SOCIOLITICAL THEORY AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

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I

At some risk of stirring up ghosts of sociology's controversial past, it may be suggested that there is now, more than ever, a pressing need for rethinking the relationship between sociological theory and social problems. This need is keenly felt by those who are engaged in teaching general social problems courses to undergraduates.

Sociology departments have inherited social problems courses from their forebears who began teaching them before the turn of the century when the complexion of "sociology" was far more reformative than at the present time. Since the other disciplines were too specialized to bother with social problems, sociology entering the academic curriculum through the back-door of the so-called "social science" courses filled up the void by sponsoring discussion of the current societal evils. Subsequently there has been a commendable trend toward specialization in the teaching of social problems. We now have in the place of such catchall subjects as "Dependents, Defectives, and Delinquents" somewhat distinct and separate courses in Criminology, Poverty and Dependency, Race Problems, Population Problems, Immigration, Family Disorganization, and the like.

Yet there remains a need in most curricula for the offering of a general service course to the many students who are not concentrating in sociology but who desire at least one semester's study of the major social problems of our society. Nor can we escape the fact that by far the great majority of students who "want a sociology course" are interested primarily in the social problems aspects of our field and only secondarily or not at all in what we have been inclined to call "pure sociological theory." What then has sociology to contribute?

II

An examination of social problems literature published over the last two or three decades suggests two philosophies of approach:

1. Most of the early texts make no effort to orient the problems discussed to a systematic framework of sociological theory. Each problem is considered more or less at random with reference to heterogeneous factual material, biological, psychological, or political in nature. No attention is given to interrelationships or classification of problems.
Implicit in this procedure is the old assumption that sociology must and should function as the “cap-stone” science. So far as social problems are concerned this means that sociology draws its generalizations from the data of all the other sciences, physical and social, and seeks to integrate or synthesize the contributions of these special sciences insofar as they are pertinent to the particular problem under consideration. Hence, our knowledge of unemployment is not strictly sociological, but is based on the findings of economics, psychiatry, medicine, social work, and the like.

2. The tendency of more recent texts is to posit a sociological frame of reference as background material for the discussion of particular social problems. The logic of this approach is that sociology has outgrown much of its synthetic or “cap-stone” nature and has a core of theory of its own relating to personality, groups, and institutions.

This viewpoint affords a raison d’être for the inclusion of social problems as legitimate subject matter for sociological inquiry. Nevertheless a prime consideration persists, and that is whether social problems may be described, analyzed, and solutions proposed within the theoretical framework of sociology or any one other discipline. To this question the remainder of this paper is devoted.

III

To what theoretical systems have the sociologists resorted? There are at least three characteristic types:

1. The general conceptual approach. This is by far the most popular. Social problems are pictured as normal or natural emergents of the social process. They are described against the relief background of social organization, social change, and social disorganization. The situation which constitutes the social problem develops out of the impact of social change on existing behavior patterns. Technologies, folkways, and institutions have been worked out in adjustment to life conditions of the past; although such conditions have subsequently changed, change in the adaptive culture is painfully slow. Since traditional groups and institutions addicted to obsolete patterns cannot effectively cope with the change, the social problem emerges. The result is social disorganization in the units affected; group influence on individual behavior declines, often accompanied by personal demoralization in the individuals concerned.

This broad approach is often used strictly as background material. After preliminary chapters defining social problems and their characteristics, the student is presented with an historical sketch of the major social changes which have disturbed our culture. These changes are usually technological or economic in nature. The impact of inventions on industrial and corporate life is shown to penetrate into other spheres of social organization such as government, law, family, church, and school. The weakening of sacred group sanctions and the consequent individualization of life ensue. These trends are conceptualized in terms of mobility, cultural lag, social disorganization, personal disorganization, and other current sociological theory. The remainder of the text is occupied with a treatment of specific social problems.¹

Another procedure is to build the entire text around a very general theory of social disorganization, differentiating it with reference to certain units of sociological inquiry such as personal disorganization,

¹A very excellent illustration of this use of the conceptual approach may be found in James H. S. Bossard, Social Change and Social Problems, Harpers, New York, 1934.
group disorganization, institutional disorganization, or personal disorganization, family disorganization, community disorganization. The various specific social problems such as unemployment, crime, mental disease, and divorce are discussed within one or another of these conceptual compartments.

The general conceptual approach has as its chief asset the linking of problem situations with the social process of which they are a part. Instead of a haphazard, piecemeal discussion of seemingly unrelated problems, a point of view is offered the student; interrelationships stand out.

Yet there are inherent weaknesses. In the first place such concepts as social disorganization, cultural lag, mobility, and the like are at the present stage of development of sociological theory more in the nature of hypotheses than scientifically validated generalizations. They are rather loose descriptive symbols, not precise tools of analysis. Hence when the student comes to apply the theory to specific problems he is at a loss to see its exact bearing though he has a vaguely better understanding than he would have without such theory. In the second place this approach is more applicable to certain social problems than to others. It is more or less adequate for those problems the essence of which is a rapidly changing technological culture and a slowly changing adaptive culture. Accordingly, it fits quite readily the description of such problems as economic insecurity, crime, and family disorganization; but when the student focuses upon other problems such as physical and mental disease, population pressure, and race conflict, it is by no means clear that the general theory is workable. In the third place since this approach is essentially cultural, there is a tendency to overlook the significance of biological and physical inadequacies in individuals which contribute to the social problem. Not all insanities are induced by cultural strain, not all poverty is traceable to the collapse of economic institutions, not all crime is without reference to hereditary or physiological deficiencies.

2. The single concept approach. Somewhat of a variation of the general conceptual approach is the use of one sociological concept as the core around which the discussion of particular social problems is centered, as for instance social conflict. This approach has the obvious deficiency that no one social problem can be stated completely in terms of any one concept, no matter how inclusive it may be. Furthermore, a given concept such as social conflict is more illuminating for describing certain problems than for others. Finally, since the concept is a process, it cuts through many or all problems and the student tends to find himself studying the process rather than the problem.

3. The community approach. A third approach is from the standpoint of community organization. Here the frame of reference is the community with its ecological structure, economic division of labor, social agencies and institutions. Problems such as health, housing, recreation, and Americanization are discussed from the point of view of practical ques-
This approach is promising insofar as the student learns to conceive the problem in terms of the groups, social classes, and institutions of which he is a part. The problem is brought home to him realistically; he thinks it out with one eye on the situation in his own community. However, the unit of reference is somewhat too narrow for many social problems, various phases of which transcend the community as a point of focus. The social and economic organization of wider regional areas and the forces of social change operative within them must be considered as well as the more specific aspects of community readjustment.

The difficulty with the first two conceptual approaches discussed above is not one of applying the theory to problems in general but to problems in particular. This is clearly evidenced by the fact that once the theory is stated as an introduction to the problem the specific operative facts of the problem are discussed without reference to the theory. The interest in the discussion of a particular problem becomes an interest in concrete facts and the broad processes of sociological theory are forgotten. That is to say, the theory serves merely as window dressing for the real goods which make up the problem.

This condition is traceable to at least two fundamental truths concerning the nature of social problems which are often overlooked:

6. All social problems are not alike. If we select at random the problems of divorce, race conflict, and mental disease, we find as their only common elements of interest to the sociologist: they constitute social situations which the group has come to regard as inimical to its collective welfare; they are very complex and have multiple not single causation; they are relative in time and space; if they co-exist in the same social group there may be some inter-relationship between them. Beyond these common factors we cannot go. Any attempt to force all of these problems into one theoretical frame of reference courts a strained artificiality which even the most facile sociological imagination cannot avoid.

7. A knowledge of the causes of a social problem does not solve the problem. Many sociologists are preoccupied with describing the causal patterns or sequences which underly the problem. It is true that social problems often defy solutions because we do not know enough about their causation. But it is also obvious that in many instances even where we do know the causes the difficulty is in removing them without upsetting accepted values and institutional practices. The same institutional folkways which create the problem many times hinder its solution. Thus, the social scientist may explain adequately the causes of seasonal unemployment and employee-employer
may predict accurately when it will come and how severe it will be. The most direct remedy would be to quash the profit motive as the sine qua non of our competitive economy and induce employers to carry their men without pay reductions during slack periods. The rub is that the profit motive is basic in our mores and cannot be erased with a wave of the hand. Though we recognize the social threat of unemployment we are unwilling to alter fundamentally the traditional values of our economy. Hence, the core of the problem is not in most cases the enumeration and classification of causes but rather the working out of remedies which will succeed though they may have no relation to causal sequences. Accordingly a scheme of unemployment compensation or a public works program is not concerned with causes but with solutions.

This failure to distinguish between the causes of social problems and their solutions means a confusion between the theoretical analysis of the problem and considerations of policy involved in the treatment of the problem. Since in dealing with social problems we are in the realm of social values and not the laboratory of the natural scientist, solutions do not follow from analysis of causes. Solutions do follow from a free-for-all discussion of political, moral, and ethical questions inherent in policy determination. For this latter element in the discussion of social problems it is indeed doubtful that there can ever be a scientific frame of reference.

V

In the discussion of social problems we are concerned with three kinds of facts: those relative to scientific research, those relative to policy, those relative to efficiency of administration.

1. Facts relative to scientific research. The scientist's interest in social problems is in large measure different from that of the public's interest. His concern is with untangling the cause and effect sequences underlying the problem. He is supposed to be free from emotional and reformative considerations. He must gather data, define and test his hypotheses, and if practical offer generalizations which contain some possibilities of prediction. The social scientist's findings are often available to the general public and in this way may find their course into popular discussions of policy.9 Research may also serve the function of pointing the way to more efficient administration of agencies and programs concerned with the solution of the problem.10

Yet in the final analysis the solution of any social problem involves more than scientific generalizations. Whether or not pertinent scientific theory based on careful research is available and known to the citizens, their discussion of solutions goes on in a world of competing values and conflicting social interests among which they must make some selection.

2. Facts relative to policy. The public is only incidentally concerned with causes and the attention it gives them is usually ancillary to its concern with solutions. People ask, "What ought to be done?" This question is only partially answerable by reference to scientific theory of causation. Solutions primarily involve questions of policy. And discussion of policy

9 Thus if the problem is that of juvenile delinquency, reference may be made to the discovery of Drs. Healy and Bronner that a crucial difference between delinquents and non-delinquents in the same family is the fact that the delinquent has suffered some emotional stress which the non-delinquent has not experienced. See William Healy and Augusta F. Bronner, *New Light on Delinquency and its Treatment*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1936.

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takes one far from the area of dispassionate scientific consideration into the area of cultural predilections, prejudice, and stereotype. A sphere of cultural limitations within which the social problem is imbedded controls the talking over process. To borrow an illustration from Frank, the housing problem is easily solved on paper. When there is a housing shortage what is more logical than to build more houses! There is no dearth of good architects, builders, technological materials, land, and skill. Yet if we listen in on a group of citizens discussing this problem we find them preoccupied with working out solutions which will not antagonize various groups who have vested interests in the culture complex housing. A reasonable profit must be preserved for the real estate operator and contractor, labor union and banker must be conciliated, government building projects must not unduly interfere with private enterprise. Thus the scheme which is eventually adopted for financing low cost housing must not be so radical as to overturn existing economic mores.11

Consequently when social problems are discussed by the sociologist from the point of view of public policy he cannot remain entirely within the framework of scientific theory. If he is realistic he must get across to his students an appreciation that a given social problem is a problem not only because of the difficulty of ascertaining its causes but further because a dangerous social situation must be changed, yet in such fashion as not to imperil cherished values.

3. Facts relative to efficiency of administration. A third aspect of the social problem which involves a third type of factual data for discussion is that of the administration of corrective or alleviatory programs. Once policy is decided and reform begun, the social problem dissolves into a number of specific technical problems for the solution of which technical experts with specialized training are necessary. Agencies and institutions are established and functionaries appointed for the administration of techniques of reform. Thus we have our juvenile courts and probation departments, our public works commissions and social security boards, our community fund agencies and social case workers. Problems of administrative efficiency arise within these units which directly concern neither the social scientist in his study of causal sequences nor the public in its determination of general policy. Such problems must be settled by personnel professionally trained to deal with them. Yet any well-rounded course in social problems must at least state some of these problems of administrative efficiency. If the topic is crime, the activities and problems of the parole board should be discussed. If it is unemployment, the intelligent administration of public works is as worthy a topic for consideration as erudite research into the causal roots of the business cycle.12

VI

If this analysis of the three-fold factual character of social problems is sound, how can such facts be most effectively presented to the student? The following suggestions are in summary of the points made in this paper:

1. The student should be given a general point-of-view. Discussion of problems must not be hit or miss. Insofar as the textbook is concerned this may be accomplished by:


12 As previously indicated the application of available scientific knowledge and techniques may facilitate efficiency in carrying out programs of reform: witness the Tennessee Valley Authority project and the social as well as physical engineering involved.
(a) An introductory chapter or two dealing with the general nature of social problems and indicating such elements as are common to all problems.

(b) Since social change, social disorganization, and personal disorganization are processes which make up the background of many current social problems, a general symbolic approach built around these concepts gives a systematic, coordinated perspective from which to view the specific problems. But an effort to fit rigidly the discussion of all social problems into this theoretical mold means a confused and strained interpretation.

2. Inasmuch as all social problems are not alike, some classification of general types must be worked out and within these subdivisions there should be some differentiation of theoretical approach. Granted that all social problems overlap to some extent in content and process, yet a more discriminating differentiation of theory according to types should dissipate much of the current confusion between sociological theory and social problems.¹³

3. Insofar as a particular problem can be stated in terms of group, personality, and institutional factors, the sociologist is in position to offer any purely sociological generalizations available and pertinent to the problem. If he chooses he may even devote his principal attention to these sociological phases of the problem. After all, that is his specialty.

4. However, the problem as a whole cannot be presented adequately with resort exclusively to sociological data and generalizations. So long as social problems courses are offered in sociology departments we cannot escape the synthetic function of considering the pertinent generalizations of any science, physical or social, which help to shed light on the problem. After all, sociology is still a very broad discipline committed to the study of human behavior in all its group relationships. Our generalizations are of necessity still quite dependent on spade work in the other sciences. We may not like this situation, but so far as the teaching of social problems is concerned we might as well face it. If there is any distinctive sociological contribution in performing this integrative function, it is the description of the total situation involved in the problem and an avoidance of one-sided particularistic emphases, economic, biological, psychological, or whatnot. In the writer's opinion this is a valuable aid to the student of social problems and a service no sociologist need shrink from.

5. Since scientific research yields but one type of fact relative to the solution of social problems, sociologists cannot escape discussion of facts pertaining to social policy and the administration of reform. Such discussion inevitably leads into ethical, moral, and political issues. This does not mean that discussion need be emotionally biased and completely subjective. It does mean that only through such talking over can students intelligently evaluate the cross currents of conflicting mores and ideologies which in some way must be compromised or dissipated before the talking over process can go on to community action and reform. The classroom is a proper forum for airing these social value aspects of the problem. Scientific theory is only the point of departure for such discussion. It is a guide, not a formula for the solution of the problem.

¹³ Texts published within the last few years are giving some attention to classification. See the interesting procedure in John M. Gillette and James H. Reinhardt, Current Social Problems, American Book Co., New York, 1933. However, the possibilities of classification remain relatively unexplored.