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THE PROMISE OF SOCIOLOGY\*

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AMERICAN sociologists, as a group, are well aware of their defects and many short-comings and have developed a literature of self criticism which is a wholesome product and should never be allowed to die out. Not that all the criticism is or could be expected to be judicious, for many of the critics seem to be engaged in a disguised recommendation of their own superior formulations.

Many among us are moved to write words of sharp reproof when they contemplate the achievements of sociology in comparison with the rich treasures of physics and seem discouraged that we cannot proceed to the speedy erection of a comparable system.

It is, indeed, both generous and just to admire the triumphs of physics. Who can but envy Michelson's delicate and accurate measurements, so fittingly described in the lines of Lewis:

“He gathered up the iris from the plunging planet's rim  
With bright precision of fingers that Ariel envieth him.  
But when from the plunging planet he stretched out a hand to feel  
How far the ether drifted back, through flesh or stone or steel,  
The fine fiducial fingers felt no ethereal breath;  
He penciled the night with a cross of light, and found it still as death.  
Have the stars conspired against him? Do measurements only seem?  
Are time and space but shadows, enmeshed in a private dream?”

“But dreaming or not, he measured; he made him a rainbow bar;  
And first he measured the measures of men and then he measured a star.  
Now this is the law of science, and this is the price of peace:  
That men should learn to measure, or ever their strife shall cease.  
They shall measure the cost of killing, and measure the hearts that bleed;  
And measure the earth for sowing; and measure the sowing of seed.”

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\* Presidential Address at the meeting of the American Sociological Society, Atlantic City, Dec. 29, 1937.

Alas, we can measure nothing in our field with the accuracy of the physicists, but we have some measurements of which we are not ashamed. Some of our phenomena we cannot yet measure at all, and it is not impossible that some things can never be measured and accuracy must be sought by other methods, but at least our task is well begun and now a few worthy achievements are already recorded to our credit.

And if we have not come as far as we could have hoped, we can take comfort in the fact that we have not been at our task very long as compared with the physical sciences. It was 144 years from the discovery of the revolution of the heavenly orbs to the writing of the mathematical formula that explained their movements; 144 years from Copernicus to Newton. Give us 144 years and we ought to have by that time, comparable results! I hereby call on the president of the American Sociological Society in the year 2081 to take note of this prophecy of mine!

Criticism we have always with us, like the poor, but would it not be well at this time to compare our state with that of our ancestors who lived at no vastly remote period and see if there is not sound cause for encouragement and a genuine promise for sociology as well as for our sister social sciences?

We need only go back a few centuries to see a world where not only was there no thought of a scientific sociology, but when the proposal to engage in such studies as we delight to pursue would have been forbidden under heavy penalties. Ours is a modern world of movement; that older day was a world of immobility.

When the middle age had reached its climax the conception of order and fixity came to its ultimate formulation. The solid earth was fixed and immovable on its pillars and foundations. The common people were bound to the soil and were transferred with the land along with the hedges and the buildings. Men's faith was fixed and absolute, and to question was a sin. The king was responsible to no mortal authority, for even disrespect to him brought punishment, and opposition invited destruction. Morals were absolute and of no human origin. Likewise the species of living things were fixed and eternal, created once and for all. The head of the church was but an instrument, a mouth-piece of the deity; for all authority and wisdom came from beyond the skies. The temporal ruler did not assert his own private right; for he received laws that were written by the finger of God as Hammurabi had done by the river, or Moses by the stony mount.

History was short in span, clear in purpose, and easily comprehended. Only four thousand years from Adam to Christ, with the end not far off, when the consuming fire was to destroy the wicked world and the redeemed of the Lord would judge the twelve tribes of Israel. Never before and not again since has absolutism, fixity, and certainty been so fully realized.

The changes of the years intervening between the medieval age and our own time will be differently appraised by men with differing values. To some the loss of the medieval world-view is a dark tragedy; to others it marks a triumphant struggle of the human spirit. But to no one is it doubtful that the change has occurred. And the changes have made a new world.

For the fixity and absolutism did not fail to encounter resistance. It was in the very century when St. Thomas was building his edifice that the inquisition was set up to hunt down and destroy those who found it unacceptable. In 1543 the earth was shown to be a spinning sphere so that the location of heaven itself was in doubt. By 1687 the exact mathematical formula that governed its motions had been written, and men could set their clocks by the stars. By 1517 religious absolutism was challenged, and Christian men asserted the right to formulate their own faith. They had to go to war to defend this right but they won the war; and the dictates of one's own conscience is the measure of liberty to Catholic, Protestant, and Jew alike in our time.

The fixity of the authority of secular kings was shattered by a like bitter struggle. In 1649 they killed one of them, and by 1789 they took a step that soon forced them to kill another. In 1776 the world was informed that governments derive their powers from below and not from above, from the consent of the governed and not from the will of any god. And in 1918 the ruler of a powerful nation proclaimed to a listening world that the reign of law was not only based on the consent of the governed, but was "sustained by the organized opinion of mankind."

What a contrast is here! Opinion, shifting, fallible, the organization of the wills of common men—opinion, despised in the Middle age, has at last become sovereign; unseating rulers, forcing states to war, and compelling peoples to peace.

We may pass over more quickly the dissolution of absolutism in other aspects of life and the world. In the 19th century the very species of living creatures were found to have been always in transition and from whales and lions, to apes and men, the slow evolution has been moulding new forms and creating that which had not been.

The sociologists have made their contribution to the shift from the absolute to the modern in their concept of the mores, which have been shown to proceed from the lives of men and not from the mind of the transcendent. Morals spring from the human struggle and, while every code has a certain sacredness, yet none is sacrosanct, and all are subject to change. It was our distinguished chairman, Professor Ross, who once wrote in a book that was highly and publicly commended by the president of the United States: "We need an annual supplement to the decalogue."

We are approaching controversial ground but it should be easy to find a formula that will be accepted by us all. It is not demonstrable that the

modern world is better or happier than the medieval world; it is clear, however, that it is different, very different, vastly different. There has been a transition from the changeless to change; from the absolute to the relative; from the transcendental to the human. To the modern man, truth is to be carved out by human effort, not accepted on the word of a learned doctor.

What has all this to do with sociology? Much every way. It is for us by hard thinking and disinterested search, by co-operative effort, to dig and to discover, to understand the causes and conditions—for only on intelligent comprehension of facts, principles, causes and conditions, can intelligent programs of action be based.

For if absolute and revealed truth is no longer accessible, how can we hope to know our world of societies, communities, and persons unless we learn to develop and apply methods of tested search to these things also? An absolute world demanded humble acquiescence and unquestioning acceptance of doctrine; the modern distrusts dogmatism, he values doubt as essential to the testing of truth, and seeks to invent ever newer and better methods for discovery.

It has been a long time since the beautiful picture of an inevitable evolution toward ever higher and better conditions has been convincing to us. The fair doctrine of progress was beautiful while it lasted but the glow has faded and the sober conviction has come that it was too good to be true. But the repudiation of a straight line of evolution does not mean that there is no development anywhere; and the loss of the Victorian faith in the one far off divine event to which the whole creation moves, does not mean that we cannot have specific desires that may be gratified, nor does it forbid us to expect that separate goals of endeavor can be reached.

One does not hear so much in these days of the three stages of Comte, but it is possible to salvage much of value in his formulation. He spoke of the theological stage, when the explanation was to be found in the mind and the will of the gods; of the metaphysical stage, when eternal but transcendental principles constituted the basis of explanation; and last of all, the positive stage when men sought to discover by intelligence the laws that interpret the universe. I would venture that we may, if we are careful in our statement, find still much of value in such a sequence, and for purposes of this discussion it may be allowable to speak of five stages instead of three, of which the last is of peculiar interest to sociology.

The first of these stages might be called the preliterate or primitive or uncivilized or whatever name is convenient to denote the attitude toward men and things which may still be observed from Greenland to New Guinea in which startling events are attributed to spirits, and magical tricks and ceremonies are used to ward off the undesired and to insure what is wished for. For our purposes it is most important to observe that it is an era of

pre-organization, antedating the appearance in human experience of a cosmos. There is no unification of the world and no adequate foundation for conduct or morals. Life has its securities but is, in the main and on the whole, highly precarious.

Then, after two hundred thousand years when no one anywhere had done it before, in one favored spot, or about the same time in two, men gathered into a city, when conquest had formed a state, and writing was developed. A written literature added a new dimension to human life. Some would call it good, some would be doubtful as to the benefits, but no one would deny that it was importantly new, and that it had momentous consequences. It made possible the first broadcasting, infinitely slower in velocity but compensatingly enduring. Writing reversed the saying of the apostle; in this instance the things that were seen, the written sentences, were eternal; the things that were not seen, the spoken words, were temporal. *Verbum scriptum manet.*

But writing had a more basic importance for sociology, for it gave to groups and peoples the analogue of memory in a person, and made possible a group self-consciousness that was not limited to the memory of the oldest grandfather. Without the sacred books, zionism, for example, would be unthinkable.

But even more important for social theory was the effect of the preservation of the oral legends and teachings in the old, and therefore, sacred writings, which, with the appearance of kings and emperors, gave new imagery to the picture of the after life and a new possibility to men's idea of the government of the world. There *was* a theological stage. There is among us a certain opposition to statistics but the first recorded objection that I can find is in the experience of King David. He had the population counted but when the census was followed by a pestilence and seventy thousand people died, it was written down and may still be read in the sacred book that it was on account of the irritation of the deity who, though he numbers the very hairs of our heads, and records the fall of the sparrows, yet regarded it as presumptuous to have men interfere with his work in this way. Even the opponents of statistics may invoke divine authority!

Neither the primitive nor the theological stage has wholly disappeared, and millions of men to this day live their lives in one or the other. But the time did come when the theological beliefs were in need of proofs and then philosophy began. Proofs of the existence of God are many, but they are hardly necessary to one who already believes, and strangely unconvincing to one who has become skeptical. Whatever the causes of this social change, the stage is undoubtedly discernible when men referred to eternal metaphysical principles to explain what their fathers had held to emanate from the will of a divine being. Men sought a new pronoun for the subject of their verbs; they turned from asking "who" to an inquiry involving "what."

This stage is also, like the other two, by no means obsolete everywhere. It began with the earliest philosophers. It lost its prestige in the west with the passing of Hegel, though a few gifted men find comfort in it still.

The scientific stage of Comte may be divided into two. The account of the transition to the modern age and the story of the discovery of the scientific method has been often told and is familiar to all. But the importance of the discovery can never be overstated. For something over three hundred years ago, a very recent date in the long story of man, there appeared in western Europe a momentous formulation which some have considered as important an event in the life of the race as anything that ever happened. It has been held to be second only to the appearance of language itself. It was this conviction: *That the Forces of Nature Can be Used and Controlled to Satisfy and Increase the Wants of Man.*

For it must be kept in mind that high intelligence and superior intellectual and cultural ability have no negative correlation with magic or superstition. There was as much magic in the days of Augustus Caesar as today in the Congo forest. The flight of birds gave permission to put to sea, and the entrails of a fowl told when to go to war. And all down through the medieval period of European history, when the great cathedrals were building, and the field of the cloth of gold was a proverb of the magnificence of rulers, men lived in fear and anxiety in the face of the blind forces of nature. Comets were portents, earthquakes were the punishment for sin, and famine and pestilence were beyond the control of man.

The theological stage and the metaphysical stage were alike hospitable to the practice of magic and helpless in the absence of science. Great poets could and did sing; transcendent artists erected marble temples which are the despair of the lesser men who followed them; great orators left models for the speakers of all time to imitate; and mighty warriors left their names as synonyms of ability and genius. And all the time, from the least of them to the greatest, there was fear of the unseen and terror in the contemplation of the unknown. Marcus Aurelius could only counsel resignation: "When you kiss your child in the morning, say to him: Perhaps, tomorrow, you will be dead."

But the modern spirit will not submit. When little Elizabeth McCormick died of scarlet fever, her father and mother built her a monument, a hospital for the contagious diseases of children, with provision for a research staff and a request that an effort should be made to discover the cure for these diseases, with especial emphasis on scarlet fever. Twelve years ago this Christmas my own child fell ill of scarlet fever and he was taken to this very hospital where, in the meantime, science had discovered how to detect the children who were susceptible to scarlet fever, and how to tell those who were immune. They found a method of making immune those who were not immune, and discovered a way to cure those who had contracted

the disease. The forces of nature had been used and controlled to satisfy the wants of man. Progress in general is too large an order to assert; progress in particular enterprises is too certain an achievement to deny.

Comte's scientific stage can, it has been suggested, be divided into two sub-stages, one of which is well advanced, the other only getting off to a promising start with little to its credit, as yet, but with abundant promise of future achievement. For the present age is enjoying the fruits of physical science and the world is transformed as a result. Nor is it only in the field of technology, nay it is not chiefly in the field of technology that the debt of man to science appears. The new astronomy, the magnificent structure of modern geology, the splendid edifice of organic evolution of biological forms, these are not technological either in origin or application, and yet they have lifted a load of care and anxiety which was so heavy that we marvel that our fathers were able to bear it. The forces of nature were blind, capricious, and dependent upon an arbitrary will or merciless laws. The center has shifted to man. We have triumphed in constructing a conception of the world that will make us feel somewhat at home in it instead of regarding it as a strange place of painful pilgrimage: a probation, till bliss or hell should be our lot in the transcendent realm. And now has come our fifth stage.

But the scientific attitude was, until these latter decades limited to the physical world. To this good hour it is not too much to say that our people are as bewildered in the face of the blind forces of human nature as their fathers were in the face of the storms and the earthquakes.

Wars come when no one seems to want them, industrial strife occurs when industrial peace would be to the interest of all. Race conflict increases the sum of human misery and warps the soul of him who injures and of him who suffers. Personal anxiety and individual inefficiency, family discord and marital disaster—why lengthen the list? What is the matter? No philosophy? We have had great philosophers for more than twenty centuries and the experts in philosophy still recommend them. Religion? Great religions with doctrines of love and joy and peace—these we have had for scores of generations. Preachers to preach these? The history of the church has a bright and glittering roster of magnificent pulpit orators and prophets who have held out the panacea till their holy words have become trite with repetition. Reformers? They have been with us for long; they are with us yet; some have even crept into the camp of the sociologists but their zeal is not according to knowledge. Why not turn to science?

The preacher tells us to purify our hearts and to fill them with love; the agitator tells us whom to hate. The one calls us to our knees, and the other summons us to the battle. We need not decry the efforts of these earnest souls, knowing their sincerity, though sincerity is so cheap a virtue that no one should ask much credit for possession of it.

But why not try intelligence? The chief of the G men rants loudly about who is to blame for crimes. Is there not call for patient search for the conditions which occasion crimes? Delinquency is a sore evil—what are the conditions, all of them, that bring about delinquency? Are we to assume that this type of problem is too difficult for the human intellect? It is the conviction of sociology that the same careful methods of analysis, criticism, hypothesis forming, data gathering, and co-operative verifying will give us understanding.

Is race conflict eternal? It is surely age-long but so, until yesterday, was recurrent famine and starvation. The Jews have suffered for two or three thousand years, and yet all we have been asking is the question of who is to blame. Is the human reason to confess impotence in the face of such a problem? Can we not hope to understand the conditions under which race prejudice arises and the alterations which it might be possible to make of conditions that would cause its diminution or its disappearance. The facts might lead to conclusions unacceptable to the Jews or to their enemies, but it is the promise of sociology and its sister social sciences that these and similar problems are capable of investigation and that a fortunate discovery will put us on the road to a demonstrable solution.

To some of us it appears that the promise of sociology is encouraging. We assume that the laws of human nature can be known. And, if they can be discovered, we assume that they exist or else we could not hope to find them. And if there are laws that can be formulated, causes that can be determined, sequences that can be established, then we are on solid ground in assuming the possibility of a mature science. Human nature being human is different from the other aspects of nature. Human nature is not the same as dog nature, or the nature of a rat, or a fish, or an oak tree. All these have their ways which we can hope to discover and they differ from the ways of man.

But we assume that human nature is not only human but also nature. And therefore in investigating man we are investigating nature. We assume that what happens to man is a natural happening, given the conditions which are present. Does a man commit suicide? Under what conditions did this happen? If all the conditions are clearly and fully known, we might hope to understand just why and how this result was observed. Does a robber rob? Under what conditions, all conditions, economic, personal, social, religious? Let us find the significant conditions and the phenomenon may cease to be inexplicable. If man is a product of nature, wholly and without residue, then the acts of man are to be understood as natural acts, and the culture of human societies will be said to have its laws which, in turn, we can discover, and discovering come to understand, and understanding, learn to use our knowledge.

And so, to those who are ready to receive the saying, all the acts of man



are natural, in the sense that they may be expected from the discoverable conditions. The very existence of schools is a tribute to an unexpressed recognition of this hard saying. For we want our children to respond to conditions which we contrive to set up.

For not all that is natural is desired or desirable. Earthquakes are natural, and storms, and drouth. It was only by considering them as natural that we overcame our helplessness in the face of them.

Social science, if it is to be science, must assume some such postulate. The positive stage of Comte has well advanced with respect to astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology. The scientific stage with regard to man is beginning to be. It is given to such as you whom I am addressing to make its possibilities real.

Thirty-one years ago this society held its first meeting with an enrollment of slightly more than a hundred members, and the treasurer balanced his budget at less than \$350. A generation has passed since that time and only a few of our honored senior members remain of the young men who were present then but our membership has long exceeded a thousand. It is well to look back and observe the changes which the years have witnessed. It would be not without profit for those who are now active to read the account of that first meeting, available in our permanent archives.

One striking note in the record is the protest against those who were continually raising for debate the question whether sociology was a science. They considered it a profitless inquiry then, and there are those of us who consider it a profitless question today. It can only lead to barren and formal definitions and neither adds light to our path nor gives us assistance in our tasks. Complete, unified, consistent, sociology is not, as all the world knows. But these thirty years have seen the clearing away of much ancient error, the invention and perfection of many promising methods, the successful attack on many significant problems, and a gratifying growth in the number of men and women who are devoting their efforts to the creation of a sound sociological body of organized principles and tested laws.

By far the most encouraging of the changes of the generation since our American Society was founded is in the attitude of the public toward sociology. Then it was a new word to our public whose interest and permission is essential if we are to have support for our work, and neither in the academic world nor in the public mind was sociology able to claim the respect and prestige that every such enterprise must have if it is to succeed at its task. We owe a debt to those sociologists of the first generation who fought our battles for recognition and who brought it about that we can now take our place in the councils of the sciences. Other men have labored and we have entered into their labors.

Indeed, the success of our pioneers has been so great that there is a certain danger present, and a certain caution necessary. When the head of

the most powerful government in the world can appeal to a former president of this society to make a study of our social trends that can be used in the formation of far-reaching public policies, there is demand for caution lest the layman overestimate our achievements and we be tempted to make premature pronouncements. It is not an unrecognized danger, and being recognized, there is reason to expect the scientific caution that should characterize every ethical scholar.

One of the most striking changes in the activities of the society itself is to be observed by a comparison of its first program in 1906 with the present list of meetings and topics. For fifteen years, the meetings were devoted to the discussion of a central theme, or topic, and the men of that day were largely concerned with the question of the knowledge, information, and point of view that was of value to American students and which it was the duty of sociology to contribute. Those were the days of systems, and methodology was chiefly concerned with abstract nouns and semantic subtleties. For those were the days of creation and foundation. Today, a sociologist is made into a sociologist by sociologists in the graduate school of a university. But in the beginning a sort of academic parthenogenesis was a necessity. The first generation of sociologists was like Roger Williams who wanted to be a Baptist but could find no Baptist to baptize him. For you could only be a Baptist if you were baptized by a Baptist. Williams solved the difficulty by baptizing a friend, who, now being baptized could in turn make a Baptist out of Williams. It is not to be wondered at that the baptism of some of our earlier sociologists was sometimes deemed irregular.

About fifteen years ago recognition was given to the increasing differentiation of interests in the specialized efforts of our members and the formation of divisions and sections began, a practice that has continued with increasing emphasis. This year another step has been taken which seems to have met with wide-spread approval in omitting entirely any designation of a central theme for the program of the annual meeting. It is possible to regard this trend, for which no one is responsible, as indicative of change in a desirable direction. There are those who appear to be disturbed by it but thoughtful re-examination may lead to a revision of judgment.

In the first place, the division into sections means everywhere an emphasis on research, and it needs no argument to show that fruitful investigation must be limited to a small area of significant problems, must be intensive, long-continued, and co-operative. And there are problems in connection with farm life, religion, crime, the local community, and other interests represented in the list of sections which our membership can with profit discuss in their annual gatherings.

Of equal importance is the significance of the divisions and sections with reference to a man of straw which has been erected and valiantly demol-

ished by many a college president and not a few sociologists. I refer to the accusation that sociology is not sufficiently concerned with the work of the other social scientists and with the results of the other investigations. The list of five divisions and ten sections besides various joint sessions with sister disciplines is eloquent of the fact that we are recognizing the well-known principle that some of the richest fields for cultivation lie on the frontier between two specialties.

There was a time when sociology was considered alike by its opponents and its proponents to be a satellite, fated to revolve around some other and more basic science. Cooley has recorded his dissent from this conception of the dependence on economics.

"I cannot see that the getting of food, or whatever else the economic activities may be defined to be, is any more the logical basis of existence than the ideal activities. It is true that there could be no ideas and institutions without a food supply; but no more could we get food if we did not have ideas and institutions. All work together, and each of the principal functions is essential to every other.

"History is not like a tangled skein which you may straighten out by getting hold of the right end and following it with sufficient persistence. It has no straightness, no mere lineal continuity, in its nature. It is a living thing, to be known by sharing its life, very much as you know a person. In the organic world—that is to say in real life—each function is a center from which causes radiate and to which they converge; all is alike cause and effect; there is no logical primacy, no independent variable, no place where the thread begins."

These particularistic explanations, this monistic fallacy, constituted not only a logical error, seeking one cause where there are in reality many variables, but involved the dependence of sociology, one might almost say the degradation of sociology, to a position of secondary importance. It took a long time before the many false starts were recognized as false. The foundation was sought by some in psychology, by others in biology, by others again in geography, or in economics and, on the continent of Europe, in philosophy. We see things more clearly now. We recognize that we need the results of those kindred sciences but we feel that they also may have some need of us.

Some years before the organization of the society I went up to the university as a student of theology. My teachers were presenting theology as founded on philosophy and, after a year, I transferred to the department of philosophy, hoping to get at the heart of the matter. The philosophy lectures, at that time, were insisting on the importance of a foundation in psychology and after a year I went over into that department, seeking the basis and a sure foundation. In psychology, in those days, the emphasis was on a strong physiological and neurological foundation, and eventually

I put on a white coat and enrolled in the medical school and began to dissect the brains of rats and men. But the foundation there recommended was physiological chemistry, and so I gave up the merry-go-round, coming to the conclusion that the metaphor was ill chosen; that the sciences are not founded on each other, and that there is none that is fundamental or basic. It is no longer helpful to erect a hierarchy of the sciences. Even here there is a democracy—a co-operative quest, where each can get from others and give back, in return, something of value.

Sociology has learned, or at least is surely learning, that it must find its own problems, develop its own methods, and in closest contact with sister disciplines co-operate in a common task. If in the past sociology was a daughter in her mother's house, today she is mistress in her own.

We do not see any fixed goal. Our age imagines no utopia nor does it look for a millennium. The quest for certainty has been succeeded by a desire for a greater measure of security, and our scientific laws only aspire to a high degree of probability. When the present crises are met or passed, other and newer difficulties may be expected, and future generations will have to struggle with them.

But we can define our proximate goals and we can enjoy the prospect of separate triumphs of the human reason. Our ideals may never be attained, but a fixed star is good to steer by. The triumphs of the age of physical science give us confidence in the power of the human reason. The forces of human nature may be used and controlled to satisfy and increase the wants of man. Ours is a profession of the highest dignity. There is every reason to hope that by our efforts human welfare may be advanced.