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### Making Sociology Relevant to Society\*

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People often ask me how they can make sociology more “relevant” to their social and political concerns. How can they shape their research and thinking so that the results of their work will help advance causes they think worthwhile? They think of specific things in the society they live in that seem to them wrong, social arrangements which produce what they regard as bad, if not totally evil, results. Can’t they do sociology in a way that will reduce the amount of bad things in the world? Can’t their research provide concrete guidance to people who work to make a better world, a more just society?

I don't think sociology should be irrelevant, but I do think that the usual ways of talking about these questions take too much for granted, especially what sociology should be relevant to, and how we ought to try to maximize that relevance.

My basic fear is that trying to make sociology relevant will inevitably and necessarily make it irrelevant. Why? Because we will look at "problems" as they are framed by others. That will, in turn, lead us to ignore those elements of a situation that might actually be relevant to the solution of serious problems.

### WHAT’S RELEVANT?

When we define situations as problematic or difficult or in need of solutions—as the kind of thing sociology ought, for those reasons, to be relevant to—our definitions are not made (as a large literature now attests) in accordance with some kind of sociological criterion, developed out of sociological theory. Which is not to say they should be developed that way but, rather, that finding "social problems" is not the kind of thing sociological science, defined as I understand it, does.

What we sociologists do is find out how society works: what processes produce what forms of collective action, and the situations those forms of acting together in turn create. Some people define the situations that result as problematic because they don't like what is going on and want it to go away or get better.

Politicians always have a list of things in their society that need fixing, but they almost never agree on that list. Organizations outside the government, chief among them businesses but also private organizations devoted to reform and social change, have another list. These lists seldom coincide. Private citizens have their own problems, among which is getting government and large organizations to pay attention to what bothers them.

The "relevance" of sociology consists in solving, or contributing to the solution of, the problem as someone has defined it. Which means that we should be very attentive to the way this or that situation is singled out as the kind of problem our work should be relevant to.

Definitions of problems do not arise in a social vacuum. They arise in a context of envioning conditions which contribute to the problematic situation but are very often ignored in the definition of the problem our work should be relevant to.

#### WHO WANTS TO FIX WHAT?

Since so many different people have ideas about what in society needs fixing, the answers to the question "Who wants to fix what and, therefore, who should our sociology be relevant to and for?" are not obvious. Who should we pay attention to? Whose problems do we want to be relevant to? That depends on our own situation and politics. You may want to fix poverty. You may want to fix inequality. You may want to stop terrorism. Your aspirations may be more modest, like arriving at a more rational and humane way of dealing with recreational drugs. Or solving a regional or local problem. There's always a long list of things that need fixing. There is seldom universal agreement on this list or, when the definition of what's to be fixed is vague enough to have everyone support it, certainly not on the possible solutions or priorities. Sociological theories and methods do not help us decide who to help fix what.

An example is in order, even necessary. Many people, governments, and organizations think there is a "drug problem," though they seldom agree on what that problem is. Some think it is the presence of junkies and other unpleasant sights in the streets of major cities, or the crimes that such people are alleged to commit. Some think it is a disintegration of the moral climate of countries which makes drug consumption easy and appealing. Some think it is the corruption of governmental agencies, especially the police, which then infects many other areas of society. Some think it is the disruption of the private lives of drug users who, under a different legal regime, would be able to live more peacefully. Some think it is the infringement of personal liberty that marks most legal systems related to drug use. Each definition suggests possible solutions, but mostly quite different, and sometimes contradictory, ones.

The complex of envioning conditions which produces all these "problems"—the situations to which people and organizations who want solutions call attention, and the situations they act in which lead them to see what they see as problems—that complex includes all the circumstances of political, organizational, community and personal life and activity that are implied in such a list. And some others that are seldom mentioned or thought of. I cite just one example of a seldom thought of factor, called to my attention by the important work of F-X

Dudouet (Dudouet 2009) on international organizations regulating the traffic in narcotic drugs. Dudouet makes the point (which, once made, seems obvious but was not so before his detailed analysis of the history of these organizations) that these international organizations (those associated with the League of Nations and, later, those associated with the United Nations) exist *not* to control the illicit drug market but rather to control the traffic in licit drugs, in short, to protect the French, British, and U.S. monopoly on the production of morphine, codeine, and their derivatives used in medical practice. The interest in illicit drug use is that drugs entering that traffic might be diverted into the legal market and thus undermine the monopoly on, and price structure of, the legal market. A thorough analysis of the phenomenon of recreational drug use requires that all of these things be taken into account in analyzing any "problem" posed by any of the participants for sociology to solve.

### THE ANALYTIC PROBLEM OF "SOCIETY"

There's another difficulty. It's impossible to speak about being relevant to the needs or desires of "society." "Society" is a meaningless abstraction. There is no "society," in the most obvious sense. "Society" is not a thing, it's the name of an idea, the idea that there is something distinctive about the way people live in groups. Society is a name that refers to the biggest such agglomeration, the one that's bigger than classes, communities, cities, regions, etc. But if you go looking for it, you can't find it anywhere.

Though you cannot find "society," you can find people who speak in the name of society, who tell us what society is, what it thinks, what it wants, what it needs. These people raise all the questions and problems Bruno Latour has made us aware of when he analyzed the position and activity of "spokesmen" (Latour 1987, pp. 70-74, 83-85). Latour was talking about the people who speak for and interpret "scientific facts," about whom he says, correctly, that we can never be sure that they are saying what the people or things they speak for would say if they could talk to us directly. So we have to fill in the empty space marked by the word "society" with something more concrete, and this is where the trouble starts, because then you are talking about interest groups, actors interested in the situation rather than in sociological principles.

### SHIFTING RELEVANCE

I rely now on my own experiences in small-scale, specific versions of making sociology relevant to suggest some of the ambiguities of that enterprise.

For one thing, relevance changes all the time, in response to historical situations. What we consider relevant is a choice from among all the things that, from one point of view or another, might be thought relevant, a choice that has nothing to do with sociological knowledge or insight. The relevance of a topic or piece of research changes constantly, even though the work has not changed at all.

In 1953 I did a small study on marijuana smoking. I designed my study for an abstract and personal reason, not to solve any social problem or help anyone who smoked marijuana live a more comfortable life, free of harassment by the police: I wanted to experiment with the method of analytic induction, which I had found in a study too little appreciated, Alfred

Lindesmith's book on opiate addiction (Lindesmith 1947). I was able to get a research organization, the Institute for Juvenile Research located in Chicago, to pay me to do this research, even though no one there, or anywhere else, considered it relevant to what was then thought of as the "real" drug problem, which was thought to be heroin use. If anyone had been interested in the relevance of my work, they probably would have rejected it as useless, since it said nothing about ways to get people to stop smoking marijuana, which was then, as it generally still is, seen as "the problem," in relation to which relevance would be established. My study, which I thought a small but nice contribution to both methodology and social psychology, was thought by most sociologists to be at best quaint, perhaps even irresponsible, not dealing with anything of any real importance. And no one else was even that interested in it.

By 1965, when I began teaching at Northwestern University, large numbers of middle class white kids were smoking marijuana and, more to the point, were being arrested by the local police. And my study was now thought by many people in official and quasi-official positions to say something interesting about a problem that bothered them. My study had become relevant, largely, I think, because it seemed to imply that anyone who had certain experiences could become a marijuana smoker—thus that the middle class youth being arrested were not seriously psychologically deranged and had no need of imprisonment or treatment. Further, I had introduced an expression many people needed—"recreational drug use"—which allowed them to distinguish what these people from "good families" were doing from "addiction," which was what people of lower classes and despised ethnic groups did.

A second research experience was the study Blanche Geer and I directed of trade schools and apprenticeships (reported in Geer 1972). We had just finished lengthy studies of a medical school and an undergraduate college and were interested in pursuing the idea of student culture and how that shaped students' responses to their educational situation. We thought it would be interesting to look at quite different kinds of educational situations, those experienced by young people who were learning a trade in somewhat less formal academic surroundings, places like a barber college or beauty school or in apprenticeship programs in such skilled trades as meat cutting or construction. Most social scientists we knew thought this was vaguely silly and somewhat irresponsible, not at all what was relevant to the problems of higher education in the 1960s.

But then history and politics intervened. President Lyndon Johnson declared war on poverty. One element in his attack on this newly rediscovered problem, whose relevance no one could deny, was to look at possibilities for young people's education other than going to college. Suddenly, without any change in our research plans or thinking, our work became very relevant. Leaving us a little skeptical of the idea of relevance.

## IMPRACTICALITY

We found, in our research on educational institutions and elsewhere, that our most relevant suggestions for what to do about a problem someone had defined for us—the suggestions we thought most likely to produce the results we had been told were wanted—were usually dismissed as not relevant at all, because they were "impractical." "Impractical," in such a context, means that established arrangements make the suggested action too expensive, that the

action would disrupt some way of doing things that is satisfactory to the participants in the situation as it now exists, a disruption they aren't prepared to tolerate. Here is a small example.

The doctors in the medical school we studied (Becker, Geer et al. 1961)—dedicated academic physicians, researchers, not people whose seriousness could be dismissed easily—wanted to know, when we finished our research, what our "recommendations" were. This was part of a time-honored game, in which educational "experts" make a brief visit, look around, and then deliver a series of suggestions based partly on what they have learned about the place, but much more on the recommendations they make for all such institutions, no matter what they have seen during their visit.

We didn't play this game. We said we had no recommendations. "Surely," they said, "you've been here several years, you must have seen something that could be improved." We said that we didn't have any idea, not being doctors, what needed fixing but, if they would specify some problems, we would make suggestions. Well, they said, "We hate the way students cram for examinations and then forget everything once the examination is done." What would you rather they did, we asked? "Learn how to examine a patient, take a medical history, order laboratory work, make a diagnosis, suggest a plan of treatment." Then, we said, it's easy. Stop giving written exams, give each student two patients, let them do all that, and then check what they've done by examining the patient yourself and seeing how close the students have come to doing it right and getting the results you did.

The faculty members looked very unhappy at this suggestion and we asked what was wrong. Well, they said, that would take a lot of time. Yes, we said, it would, but that's the way to get the result you want. Other ways that don't take much time will produce the same results you've just told us you don't want. They said that we didn't understand, that they had other things to do besides teach students: they had their research, their administrative duties, their own patients to take care of. They could see that what we suggested would probably work, but it didn't solve their problem, because it required time they were not willing to devote to solving the problem. They wanted a solution that left all the other things they did just as they were. We didn't tell them, but did learn from this, that what people usually want is a *panacea*, which (to give a technical definition) is something that gets rid of what you don't like without upsetting all the other arrangements that are satisfactory to you, in short, without costing anything.

I leave it to readers to imagine the details of what was said when the chairman of the group that produced *The Report of the Canadian Government Commission of Inquiry into the Non-Medical Use of Drugs* (1972), which dealt with the illicit use of recreational drugs, told me that he (representing, he said, "the Canadian people") wanted to get rid of, specifically, marijuana use and that he did not want to be told to legalize it (which all his previous consultants had told him was the simple way to solve that problem). I said he could do it by suspending civil liberties, searching people randomly on the street and making random searches of houses, and then shooting on the spot any people found to be in possession of drugs and burning to the ground any houses found to contain them. He said, "Are you telling me that anything less than that won't work?" I said, "Yes, and you're not willing to live with the consequences of such a decision, supposing you could get it approved, so why don't you start talking seriously and stop posturing?" (I was a brash kid in those days.)

Practicality defeats relevant sociological analysis almost every time. Which is why I said earlier that trying to be relevant inevitably leads to being irrelevant. To summarize: if we try to solve the problem as defined by others, we will tie our hands and make a solution impossible

because any effective solution would mean hurting the interests of those who defined the problem for us in the first place.

## ALTERNATIVES

Suppose we forget about being relevant in the way that's usually understood, accepting the criticism I have just made of that approach as unworkable. What might we do instead? What I'm looking for here is a way of looking at "problematic" situations that avoids the traps set by conventional definitions. But this means, remember, that what we then see as the solution will probably not be acceptable to any of the participants who help create that situation.

We might try to avoid the difficulties created when we accept conventional definitions of "the problem" by looking at the situation from the point of view of some of the other people involved in it, and seeing what they would think was a problem that needed fixing. This will invariably make us aware of aspects of the phenomenon masked by the conventional definitions.

A simple example involves parents and children. Parents often think their children are going to hell. "Relevant" research would see to what degree that diagnosis is true and what to do about it. It would investigate how children fail to do what's expected of them in school, at home, on the street, in the neighborhood, and would look for actions and programs that might be undertaken to get the children to behave as adults expect and want them to.

Suppose, instead, that we look at the situation from as a child might, and see the problem differently, from the point of view of someone with different interests. Parents, we might learn, are difficult, bossy, cruel, unpredictable, capricious. In fact, sometimes we do accept children's definitions, and then we refer to such situations as "child abuse."

More obviously, "labor problems" are not the same viewed from the perspective of the owner of a factory as from that of the workers in it. (In fact, to call them "labor problems" is already to accept the owners' perspectives.) "Crime" is not the same kind of problem viewed from the perspective of someone who makes a living stealing as it is from the perspective of someone who makes a living catching thieves. It's extraordinary how the problems of schools are invariably viewed as problems created by the students. Suggesting that the teachers or administrators might contribute to "the problem," although it is only sociological common sense—we all know from W.I. Thomas among others that everyone who is part of a situation contributes to what happens there—is heretical and leads to charges of, at the least, impracticality.

Suppose we accept the risk of being thought strange and impractical, and thus learn to see things, at least for a moment of analytic thinking, differently. So what? Where's the advantage in that? The advantage for a social scientist is that you see more of what affects the situation you are studying. You become aware of what must be entered into the equation, because parents don't know everything that goes in the lives of their children, bosses don't know everything that goes on in the workplace, and there is more to the world of crime than police are aware of. These people who have a higher place in some hierarchy know some things. They know the things they know, but other people in the situation know other things. The more we know, the better we understand what's going on. Everett C. Hughes once said, wisely, that everyone in a situation knows something about it; the sociologist who has done a good study knows more than any one of them because he knows what they all know.

In fact, it's useful to study what most people think is irrelevant. When things are defined as not important or worth looking into, it's a good bet that they are worth looking at. Someone says that X is unimportant, and perhaps it is, from where they sit. But when someone tells me something is "unimportant," my first suspicion is that it is probably something that *is* relevant but that my informant would rather I not look into.

If we accept these guidelines, when we think about what could be done to change a situation in a direction that seems desirable, we have a better chance of coming up with something that will "work," that will have the effect we want without a lot of other effects we don't want. Knowing more is always better than knowing less.

It is sometimes said that you cannot resolve a conflict on the level of the conflict itself. Similarly, if we recognize, as all the above suggests we should, that "relevance" is a political, not a sociological, category of thought, then we will be led to go beyond the contemporary debate about what is relevant and see the definitions of "relevance" themselves as part of the situation to be studied.

#### WHO CAN DO WHAT?

Finally, we must recognize that, even though we see how things might be remedied to the satisfaction of this one or that one, we are seldom in a position to do the things that would "solve the problem." Other people, who do not spend their time in academic research, have their hands on the buttons and switches that can make things happen. My colleagues and I knew, or thought we knew, how to fix what the medical educators whose school we had studied wanted fixed. But they didn't want to follow our advice and we had no way to implement our suggestions otherwise. They ran the medical school. We didn't.

Worse yet, our advice, even if we follow the precautions suggested above, may well not work out as we have anticipated. No matter how good our sociology, we are likely to have left something important out and, as a result, if anyone follows our recommendations, their actions are likely to have results we didn't anticipate. The classic example of this is the idea that the way to deal with the "problem of mental illness" was to recognize what was unavoidable, the terrible conditions in mental hospitals everywhere, and get patients out of them into the "community," where they would have a better chance of being able to live a reasonable life. The problem with the analyses that produced such suggestions was the failure to fully understand "communities" (which usually had not been the object of any study) and how they would probably react to the presence of large numbers of people who behaved the way people who had been in mental hospitals would (or could be expected to) behave. When the communities proved less welcoming than the analyses had suggested, a new "problem"—"homelessness"—to which we might be relevant became obvious, although why anyone would want our advice about it isn't clear.

#### AND SO?

I have a solution to this dilemma, but I hesitate to recommend it to anyone else, and so simply offer it as the way I have found to keep doing sociological work and stay reasonably happy. It's simple. Do the best research you can, look at everything that might be worth looking at even

when others think you're wrong, and don't worry about whether anyone finds your results useful. It's the best way to produce knowledge that will really work, if anyone is willing to try it.

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