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# SOME REFLECTIONS ON SOCIOLOGY DURING A CRISIS[1]

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WHEN a storm shakes the house, we grow concerned for the foundations. When a crisis challenges our routines, we are forced to think back to the values on which they rest. We may cling to these values more tenaciously or we may break loose from them. In any event, we must revaluate. This holds for our intellectual values no less than for the rest. Our scholarship, our learning, our research, how do they look against the background of a time when small and great states crumble, when across the seas the skies are filled with death, when profound uncertainties divide today from tomorrow, when the destinies of peoples everywhere are in the balance? These mighty issues besiege us on every side. What then of the issues to which we devote our workday lives, we scholars who have the peculiar freedom of deciding for ourselves our own intellectual tasks? It is because we have this freedom that we are troubled. I have heard some scholars say that in these days their work seems insignificant and futile, that they have no longer the heart to pursue it. Perhaps we might impertinently ask the further question: what is it worth at any other time if it loses its worth in times like these?

The question becomes now permissible when the grip of routine is loosened, so that we dare to look at the value of the things we do. Nothing is any longer justified by by the sacred habit of doing it. What then are the values served by our science? How are we pursuing, how far are we achieving them? There is the knowledge that is illumination, enabling us to understand things; and there is the knowledge that is skill, enabling us to do things. Learning may not provide either illumination or skill, at least to any degree that counts. There are refinements of learning that pursue minutiae of past lores or chart the course of chimaeras bombinating in the

[1] Presidential address to the Thirty-fifth Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Society, Chicago, Illinois, Dec. 27, 1940.

void. There is laborious research that rediscovers the obvious or discovers nothing at all. But unless learning gives us the knowledge that is illumination or the knowledge that is skill, it is vanity or vexation of spirit. We do not need to choose between these goals. Each has its binding claim upon us. To understand things is to live in a larger world, to conquer prejudice and superstition and darkness, to come to terms with the encompassing reality, to employ the unique gift of conscious being. To achieve skills is to gain potential mastery over our lot, to attack with hopes of victory the many problems and ills that beset us. But skills without understanding are blind, and understanding is impotent without skills.

Since we last met, we have lived through a year of cumulative crisis, crisis that has come ever nearer to us. None of us can have wholly escaped the question: how does our subject meet the test? In this time of intense appraisal, what seems its worth? When all boundaries are changing, are its boundaries enlarged or narrowed? What are we doing as sociologists? What values are we upholding or advancing—values that belong to the area of knowledge we have taken for our own? What are we contributing, as sociologists, either to the intellectual or to the practical needs of this distracted age? Often during the past year, this question has pierced through the preoccupations of the hour. In putting before you something of my own response, I shall confine myself to certain central issues. There are imporant tasks of sociology that it shares with economics and politics and law and the sciences of the cultural life. With these I shall not here be concerned. There are also important tasks of sociology that link it to the immediate practical problems of a nation arming itself against crisis. These are now being studied by a special committee of the Society, and I believe its labors will be fruitful. With these tasks, I shall not here be concerned.

Instead, I want to turn your thoughts to certain areas of sociological investigation where the crisis convicts us of neglected opportunities, to vast areas unpossessed by us and unexplored, though our own flag and no other flies ever them. What is more remarkable about a time of crisis than the revelations it offers concerning the social nature of man? When men are detached from their social moorings, when they are subject to catastrophic changes of fortune, when every hour contains the final alternatives of life and death, when the young are more mortal than the old, when millions of males are segregated into unisexual camps, when responsibilities are suddenly intensified and abruptly transformed, when many social ties are broken, when one imperative demand silences all the rest—when such things happen, the foundations of human society are exposed. We can discern something of what has happened in man, the cunning herd animal, in the deep-working processes that have led from the Cyclopean family to this stage of our civilization. The delusive multicolored play of his surface valuations is swept aside. We watch the testing of the tensile strength of his

social cohesion; we can learn its endurance limits. We discover how his obdurate social emotions combine with his fierce egoisms. We discover how group identification sustains his private being, sustains not only his prouder loyalties but also his most petty ambitions. We observe how, when these are together threatened, he retreats in panic back to the herd, abandoning his individuality, eagerly accepting whatever messiah promises, at whatever price, the healing of his trauma, the restoration of his solidarity.

These are phenomena of profound sociological significance. To investigate them, to seek to comprehend them, should be a splendid enterprise, at once illuminating and eminently serviceable. I can imagine no knowledge that, if thoroughly grasped and widely diffused, could offer greater guidance to the leaders of men. We investigate what happens in the heart of the atom, we investigate what happens in the heart of distant suns, but we do so little genuinely to investigate what happens in the heart of man. Because we do not know or even care to know, our policies, our stratagems, our treaties, our controls, bring often the most unexpected and disastrous consequences to ourselves. What a record of miscalculation has been the political history of the last three decades! How little the guides and advisers foresaw, how little they understood! These decades do not stand alone. It is the history of political man repeating itself in our age. Men seem to learn every other lesson more quickly than how to deal intelligently, on the larger political scale, with their fellowmen. I am not dreaming of any utopia in which conflict will cease. I am merely suggesting that much of the actual conflict is misguided and ruinous, because of a lack of foresight, a lack of understanding, such as men do not display in the conduct of their other affairs. And the understanding that is most lacking is the understanding that sociology should and can provide. For it is the understanding of social relationships, of the social values men cherish, of their tribal gods and idols, of their responses to controls, of their long-run reactions to indoctrinations, of the tides of opinion, of the constancy and fickleness of mass emotions, of the consequences to the ingroup of treating the outgroup thus and thus.

Here are some of the major problems of sociology, and my reflections during the past year have often turned around the question: what are we doing to investigate them? We are the scientific fiduciaries of a great enterprise. Are we big enough for the job? Do we realize its greatness and our responsibility? Are we gearing ourselves to it as best we can? Or do we spend too much time disputing over little things or empty things? Do we vex ourselves overmuch with methodological quarrels and ignore the major tasks to which our methods should be applied? Have we enough to show for our diligent and often expensive researching? What do we do with the piles of data we collect? Are we asking significant questions and seeking significant answers? Is there some danger that we sprawl over half the universe of

knowledge and do not concentrate on our proper and urgent business?

I would bring to your attention some of these neglected tasks, selecting them because either their character or their practical importance is peculiarly revealed in times of crisis.

At the head of my list is the study of what I shall call social images. The first great philosopher of science spoke of the invisible idols men erect and worship. Three of his four orders of idols were socially created, the idols of the tribe, the idols of the market-place, and the idols of the theater. These images have frequently been exorcized by the logician and the philosopher, and more recently they have been described by the historian and in some part by the psychologist. A few sociologists, like Pareto, Veblen, and Thurman Arnold, have dealt with them in some fashion. But little enough has been done by way of the direct investigation of them. It is the business of the other sciences to eschew these idols; it is the business of the social sciences to study them. They are among the most portentous phenomena of social life. They are so powerful that at this hour, in most lands, men do not dare to look them in the face, so powerful that they make all science bow before them and furnish the technological aids they require for their greater power and glory. In all countries, they are enthroned and command allegiance. For these social images are more than idols—they are the projection of our social values, of our group and national solidarities, of the things that bind us and divide us also, group from group, nation from nation.

How then should we study them and to what end? The role of science is not to revaluate or to devaluate our primary values. It is concerned with the verifiable, the discoverable relations between phenomena and systems of phenomena. If our primary values lived in a realm of their own and were content to let science find and follow its own truth, there would be no issue between them and science. But our dynamic impulses, striving to change the world, often lead us to misinterpret it, to distort or to deny the verifiable. One remarkable feature of our own times is the manner in which these controlling value-systems have enlisted the last advances of technology to make their idols secure against investigation, to suppress all science that is unfavorable to their claims, to instil scientifically untenable doctrines of race and nationality and the social order. They take history away from the historians, anthropology from the anthropologists, social biology from the biologists, and sociology from the sociologists. Some of the priests who guard these images are bold enough to tell us that myth and fable are better than truth, that we live by our sacred illusions, that the darkness is preferable to the light.

Against that faith stands the faith of science, that in the end truth serves mankind better than does falsehood or ignorance. Perhaps we social scientists can profess a further article of that simple creed, affirming that it is the dark and distorted images which nations have created that are a main

cause of the present plight of our civilization. At least, we must raise the question whether the time is not fully ripe for the turning of the light of science on our sanctified prejudices, cherished delusions, and obsolete traditions. What science can do in this regard is not to evaluate our social images but to bring them into closer correspondence with social realities. It is a tremendous task, but I shall suggest only one aspect of it.

At the outset, let us distinguish two kinds of social image. Some of our images are representations, generally skewed by our interests and emotions, but nevertheless accepted representations of existent things. Others are nonrepresentative expressions of our dynamic values. The latter do not mirror, even distortedly, any evidential datum or system of data that the scientist can investigate. They are in that sense wholly subjective, though of course none the less important on that account. Both kinds of social image seem necessary for our social life. To the second order, the nonrepresentative, belong such concepts as honor, glory, prestige, purity, right, justice, loyalty, shame, duty. To the first order belong a motley array of ascriptions, denoted by such words as capitalism, communism, democracy, the "New Order" in Europe, the Nordic, the Jew, the alien, the rustic, Hollywood, New York City, the Middle West, Methodism, Roman Catholicism, the fair sex, and so forth. Each group sets up images of itself and of the countergroup, and the like-named images of different groups, though they purport to represent the same actualities, bear not the remotest resemblance to one another. Compare, for example, the socialist images of capitalism and of socialism with the capitalist images of socialism and of capitalism. Sometimes there would be a remarkable resemblance between the images of countergroups if we could only change around the labels attached by one or the other of them. The Republican's image of a Democrat used to be mighty like the Democrat's image of a Republican. But I shall not enlarge on this interesting theme.

There can be no doubt that these social images play a most powerful role. That fact of itself should be enough to make them a principal object of sociological investigation. But there is the further fact that our images of the second order are often gross misrepresentations of things. When so, they can properly be called unscientific, a term that has no direct relevance to our images of the first order. If we have different notions about honor or duty or shame or the rights of man, there is no decisive appeal; but if we have different notions about race or nationality or sovereignty or trade unionism or economic planning, some part of our disagreement can be settled provided we are willing to look for and to accept the facts. Our misrepresentations, our distorted images, have increasingly become forces to tear the world asunder. If sociologists set themselves steadily to the task of investigating these images, they would be bringing science and human life together at the place where they are most apart, at the place where the

separation of them appears, in this age of ours, to be most perilous.

It is a progressive task that must be renewed, generation after generation. In some areas, we dare not yet attempt it. Yet much can even now be done. In one great field of exploration, that of the assessment and measurement of the changes of public opinion, there has already been established a successful and happy alliance between sociologists and statisticians. I should like to see that alliance at work on our social images. A few years ago, I had the opportunity to direct an investigation of the social images the people of Canada have built up with respect to the United States.[2] There is scarcely another international frontier in the wide world over which a similar investigation could have been carried without occasioning friction or arousing opposition. Scarcely anywhere else could the social images a people erects of a neighboring people have been faithfully surveyed as part of a program for the increase of international understanding. It was possible only because the two peoples are so closely bound by many ties. Even so, the image of the American people beheld by Canadians is strikingly different from the kind of image the American people beholds of itself. Our investigation threw light on the causes that made the images so different. It also threw light on the conditions of national image-making and image-changing. In a curious way, it is because human beings are so like other human beings that they see other groups and other peoples so differently from the way in which they see their own. The manner of seeing is similar but the angle of approach is different. Further international investigation of this sort must wait more favorable times. Meanwhile, there are other images in plenty for us to investigate, the counterimages of economic groups, of political parties, of sects, of class groups, of regional divisions, and so forth. The study of these would extend the basis of sociology, would contribute to social enlightenment, and would develop the skills with which in due season we could attack the strongest citadels of social prejudice.

Times of crisis reveal the role of our social images, but they reveal something more. They reveal the nature of social cohesion. On this knowledge must our science be built. To advance it is our primary task. Perhaps we are skirmishing too much along the edges of it and attacking too little at the center. How strong are the bonds that bind man to his fellowmen? Which snap first with increasing tension? Which endure longest? To what appeals are men most responsive, in the long run as well as in the short run? Under what conditions does ethnocentricity triumph over egocentricity, and vice versa? What social emotions are in control when men are ready to sacrifice their lives for a cause? How are these emotions strengthened

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[2] Published under the title, *Canada and Her Great Neighbor*, ed. H. F. Angus, Toronto, 1938, being one of a series of Canadian-American studies under the general direction of James T. Shotwell and sponsored by the Division of Economics and History of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

and how are they weakened? How is morale fostered and how is it broken?

In times of crisis or of war, these questions are paramount. If we could grapple with them, the worth and the standing and the service of our science would be greatly enhanced. For the things we need to know to build the foundations of our science are also the things men need to know if they are to find some redemption from the blindness of their impulses, from the trampling herd spirit that so often overpowers them, from the evil omens of their distorted social images. Why should we leave these themes to the novelist and the dramatist, to the descriptive historian or to the philosopher? They have their own missions and we have ours. Ours is to establish, by sustained investigation and interpretation, a coherent body of knowledge in which the primary relations of man to man and of man to his groups will be revealed with amplitude of perception in the clear perspective of science. Has any science a grander task? Who shall deny its urgency?

Here, as elsewhere, knowledge must clarify need. We are midway between the guidance of instinct and the guidance of intelligence. Instinct suffices us no longer and the half-lights of interest mislead. Instinct, if I dare use the word, must furnish the dynamic while intelligence shows the direction. Why is it that, both for this generation and for the preceding, all the major schemes and strategems of statesmen in the international arena have ended in nothing but disaster and disillusionment? It is because they left out of their calculations the sociopsychological factors. They calculated resources and forces, but they did not calculate the resources of defeat or the impotence of victory. They calculated economic and territorial gains and losses, but they did not calculate the consequences of economic privation or of political suppression. They did not comprehend the tenacity of loyalties and traditions, the resurgence of national unities, the responses of peoples to crises. Thus, they miscalculated, and today the miscalculations are proceeding on a yet grander scale. What statesmen and peoples lacked is social knowledge, the knowledge of the other side of human relationships. To provide this is the chief among the practical tasks of sociology.

On the whole, we have neglected our opportunities in this field. We have done but little to study the ways men divide and the ways they unite, all the long range from the unities men defend to the death to the divisions in the name of which they destroy one another. Take, for example, the subject of social stratification. Every group, every village, every city, every country, has its pattern of stratified relationships. We know something of the broad lines of stratification, but we have had few investigations of how they actually work. We have some studies of special problems, such as racial stratification in the South, but where shall we go if we want to learn what social class means in a town of New Hampshire or Pennsylvania or Illinois or Oregon? Where shall we go for intimate studies of the part played in this matter by churches and lodges and clubs and family groups? Mostly

to the novelists, not to the sociologists. And once again, the mission of the novelist is different from ours. Ours is to uncover and marshal the evidences, impartially examine them, patiently organize them, and, with the ceaseless vigilance of the disciplined imagination, explore and verify and interpret, reverify, reinterpret, and reexplore.

What I am pointing out is that we still have to make the first serious exploration of many areas of our proper territory. I could adduce various other evidences. Take, for example, the whole subject of the sociology of war which has received scarcely any specific investigation. But, mindful of my limits, I shall not push the argument further. I shall content myself instead with two concluding comments.

These great unexplored areas offer us no easy conquest. We have at times been too prone to think that the receipt for a successful grand-scale investigation consisted of, first, a financial angel to underwrite it, usually in the form of a foundation or a government agency; second, a director versed in the art of research organization; and, third, a competent gang of field workers. I am far from belittling any of these necessary aids. I am, however, claiming that they are not enough, that they alone will not carry us to our goal. This campaign calls for all our intellectual resources as well. We need sustained devotion and we need intellectual sweat. Some of our research borders too nearly on the mechanical. That kind will never advance this cause. There are those who say we are not yet ready to approach these large subjects. We must first devise the special tools, the techniques. But we have at our command the whole kit-bag of science, and where we need special tools of our own we must shape them as we proceed with our proper work. That is the way of science. That, I believe, is the true operationalism. Let us get on with the job, and in the process we shall make and improve the tools we need. There are already some fine achievements to our credit; many more await us.

So I come to my last point. I have been talking less of the things we have done than of the things we have left undone. The time of crisis reveals the unseized opportunities. But I present them as opportunities, as auguries of advance and not as witnesses of failure. It is well that we should recognize the vastness of our unclaimed heritage. It is well that we should see our subject in its nobler proportions. If its scale shrinks, it is only because we are shrunken. It is well that our younger scholars in particular should be aware of the challenge to achievement. If they realize it, the world will realize it, too. If they realize it, they will serve the world. The subjects we have been neglecting vitally concern this civilization of ours. Here is a more rewarding cause than many of those that engross us. The lively disputes of today become the dead records of tomorrow. But what we do to possess these areas of social knowledge will not be without effect on the making of tomorrow.