to name a pair. We could do with more of those who are not of the usual academic folkways but are still sufficiently attracted to scholastic work to remain in the traditional university training settings. It is my hope that these students could help revivify Sociology, and I suspect that if accepted and left alone enough to do their own kind of work, they will. But, as in the case of the conventionally bright, we are not getting these students into Sociology.

Such individualized students may not appear to be overly friendly to Sociology and as such may seem threatening to many. To be sure it is likely they may appear to be overly friendly to few academic disciplines as such, and they may see our sacred disciplinary boundaries as spurious restraints to boot. Such students now, I think, go into the humanities and the hard sciences, and a few may lead self-directed scholarly lives that lead them haphazardly through school - or serve to get them thrown out. Such students are natural social experimenters: they question where others embrace, criticize where others remain respectful, and place their own destinies on the line in social trial-and-error where others

serially metamorphize to suit the climate. Sociology, as potentially the most complex of the social sciences, could use such people in its training programs - their better-developed analytical talents would be a real boon to their professors - and most certainly later on in the practicing of the discipline itself, where their influence as peers might be somewhat revolutionary.

The real value of these people to Sociology lies in their individualized cognitive and social ways of life: as natural social observers and experimenters, their characteristics are more nearly in line with those we ideally attribute to the scientist, except, of course, that they are usually by no means "value-free." These young cultural tinkerers are potential inventors, and we may do well to suffer some of their irritating personal mannerisms in the hopes of a real payoff. Among the social sciences Sociology and Anthropology are best fitted by virtue of their subject matter, tradition, and scientific character ideals to incorporate and develop the talents of academically inclined young alienates. Sociology stands to gain scientifically from a little relaxing of its largely implicit selection and reward criteria, and any changes along these lines should be made public in one way or another. The truly superior students I have discussed must be attracted to the discipline, and those few already within our ranks possessing the attributes mentioned must be allowed the freedom and offered the guidance to do what suits them.

II

We need Sociology departments with different philosophical attitudes and day-to-day approaches toward teaching, research and recruiting. We need better departments, not in the quantitative sense of degree ratios and sources, publication totals, or sheer numbers of the god-like, but better in the sense that the boundaries of social science and social inquiry are first and foremost the central concerns: the objects of aggressive, unrestrained assault. The key word here is unrestrained. In my opinion we need in effect to learn once again, at least in our sociological work, how to say shit around the girls. We need to learn from them, try not to spoil them too much, and even engage in attempts to work alongside them. Pushing them out in one way or another

has helped render the discipline unpalatable to many young people possessing the ongoing attributes of the natural scientist of society. We should have had about enough of this by now; if it is thought not, perhaps a look around in a fashion not dissimilar to the way these students look would turn up some soberly interesting evidence.

The department of Sociology of any campus should offer both new student and veteran professor a subcultural milieu unlike that of any other academic endeavor on the premises. It should be singularly committed to finding out what's socially what and reporting it, without allowing fear of administrative reprisal or public opinion to bend the form or the depth of the work. It should be freer than any cultural environment past encountered, and the initial encounter with it should be a source of immediate awareness of new and exciting scholarly and scientific potentials.

Not that this isn't what we say we already provide, of course, and we usually add the perfunctory mumbo-jumbo of academic freedom as rhetorical icing to the imagery. We all say we are against the kinds of sin implicit in the proposal of anything less than the ideals above, but we are still mainly being rhetoricians. How many of us have never felt the real press of practical departmental or university conservatism where the above ideals, all consensually sanctified, are concerned? None, I suspect, and I suggest that we have too often reacted submissively to this pressure, thereby helping both to further compromise our own working conditions and to present a discouraging picture to the youthful idealists looking us over. We have not presented any such dreary picture to the duly conservative pre-professionals and the occasional, bright careerists; their interests are obviously in line with what they see the system to be for, and in this respect they are pretty good natural scientists themselves. But we have too many of them around for our own good: they are pre-professionals who primarily want licenses to serve people and offices; we need scientists primarily interested in following their own peculiar valuational and scientific interests - regardless of personalities and organizations. Not that the two cannot work together, of course, but I would hope that one category would substantially outnumber the other. When it actually does, perhaps we will start attracting a different kind of student.

III

I should admit that I enjoy having the kind of analytical and forthright students around me that have been discussed. They apparently don't play roles that get in the way of pursuing things sociological in a brisk and candid manner, and their directness facilitates my own ease and honesty. I am new to teaching and don't yet have a grasp on the "ropes," but I am not trying too hard to find them, mainly because they may someday become overly useful as devices to ensnare "irritating" or "threatening" students. I am fairly certain that the kind of students Sociology needs will wisely back off from overweaning classroom authority, and I am equally certain that they will not stand for enforced intellectual or expressional limitations. That's probably why we lose so many of them.

It is interesting that someone once said of Sociology that it "makes itself stupid." He meant that it doesn't pursue the questions it asks far enough and that it fails to draw the conclusions that may be drawn along the way. I would quarrel with him on the fairness of his remark, but would add that Sociology often doesn't ask genuine questions of social forms at all. The "real questions" that Mills talked about, the ones that ask what's what of opaque and complex modern structural phenomena, largely go begging in professional Sociology. They are asked, however, by persons now practicing in the humanities who once may have been momentarily attracted to Sociology, and they are asked by a few unusual

undergraduates who may sit in our courses now or next semester. We should try our utmost not to disappoint such students, particularly if they are among the few who are grateful or curious enough to come back to us for seconds. If we cannot ask and answer "real" questions along with them, then at the least let us spare them offensive assurances of our intellectual superiorities and help them instead to develop their own more iconoclastic working tools and settings. In this way we can help to create something of an academic sanctuary for students who may be scientifically talented in a way peculiarly useful to Sociology.

If there is ever to be a "new" Sociology, it will very likely come about in this manner.

IV

We have too often precluded genuine insurrections. It is time to recognize that we have been routinely anticipating a courtly variety of fey, aging aspirants. It is time to turn more of our attention to the truly youthful and expectant, whose dreams of intellectual and academic conquest have too often flitted our way, then settled elsewhere. It is not the mannered and the circumspect to whom the character tenets of science really apply. To an extent our recruiting errors have lain precisely with the assumption that social caution and tact are somehow scholarly virtues, synonymous with desirable character qualities of the practicing social scientist.