FACING OUR CALLING: SOCIOLOGY AND THE AGON OF LIBERAL EDUCATION*

Donald N. Levine, University of Chicago

More than fifty million dollars is spent in this country each year on the undergraduate instructional budget for sociology. Can this investment be justified on educational grounds? To say that students should study sociology "because it is there" is not convincing. Indeed, one can advance at least three arguments against the wisdom of this investment:

1. The materials generally available for sociological instruction are inferior in intellectual quality to those of most other disciplines. As scientific works they lack the empirical rigor and methodological subtlety of materials in biology, chemistry, and psychology; and the theoretical sophistication of mathematics, physics, and economics. As statements about the human condition they lack the profundity of classic authors like Aristotle, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky.

2. The highly abstract way in which sociology relates to social reality is relatively useless or even misleading before students have a fund of empirical knowledge to which those abstractions can meaningfully be applied--such knowledge as would come from the study of history, ethnography, and naturalistic fiction.

3. The objectification of social phenomena which sociology entails turns the student's attention away from his own personal experience and reactions. The young person who learns to traffic with depersonalized conceptions like role allocation, systemic function, and cohort analysis before coming to terms with his own experience and mode of relating to society tends to strengthen defenses which keep him from establishing mature personal relations and social commitments.

If valid, these arguments would justify a curriculum which gave high priority to mathematics and the natural sciences, moral philosophy, literature, history and ethnography, and encounter groups; and in which sociological instruction played little or no part.

---

*presented at the 1971 Annual Meetings of the American Sociological Association, Denver, Colorado: Section on the Profession--Undergraduate Education, Academic and Community; August 30, 1971.

While these are probably serious arguments, I do not find them conclusive. Their proper target may be the timing or the character of sociological instruction rather than what is inherent in the subject. And while the issues they raise need to be dealt with, the chief reason I mention them is to highlight the need to think about the rationale for including sociology in the college curriculum.

In so doing, of course, one does not start from scratch. Indeed, more than a century of argumentation by the foremost proponents of the subject holds that a principal raison d'etre for sociology--considered broadly for now as "the scientific study of society "--is precisely its unique and profound educational value. For Auguste Comte, sociology helps the individual mature beyond his primary narcissism both intellectually and emotionally. By subjecting ideas about human action to the discipline of scientific observation and theory, it replaces subjective fantasies about humanity with representations that are both more realistic and more amenable to consensual validation. And by demonstrating that society is a natural system--an order of reality transcending the individual in time and space--it gives man an object for his affections that transcends his more immature egoistic choices.

For Marx, sociology frees men from "false consciousness." By revealing the bases of their fetishistic attachment to certain goals and the repressive effects of certain structural arrangements and cultural patterns, it helps them understand how the circumstances of their period prevent them from pursuing their "real" interests and enjoying their appropriate solidarities.

For Emile Durkheim, sociology provides a disciplined way of observing and explaining social phenomena which lays the basis for more intelligent diagnoses of social problems. It can correct common sense views which are often misguided in that they tend to consider transient phenomena as inexorable and essential phenomena as dispensable, and to blame individual agents for effects which are often the result of social forces.

For Max Weber, sociology is a means toward more responsible thought and action. By clarifying the implications of normative assumptions and the consequences of particular courses of action, it enables individuals to maximize rationality in their orientation to the world.

For Karl Mannheim, sociology is educational in two ways: it enables us to take advantage of the insights of a number of different partisan points of view, and to become conscious of the selectivity and distortions that are endemic in partisan viewpoints.

Finally, to name just one of our contemporaries who has reflected about this matter, Peter L. Berger, sociology can liberate persons from the intellectual constraints of everyday life and institutionalized mores, opening up the possibility of more authentic awareness and choice by making us more conscious of the socially artifical nature of those constraints. All these men agree that sociology has an important educational role as a unique means of de-mystification and intellectual clarification; to come to terms with the differences in how they conceive that role remains one of the outstanding items of unfinished business in the philosophy of sociology.

Sociology has advanced sufficiently at this point, however, that our views on this question need no longer be tied to programmatic statements about the field. Enough work has been done, enough materials are now available, for us to take a more inductive approach. We now can ask: what is educational in the literature of sociology and in the process of sociological inquiry?

The question of what is educational about sociology is radically different from the question of what will produce good professional sociologists. The latter refers to a process of training, of professional socialization, in which the terms of reference must be the current state of the field and the ways in which its outstanding problems can best be identified and resolved. The former refers to a process of personal development, in which the terms of reference are significantly different. The perspective here is that of the development of subjective culture, not of objective culture--to use a favorite distinction of Georg Simmel. In this perspective, we ask what sociology can contribute to the development of the individual's intellectual and emotional capacities.

It will surprise no one if I say that sociologists committed to undergraduate instruction in a university setting have tended to neglect this question. Like other college patriots in a time when the whole enterprise of liberal education has been threatened by the vast increase of clients on one hand and the dominance of interests in objective culture on the other, we have been fighting a holding operation, chronically engaged in battles that ultimately are futile and irrelevant--the battles of teaching *versus* research, and attention to undergraduates *versus* graduates. Teaching *versus* research is ultimately a *phony* issue, because those committed to productive research *need* to "teach", both to train succeeding generations of researchers, and to gain that clarification and stimulation of their research ideas and methods which the act of teaching uniquely provides. And those committed to teaching need to do "research," to maintain a continuing connection with the growth of some body of inquiry in order that their teaching be fresh and they be respected. Graduate *versus* undergraduate teaching is likewise phony. The point is not to maximize the number of bodies in contact with undergraduates, for many academics do more harm than good there, through pathogenic kinds of interaction with students, lack of structure in the classroom, excessive rigidity, or other kinds of behavior that alienate students from the intellectual life or entice them to emulate destructive models. (I sometimes think the proper solution to the undergraduate staffing problem is to *reduce* the number of college teachers, so that students only come in contact with very well qualified educators, and then spend the rest of their time working alone or with other students on impersonally programmed auto-didactic kinds of learning.) Rather, the issue is not *more* teaching, but what kind of teaching; not *more* work with undergraduates, but what to do with them.

There is, however, one payoff from staying engaged in fighting these rearguard battles. They keep us from having to face up to the outstanding question: what are the intellectual resources which sociology can provide to help human beings develop themselves as cultured persons?

To gain perspective on this question it may be helpful to think of these resources as part of an emerging world culture, the product of a long process of cultural evolution that has involved differentiation along three dimensions. The term culture is used here in the now widely accepted technical sense as referring to "patterns of meaning embodied in symbols." One dimension of cultural differentiation concerns the specialization of symbolic patterns on a *culture functional* basis, that is, with respect to their provision *of different kinds of meaning*. Four kinds of symbolic patterns have been developed to provide answers to four basic questions of meaning: cognitive patterns, to the question "What is it?"; expressive patterns, to the question "How do I feel about it?"; normative patterns, to the question "What should I do about it?"; and sacred patterns, to the question "Why should I care about it?". In primitive cultures these patterns are not sharply separated from one another. The first step in this process of differentiation was to legitimate the separation of normative from sacred patterns, a development which was institutionalized in Greek philosophy and in Roman Law, as Talcott Parsons has stressed. A second step--particularly vexatious for sociology--was to legitimate the separation of cognitive from normative patterns. A third step was the separation of cognitive from expressive patterns, a process that has received less attention than it deserves. Within the cognitive mode of orientation, finally, a variety of disciplines of observation and explanation have been differentiated.

A second dimension of cultural differentiation concerns the objects of orientation. Using the commonplaces, god, man, and nature, we may say, following Robert Redfield's account of the primitive world view and Robert Bellah's account of primitive religion, that primitive cultures tend not to make a sharp separation among these objects; that man, nature, and god are conceived as parts of an indissoluble unity, lacking really distinct identities. Human attributes are given to gods and natural objects; the supernatural infuses nature and human groups. The separation of supernatural objects from human and non-human physical objects is of course the first great transformation in this area.

Within the realm of human objects, the identification of a distinct order of "social facts" was a major step in the establishment of sociology. In this development five phases may be identified: the separation of the polity from the individual level of analysis in Aristotelean and Thomistic philosophy; the separation of the realm of civil society from that of the polity, by the Scottish moralists and Hegel, von Stein, and Marx; the separation between society and the organism, in Comte and Spencer; the separation between society and the individual level, in Durkheim; and the separation between society and culture, adumbrated by Marx, Spencer, Simmel, and Weber and made explicit by Sorokin and Parsons. (We may note in passing that the disciplined differentiation of modes of orientation was, following Kant, the central preoccupation of the German founders of sociology; differentiation of the objects of orientation, following Comte, that of the French.)

A third dimension of differentiation concerns the separation of cultural from social institutions. Symbolic patterns are subordinated to practical needs in primitive cultures, and are shared more or less equally among all adult members of those societies. The great transformations which effect a distinct institutionalization of culture patterns are, first, the emergence of individuals and groups who serve as cultural specialists--magicians, priests, literati--and then the establishment of organizations devoted to the maintenance and development of cultural traditions--schools, theaters, academies, institutes and the like. The final precondition for the emergence of sociology is the legitimation of specialists who are free to cultivate some branch of culture for its own sake, without reference to or control by the practical needs of any group.

In sum, and to simplify a long story: what became institutionalized in the late 19th-and early 20th-centuries in Western Europe and the United States was the cultivation of cognitive orientations to social objects pursued for their cultural value. This "culture-functional" approach to the institutionalization of sociology gives us a way to carry out a rational analysis of the disciplinary structures available in sociology. It enables us to escape the constraints of looking at sociology as it is organized in universities, or as it is practised by a profession, perspectives which are germane in other contexts but which, with regard to the intellectual content of the subject, too much reflect historical circumstance and administrative convenience.

So viewed, sociology may be seen as one of a number of social sciences all of which employ some combination of a number of related intellectual disciplines. In other words, to understand what sociology has to offer as an educational subject we must deal with disciplinary forms that crosscut the conventional boundaries of sociology as well as some that are no longer included within sociology. The nine basic social disciplines which I have identified and have been attempting to codify are as follows: empirical methodology, categorical theory, and normative philosophy; scientific reportage and utopiology; explanation, criticism, diagnosis, and prescription. For now I shall simply define these disciplines and suggest some of their relations.

1. Empirical Methodology is the generic name for the discipline of making controlled observations. It consists of a number of subdisciplines, which have yet to be codified and systematically related. These include content analysis, descriptive statistics, field work techniques, historiography, interviewing techniques, laboratory techniques, phenomenology, and projective testing.

2. Categorical Theory is the discipline of grounding and articulating conceptual schemes.

3. Normative Philosophy is the discipline of grounding and articulating evaluative standards.

These three are simple disciplines, in that each of them deals with one of the three basic intellectual processes--observation, conceptualization, and evaluation--involved in the disciplined consideration of social objects.

The next two I call compound disciplines, in that they involve two terms of reference.

4. Scientific Reportage combines empirical methodology with categorial theory. It is the discipline of making controlled observations within a framework of articulated theory.

5. Utopiology combines categorial theory with normative philosophy. It is the discipline of imaginatively realizing a set of evaluative standards in terms of an articulated model of social reality.

The last four are complex disciplines, in that they involve three or more terms of reference.

6. Explanation is the discipline of relating one set of observations to another set of observations in terms of an articulated model which posits some kind of causal or other meaningful relationship between the two orders of facts involved. This contains a number of subdisciplines which may be termed genetic explanation, structural explanation, functional explanation, and reductive explanation.

7. Criticism is the discipline of applying a set of evaluative standards germane to a particular model of reality to a determinate set of observations.

8. Diagnosis is the discipline of identifying practical problems, determining relevant explanations, and generating conceptions of kinds of possible solutions.

9. Prescription is the discipline of determining the best possible course of practical action by calculating the probable benefits, probable negative consequences, and opportunity costs of alternative solutions to actual problems.

These nine disciplines have been defined in terms of the modes of cultural orientation. They provide the most relevant set of categories to organize curricular resources for the purpose of liberating and enriching the student's intellectual capacities. Present-day sociology typically involves four of them: empirical methodology, categorial theory, scientific reportage, and explanation. An adequate curriculum should also include systematic work in normative philosophy, utopiology, criticism, diagnosis, and prescription as well.

A different set of categories can be generated by considering the range of objects to which these disciplines can be applied. The subject-matters of the social disciplines consist either of human wholes--persons, communities, societies, civilizations; concrete parts--complexes, families, markets, governments, schools, etc.; or analytic abstractions--elements (motives, roles), structures (authority, justice), functions (adaptation, integration), and processes (exchange, conflict). No one has yet, to my knowledge, undertaken to look at the range of subject-matters in sociology with an eye to determining the differential educational values that might accrue from studying them. Two points often made in casual discussions of the question concern the educational value of grasping (1) the variability of basic culture patterns, and (2) the significance of reconsidering a particular set of orientations by locating it within a more encompassing structure of social relations and meanings. But virtually all of this area remains uncharted and ready for future investigation.

To conclude: the process of liberal education is a dramatic struggle, an agon, between a student oriented in terms of the fixations and inhibitions of his parochial common sense culture and the autonomously institutionalized symbolic patterns of our cultural tradition. To be liberated through education he must struggle to master those specialized modes and objects of orientation--those disciplines and subject-matters--and incorporate them into his unique structure of self-development. To this end, for sociology and the social sciences to come of age as educational subjects, their cultural components will have to be identified and assessed with respect to their educational functions, and made available to use in the way that the diverse resources of modern psychotherapy are utilized by the well-trained therapist. To grapple with the massive body of objective culture in this manner will not be easy, but surely the agon we must act out if we would call ourselves educators today.