

THE IDEOLOGICAL FUNCTION OF EARLY AMERICAN ACADEMIC SOCIOLOGY

1975

We may go far beyond M. Spencer's limits and yet stop a great way this side of socialism. (Washington Gladden, quoted in Hofstadter 1955: 105).

I

Sociology gained academic legitimation in the United States during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, decades of rapid social change affecting to some degree all institutions of the society. As a principal focus this paper will attempt to locate the rise of sociology as an academic discipline in the United States within the more general social transformation, reacting to the upheavals while at the same time coming to play an increasingly important role in the actual direction of change. The many diverse currents of a period in flux make it difficult to abstract essential influences and contextual factors, all of which were intricately related. At one basic level, the dominant schools of academic sociology were created in response to the inadequacy of earlier social theories to predict and thereby control social change, within an environment plagued by the undesirable consequences of these changes, and concerned since the direction of change, if projected, seemed antithetical to dominant social interests. The 'new' sociology was progressive yet profoundly conservative at the same time.

The basic orientation of this paper is a sociology of knowledge interpretation of the development of sociology in the United States. Social theory, despite its avowed objectivity, "begins with a stance toward the world, an existential assertion of what is valued and what is real," (McKee 1970: 103) and cannot avoid taking an ideological stance reflecting the perspective of either the superordinate or subordinate (McKee 1970: 102). The interpretation of ideological functions of academic sociology will differ in relation to the perceptions or various social groups and interests. From the point of view of this paper, American sociology despite and, in fact, partly because of its reformist orientation, has ultimately served the interests of the superordinate. During the period in question it has primarily played a conservative role with conservative being defined as the preservation of "existing power and social relations" (Kolko 1963:2).

Underlying and providing the basis for these changes in what may be considered the superstructural sphere, was the industrial revolution. In some respects the character of American industrialization more clearly paralleled the German model (proceeding simultaneously) than the earlier British model in that it was accompanied by concentration and centralization of capital, marking the transition from a competitive form of capitalism to an oligopolistic form. This change in the mode of production was accompanied by alterations in the class structure of American society – as the petite bourgeoisie declined proportionately, a process accompanied by the rise of a new

middle class of salaried non-productive workers.

The transition to corporate capitalism meant the replacement in the workshop of a more individualistic for a more co-operative mode of work. To a certain extent, there was a corresponding change in ideology with collectivist ideas replacing the individualism of the petite bourgeois era. The most complete expression of this new ideology was socialism, which was reflected in the foundation of a Socialist Party in the United States. However, it is one of the contentions of this paper that ideology is not related to the substructure in a one-to-one correspondence but rather that idea systems, once generated, tend to take on an independent existence and appear as 'survivals' even when their basis has been transformed. The ideology that developed in America toward the end of the last century was recognition of the inadequacy of competitive individualism on the one hand and of the undesirable implications of collectivism on the other. Despite the corporate form of economic ownership there was a retention of the individualistic perspective not only in folk mythology, but within the social sciences – a retention of petite bourgeois ideology modified somewhat to justify collectivism to the extent of elite as opposed to popular control. This new ideology had to be able to balance the petite bourgeois illusions inherited from the earlier age of liberal-democratic ideals with elite, undemocratic control of society. Early sociology played an important role in this somewhat uneasy retention of an ideology lacking strong material support and being increasingly negated in practice.

II

The "intellectual content of sociology is related to and dependent on its social context,... the larger social and cultural setting" (Hinkle and Hinkle, 1954: v). One important aspect of this context was the institution of higher learning within which sociology in America found acceptance rather easily in comparison to England. The function of the early American Colleges was to train those fit for such training for the good of the American republic. Unlike British higher education which was very elitist reflecting the aristocratic history of the nation, American College education was provided for larger segments of the population, a policy more consistent with that country's democratic ideals. The conservative flavour of U.S. education related to its function of producing 'good citizens', that is, those who will enhance American society. Education was primarily conceived to be instruction in correct moral principles. What can be considered the earliest sociology was taught as a course in moral philosophy – an indoctrination of moral dogma.

The colleges were primarily denominational and, as a consequence, the moral principles tended toward sectarianism. The concept of internal academic freedom was negated although freedom of religion was maintained; that is, there was freedom between and dogmatism within the colleges. The type of teaching reflected the pre-civil war age in several respects. As part of its all pervasive religious outlook moral absolutes were inculcated reflecting an age that had yet to experience the scientific controversy that was soon to penetrate to the roots of dogmatic thinking. However, there was one major democratic aspect of the classical Colleges that related to Jeffersonian ideals: it

was assumed that large numbers of citizens could be trained so as to carry out their political role in the democratic process. What knowledge there was could be diffused and the 'mental faculties' trained for self-rule. This conception becomes significantly transformed in practice and theory as ideological modifications are precipitated by social change. Paradoxically the era of the College, with its recitation method and the classical content, rested on a democratic conception of human nature that was abandoned to a degree in the era of the University despite its free elective system. While the doctrinaire method was abandoned, the moral emphasis was retained, and social ethics continued to be incorporated into the course offerings and particularly the social sciences – a perspective that quite explicitly emerges from the writings of the early sociologists. While the definition of 'good citizenship' and the methodology employed in creating 'good citizens' changed, the goal of moral training was not abandoned, although the methodology became more subtle.

III

The type of sociology that found favour in the United States was profoundly affected by European social philosophy, although in a modified form to better suit American conditions. Whereas a stagnant society may inhibit social enquiry particularly of a critical nature, it seems logical that severe social transformation would provide an impetus for such a study. The precursors of modern American sociology, Saint-Simon, Comte and Spencer, in their experience of the European industrial revolution, perceived that eighteenth century explanations fell short of the mark – practice had outstripped theory. One of the primary shifts in social philosophy was a reaction away from the eighteenth century assumption of the 'social contract' which rested on the notion of individual wills as the primary focus of social explanation, and towards the development of a science of society that would emphasize the social structure and its effects on the individuals within it.

For Comte, society was much more than the mere aggregate of the individuals who composed it; a society had to be studied institutionally and holistically. Using the natural sciences as a model, society was viewed as an organism, wherein "the parts ... at any one moment in time are ... naturally and harmoniously ordered" (Hinkle and Hinkle 1954: 5). Society, again like an organism, is not static, but goes through a continuous, gradual, inevitable process of evolution. In a basically structural-functional conception of society, it is sometimes difficult to understand the mechanisms that underlie the process of evolution. Comte believed that "there is an instinct urging man to develop his abilities as far as circumstances permit" (Hinkle and Hinkle 1954: 5) In practice, human nature can slowly improve and, following the Lamarckian thesis of the inheritance of acquired characteristics, such improvements can be subsequently passed biologically to succeeding generations and will ultimately be reflected in the advancement of intellect and morals. One implication that followed from Comte's argument was that the evolutionary process could be accelerated by purposive rational intervention in society.

Much more significant, however, for the very beginnings of American academic

sociology were the ideas of Herbert Spencer, whose popularity in U.S. universities extended well into the 20th century. While maintaining an organismic conception of society, "for Spencer, society is a whole only as an aggregate of parts, a kind of additive sum of its constituent individuals" (Hinkle and Hinkle 1954: 6). Evil resulted from maladaptation; however, through the social process of natural selection unfitness would be destroyed and hence evil banished. Since modern industrial society based on private property rested on co-operation and respect for individual rights, then these values would have priority and be singled out for selection. Human nature will, then, move from egoism to altruism.

Evolution was an impersonal process within which circumstances and the environment were omnipotent and mankind was helpless to deflect the cause of change. The development was a predetermined cosmic process "toward a remote but comfortable Elysium" (Hofstadter 1955: 125). In the social realm the implications of this view led to a 'gradualistic fatalism' in which human intervention was considered counter-productive. Spencer specifically identified with *laissez-faire* policies and, in America, Spencer's ideas seemed to be the ideal expression of the American status quo. He was "... a fervent believer in progress, ... a champion of individualism and the 'survival of the fittest', and at the same time an admirer of representative government" (Bottomore 1967: 24). Spencer's ideas were interpreted and popularized by William Sumner who was regarded by some as the father of American sociology.

Sumner was probably the most important exponent in American thought of social Darwinism – that mixture of Spencer's organismic theory of society, U.S. liberal democratic ideology, and Darwinian evolutionary principles. Sumner was an outspoken exponent of 19th century liberalism. He identified the 'fittest' with the 'best' in a process that implicitly accepts the environment as inherently good. Success in business resulted from hard work and frugality; the competitive economy rewarded the virtuous, and punished "those who were, in Sumner's words, "negligent, shiftless, silly and imprudent"" (Hofstadter 1955: 10). In this marriage of the Protestant ethic to natural selection "the materialist drive for wealth and power was ... tinged by a moral superstructure.... The 'robber barons' and political opportunists found peace with their conscience through an ethic tailored to their interest" (Shaskolsky 1970: 10).

Sumner's social Darwinism was biologically based, and rested on the 19th conception of natural law. Since the process was viewed as a cosmic force, it was deterministic and therefore anti-individualistic in some of its implications. For Sumner, individual intervention ('meddling') was seen as possibly having negative consequences. There was a contradiction inherent in the view: to leave men free meant to leave them free to intervene as well. Sumner's only hope which he regarded as minimal was that men might be convinced through education to allow the natural laws to work themselves out, a policy he was convinced would produce the best results. Like the current ideology of 'peace', the *laissez-faire* doctrine had the effect of preserving the given forms of social structure and thereby primarily benefited the superordinate classes.

The writings of Spencer and Sumner reflected an interpretation of Darwinism that buttressed the conservative outlook. Competitive struggle was a 'natural law' and

since society evolved at a glacial pace, reforms were dysfunctional. Youmans, an advocate of Spencerianism, argued that

the spirit of civilization ... is pacific, constructive, controlled by reason, and slowly ameliorating and progressive. Coercive and violent measures which aim at great and sudden advantages are sure to prove illusory.... [Science shows] that we are born well or born badly and that whoever is ushered into existence at the bottom of the scale can never rise to the top because the weight of the universe is upon him. (Youmans, quoted in Hofstadter 1955: 47)

The organismic conception of society was highly conservative because it implied that social classes existed in a natural state of harmony and that as a consequence class conflict could only result from incorrect perceptions that failed to recognize the harmony. Conflict is individualized and individuals become the proper focus of scientific interest; progress results from the alteration of individual habits. This tradition is reflected most clearly in the prominent place most social thinkers gave to education and reflects as well the continuation of the function of producing 'good citizens': social transformation was to be effected by individual character reformation. Consistent with the ideologies of competitive capitalism, the interpretation given to the extension of Darwinian natural selection to social evolution meant the acceptance of the conclusion "that every established and settled institution is justified, in its setting, as an adaptation" (Galloway Keller, quoted in Hofstadter 1955: 157). This close correspondence between ideology and the preservation of major social institutions and interests is one of the most important contextual factors in the academic acceptance of sociology as a discipline and illustrates a major theme: that in "determining whether ... ideas are accepted, truth and logic are less important criteria than suitability to the intellectual needs and preconceptions of social interest" (Galloway Keller, quoted in Hofstadter 1955: 204).

IV

Developments in the realm of higher education were quite important in determining the character of the sociology that was to be taught and the research that was to be conducted. Several important aspects in this development can be isolated for examination: of particular relevance to the question at hand are the concepts of competence, neutrality, research and academic freedom. Darwinism was interpreted as an attack on basic religious beliefs and was first 'refuted' by the Church on the grounds that it logically led to atheism and hence could not be true. The scientists counter-attacked by declaring the clergy to be scientifically incompetent – only scientists who had been rigidly trained in the proper scientific procedures and methodologies were competent to pronounce on their area of specialty. This conception of scientific competence was inherently elitist since it gave control over knowledge to a select body of men who were granted the power to select as their successors those whom they

would initiate into the mysteries of the scientific method. There is not, then, the conflict Metzger perceived between 'wise men' and 'wise mean' the former being elitist while the latter is more 'participatory', since the scientific elite not only controlled a monopoly of knowledge but also extended a monopoly of access to this knowledge. Extended to the realm of the social sciences, the doctrine of 'competence' suggested that social engineers were the appropriate agents for implementation of social goals. While it might be argued that this 'elitism' is modified, indeed turned into its opposite through public lectures and education, the control of the educational process remains in the hands of the elite, and furthermore 'competence' breeds specialization and an ideology that in essence claims social processes to be too complex for the average citizen to understand. The counterpart of the doctrine of competence is the mass society and mass manipulation. In fact the doctrine places the scientist beyond the pale of public criticism. Since all beliefs are only tentatively true, they must be verified following prescribed methods. "This procedure is best understood by those who qualify as experts" (Metzger 1955: 90). It follows that only other experts as capable of ascertaining the validity of the credentials of one of their number.

The second significant aspect related to the characteristics of scientific study was 'objectivity', that is, the belief that scientific spirit "seeks only the fact without the slightest regard to consequence" (Charles Eliot, quoted in Metzger 1955: 77). The demand for objectivity meant that "science must transcend ideology.... Professors must renounce all commitments that corrupt the passion for truth" (Charles Eliot, quoted in Metzger 1955: 92). This conception of science was greatly affected by the influence of German universities which were noted specifically for their intense specialization and rigid objectivity.

The value of objectivity became particularly paramount during the Progressive era but the concept of 'neutrality' had ultimate consequences other than those which were directly involved in academic freedom disputes. "Behind the banner of a value-free science, sociologists divested themselves of political affiliation or emotional identification with the particular problems" (Shaskolsky 1970: 13). And while it might be argued that objectivity enhanced the autonomy of sociology, McKee claims that it has the effect of muting the sociologists' criticisms of society presumably because they are less involved with actual social issues (McKee 1970: 102). The problem with objectivity (not objectivity in the sense that things can be shown to be true irrespective of what first motivated the researcher, but in the sense of 'icy neutrality') is that it operates in a profoundly interest-ridden world and that by attempting to be value free, research leaves a vacuum which will be filled by default by the dominant values of the society. It is in this sense as well that the dominant ideas of an age are the ideas of the ruling class.

Existing in a predominantly business environment, U.S. higher education was characterized by an interest in technique which was reflected in the Morrill Land Grant Act and the establishment of mechanical and technical colleges to meet the demands for technicians and engineers created by capitalist industrialization. Metzger suggests that one of the limitations imposed on 'pure science' in the Universities was that "the growth of a new business class made profits and efficiency – the foes of intellectual

curiosity – predominant social values" (Metzger 1955: 11). The necessity for basic research as a fundamental prerequisite for technological advancement was slow to be realized and be supported by businessmen.

The importance of pure research was also an idea imported from Germany and was one of the most significant aspects of the transition of the College to the University. The character of the research had the effect of placing the University in a tenuous position in relation to the community. "This indifference to vocational ambition, this insistence on disinterested research, created a gulf between the spirit of the University and that of everyday life" (Metzger 1955: 100). Thus, while John Hopkins University aimed at "the advancement of individual scholars, who by their excellence will advance the sciences they pursue, and the society wherein they dwell," it was to be "non-utilitarian in its objectives" (Metzger 1955: 103). In the environment of the United States this could not be a consistent ideology of research. Metzger points out that this leads to a dual character for research: on the one hand being carried on 'objectively' in the graduate schools irrespective of practical application, on the other hand being "geared to external and ulterior purposes" (Metzger 1955: 108).

The concepts of Lehrfreiheit and Lernfreiheit were similarly imported from Germany and subsequently transformed to more suitably fit the American environment. In Germany, professors were granted internal freedom but external restraints were imposed upon their expression. Whereas in Germany lectures were free to be polemical, in the U.S., "the proper stance for American professors was thought to be neutrality on controversial issues, and silence on substantive issues that lay outside the scope of their competence" (Metzger 1955: 127). The notion was that the professor should present a plurality of views, expressing validity only tenuously. Controversy was to be handled by an objective presentation of opposing- viewpoints without prejudice to any side. Ideas proven impractical, such as socialism, were taught in order to be refuted.

This might exemplify to some degree how the ideology of competitive capitalism was reflected in educational views. The retention of liberal democratic ideologies following the demise of the corresponding economic substructure demonstrates how cultural attributes are generated in opposition to aspects inherited from the past but that once generated tend to have an existence of their own in the realm of the superstructure independently of the forces which initially gave rise to them. As ideology, these notions remain functional and exemplify the 'survival' of petite bourgeois ideas under monopoly capitalism.

Limitations, then, were placed on the academic freedom of professors, including the prohibition of the propagation of sectarian views in the classroom. This was in contrast to the practice prevailing in Germany, and had the effect of muting social criticism since being critical might be considered synonymous with preaching sectarian views. These limitations were "narrowly interpreted by certain members of boards of trustees to prevent professors from criticizing the social order" (Metzger 1955: 127). And in fact, "any social scientist who did put forward views regarded as beyond the American pale were severely criticized and often forced to resign" (Morgan 1966: 20-21). The professors, in their resistance to these pressures, argued in terms of academic freedom, a concept that had both a progressive and a conservative side.

The growing complexity of the American economy culminating in the formation of monopoly capitalism was related to the rise of the universities in two ways. The first, discussed above, was the need for practical research. Metzger points to a second connection. During the period of 'mercantile capitalism', he suggests, businessmen had only relatively modest resources. Dependent upon religious denominations for funding, the Colleges continually faced a deficit. The rise of monopoly was accompanied by an increasing rationalization of industry as the 'robber barons' increased the production of relative surplus value. As the aggregate of the surplus increased funds were available for distribution in philanthropic gestures. This was significant because the growth of the universities, to a fairly high degree, was dependent on private benefactors. The

new men of wealth organized their philanthropies [endowments, foundations] as grandiosely as they organized their businesses.... [These] givers became entrepreneurs in the field of higher education. They took the initiative in providing funds and in deciding their general purposes. (Metzger 1955: 142)

This trend of a growing business influence in the Universities is also indicated by the change over time in the occupational background of university trustees. In 1860, 48 percent of trustees were businessmen, bankers or lawyers, while in 1900 the proportion representing these strata rose to 64 percent (Metzger 1955: 142) largely at the expense of the clergy.

The most popular theory of the time concerning academic freedom linked this increasing role of businessmen with the violations of professors' freedom. Metzger shows the inadequacy of this conspiracy theory of business-related infringement of academic freedom by first indicating that both conservative and reformist University presidents removed professors for economic con-conformity, and second, by raising the question of the multiplicity of variables involved in each concrete dispute. One of the key variables that precipitated the dispute was the teaching of economic 'heresy'; a fact that is of considerable significance. But in relation to the outcomes of the various disputes it is important to realize as well that this was a period of economic transformation in which the capitalist class was itself divided on the question of correct policies. It was not simply a matter that businessmen were 'conservative', that is, that they merely wanted to protect *laissez-faire* policies against the criticisms of academics who could show the negative implications of the continuation of such policies. Some of course, did fit this description; others, however, were 'progressive' and perhaps more aware of the best interests of their class in the particular historical conjuncture. It ought not to be surprising if, in such a period, we find professors being removed for economic heresy from both sides of the ideological fence. This seems especially true given the dearth of searching critiques of capitalism per se.

One of the important variables that helped to determine whether a professor so charged would be removed from his post (outside of the abstract notion of academic freedom which would gain the verbal support of many liberals) was the defendant's activism. While it was coming to be accepted in some quarters that the university ought

to be a 'sheltered green house' for the growth of ideas that may eventually prove true, although currently unpopular, the problem rose to a head if a professor with 'sectarian views' actively propagated them. By definition of their minority position such ideas had not been validated by the scientific community and hence ought to be suppressed from public utterance – it was a violation not only of the norm of neutrality but of strict scientific procedures as well.

The 'sheltered green house' clause acted as a safety valve allowing professors with 'dangerous tendencies' a freedom with which, however, they were confined and thus rendered safe. The English had learned historically that at certain stages of social discontent repression was less practical a response than providing harmless channels for opposition. Academic freedom is consequently a two-edged sword. On the one hand it can safeguard the positions of radicals, as can the maintenance of democratic rights in general. On the other hand one of the implications of the academic freedom policy reflected in the green house analogy is that research would be sheltered from the scrutiny of the public and from public criticism. In essence it was an expression of the elitism of the scientific minority who presumably knew what was 'right' better than the community whose ignorance might disrupt the disinterested pursuit of science which must consequently be sheltered. It is of some interest to note in passing that currently in China, as a lesson from the Cultural Revolution, the slogan extolling expertise is recognized as an expression of capitalist methods of production.

The 'conspiracy thesis' of academic infringement is the product of an individualistic age that sought the source of evil in the doings of specific conniving people. The trend towards collectivism manifesting itself in economic transformation reflected in a second theory, institutional in scope, that of cultural incompatibility. Metzger does not treat this concept sufficiently (partly because it is not his object) in that he fails to draw the connections between the University and the economic climate closely enough. While his criticisms and appreciations of Veblen are satisfactory, he fails to sufficiently recognize the points of convergence between business and the university that would actually lead to a theory of cultural compatibility. To note that 'bigness' is a value of other institutions as well and that bureaucracy can be democratic or autocratic really misses the main point which is to relate the institutional changes to each other and especially to changes in the mode of production. To glibly recognize a trend toward 'bigness' explains nothing about the source and meaning of the trend.

V

That the expectation of a collectivist ideology replacing the individualism of the early nineteenth century is a much too simplistic notion with which to understand the complexities of ideological change has been suggested earlier in this paper. With Comte and Spencer there was a rejection of the centrality of the self-motivated, self-interested individual and a realization that the nature of society itself needed explanation. What was essential was to understand as a social being, that is, that individual activities cannot be understood except in terms of social acts.

In their reaction to essentially atomistic thinking, the early sociologists developed

organismic models of society which formed a strong environmental determinism. Yet Spencer's philosophy might be termed macro-deterministic but micro-individualistic in that the society was perceived as a resultant of individuals operating through the natural laws of competition, natural selection and inheritance of acquired characteristics.

The reorientation of social thought that took place in the 1890's was both a reaction to Spencer's 'environmental determinism' as well as to his micro-individualism. The second generation of sociologists, beginning with Ward, rejected the former emphasizing the importance of consciousness and intervention in progress and rejected the latter as well to the extent that they focused their analysis on social groups. Despite this new solidarism, in essence the new sociology retained its individualistic conception of social life which is most clearly expressed in its social psychological orientation which replaced the earlier organismic conceptions of society. On the one hand they recognized the basic givens motivating individual action: social forces, or instincts which were internal to the species. At the same time, however, it was a 'social' psychology, and the nature of the expression of these basic drives arose from human interaction.

This re-orientation of thought was effected by the natural sciences on the one hand and social evolution on the other. The rediscovery of mutations by DeVries opened the way for cataclysmic changes in nature and destroyed the social analogy of gradualistic evolution. Weisman refuted the Lamarckian thesis which seemed to undercut the influence of the environment but actually emphasized cultural acquisitions and the importance of socialization. William Walling attacked sociology for not emphasizing the creative acts of mankind in the evolutionary process (Hofstadter 1955: 118).

This rejection of environmental determinism was also expressed by Henry George who attacked Malthus and argued that "the injustice of society not the niggardliness of nature, is the cause of want and misery which the current theory attributes to overpopulation" (quoted in Hofstadter 1955: 112). A second factor contributing to the re-orientation of social thought was also expressed by George: the direction of social evolution, it was felt, was not at all automatically ameliorative as Youmans had thought, but on the contrary, a *laissez-faire* approach had resulted in a deterioration of conditions which could have disastrous consequences for civilization. This recognition prompted on the one hand a tremendous concern for solving social problems and on the other hastened the rejection of Spencerianism and its replacement by a less deterministic social theory in the sense that intervention based on conscious motives was not only considered effective, but desirable. As this new conception evolved it took on a collectivist hue in that the importance of isolated activities by individuals came to be overshadowed by recourse to the agencies of the state. One point to be made, however, is to note that this re-orientation was intimately connected with the melioristic activities with which early sociology closely identified.

VI

While Comte and Spencer were superseded to some extent in the last decades of

the nineteenth century, from them came the principle (unexploited by its originators) that realistic intervention in society had to be based on an understanding built upon facts determined on the basis of the rigorous application of the scientific method. Just as on the basis of observation and deduction you could predict physical phenomena, the same kind of success could be achieved in the social realm, although the social sciences were perceived to be in a state of infancy. The movement toward social reform in America was one of the most profound aspects of the social context in which sociology came to be an accepted academic discipline. It still remains to be explained, however, why it is that at a certain stage in the historical process the need is felt to understand and control social change. It might be that this consciousness arises when the direction of social change seems incompatible with some explicit or implicit social values.

The motivation lying behind the foundation of a scientific study of society came principally from the myriad of social problems that were perceived to emanate from industrialization. The impetus for a sociology, then, came from the convulsive state of 19th century society. Small expresses this motivation clearly when he quotes Taylor:

The social movement of modern life ... is the movement of the common will to find and apply some adjustment of the disturbed relationships and dislodged classes; caused by the most revolutionary force ever introduced into human affairs, except the gospel, viz, the modern industrial system.
(Graham Taylor, quoted in Small *et al.* 1895: 3)

Odum emphasized two sources through which meliorism influenced American sociology. The first was the problem-solving orientation of the American Social Science Association, modeled after the British Association, and from which evolved, in 1905, the American Sociological Society (Odum 1951: 51). The second influence came from significant individuals who were active leaders in the ameliorative movements proceeding simultaneously.

It was within this realm of a response to social problems that many of the diverse contextual factors in the rise of sociology merged. The moral emphasis of the early sociology and the social ethics incorporated into the social sciences provided individuals with specific motivations. While it was clearly recognized that America had progressed enormously in a short time it was believed to have been merely material progress which had been accompanied (some said necessarily) by a decline in morality. There was a motivation to provide the lost moral basis of American society through the amelioration of the evil social conditions to which the lower classes were subject.

In the charter statement upon the foundation of the Department of Sociology at Columbia University, Giddings gave emphatic evidence of the problem-solving emphasis and background of the new discipline. We can see that when sociology became established in the University it did so as a social science committed to uncovering the laws underlying social phenomena and from this knowledge to promote social reform. That is, it entered primarily as a 'technical' discipline, an applied science. (Sumner has to be an obvious exception to this trend given his social philosophy.) While sociology

was divided into 'practical' and 'theoretical' branches the latter was expected to provide knowledge of the underlying laws in accordance with which practical activity could be carried out. The idealization of science was a trend that was to follow the splitting of academic sociology from Social Work, after the initial successes at melioration. The instrumentality of sociology is quite consistent with the other institutions of higher learning in their foundation as technical colleges in which there gradually evolved a recognition of the need for pure research. Sociology, of course, has carried this beyond the point of direct social application to knowledge for its own sake. Even 'pure' social research can be considered, initially, to have been only an adjunct of the mechanistic. Although he recognized a distinction between 'general' and 'special' sociology, for Giddings the former was to provide the theoretical background for the intervention of the latter (Odum 1951: 62).

To the sociologists at the turn of the century the Spencerian formula of *laissez-faire* had resulted in a moral decline that might presage the end of the American republic. If society had progressed in the past it seemed clear to many that it had not done so by people simply standing aside and allowing the natural forces to work themselves out. "It became the task of the intellectuals to apply their knowledge to the amelioration of the defects of society" (Shaskolsky 1970:11).

Lester Ward developed much of his sociology in opposition to, Spencer. Accepting evolution as a natural law he "attacked the unitary assumption of social Darwinism and natural-law-*laissez-faire* individualism.... He replaced an older passive determinism with a positive body of social theory adaptable to, the uses of reform" (Hofstadter 1955: 68). Evolution, for Ward, involved a conscious striving for the higher. He argued that if social laws are similar to natural law then just as we intervene in nature to make improvements, a developed science of sociology would permit the following through of a similar line in the social realm. He recognized the contradiction that freedom led to economic concentration which in turn inhibited freedom, and that therefore freedom had to be legislated. According to Hofstadler, Ward claimed that

a sociocratic world would distribute its favours according to merit, as individualists demand, but by equalizing opportunity for all it would eliminate advantages now possessed by those with undeserved power, accidental position or wealth, or antisocial cunning. (Hofstadter 1955: 83)

Essentially this view expresses the liberal demand to equalize opportunity so that society could ensure that those whom it rewards most highly actually deserved the stipend. Under present circumstances Ward refused to identify the 'successful' with the 'good'; he wanted to create circumstances so that this would be the case that the successful would be objectively the most virtuous. This liberalism does indeed go far beyond Spencer but it stops far short of the more radical demand for an equalization of conditions, not only equalization of opportunity to achieve unequal positions. There was implicitly a moral perspective in the teaching and theories of sociology that reflected both past practices and the religious and rural background of most of the early sociologists.

There was not a rejection of the central tenant that progress results from competition – the efforts of the reformers were directed to ensuring that competition would actually determine that the 'best' succeeded. Benjamin Kidd, however, recognized that competition was an effective social control mechanism only to the extent that it appeared to the population to offer opportunity for advancement. To be perpetually a loser competitively would lead to a recognition on the part of the lower classes that to compete against unequal odds was not in their best interests – hence the attraction of the masses to socialism. Since rational self-interest could not compel the 'delinquents to compete, one could only rely on the religious instinct which would serve as a non-rational sanction for progress.

Since altruism would not evolve automatically it "should be strengthened [as] the best possible answer to the threat of socialism" (Hofstadter 1955: 100) Social legislation should be enacted that would compel competition. Furthermore, Kidd claimed that "as state interference widens, mankind will paradoxically move further and further away from socialism" (Hofstadter 1955: 100). While Small and the other contemporary sociologists disagreed with this position, in fact, it came close to the actual course of historical development and explicitly stated what was sometimes only implicit in the calls for amelioration.

The conservative character of the reformism of the early sociologists is perhaps exemplified by Charles E. Ellwood's definition of sociology as a 'general social reform', and elaborated to claim that amelioration required "modifications progressing in the same direction as the main process of change" (Hinkle and Hinkle 1954: 12). The general underlying trends are perceived to be the outcome of natural social evolution and are taken for granted rather than subjected to a radical critique. From this acceptance of the major institutions it followed that reform had to be directed at what Ellwood called the main difficulty: "the patterned behavior and moral character of individuals" (Hinkle and Hinkle 1954: 12).

The individualistic component must not be overdrawn, however. The melioristic movement involved both alterations in the environment of the disadvantaged as well as attempts at moral uplifting. As the depression years of the 1890's receded and were followed by a prosperous inflationary decade, the objective conditions which had given rise to populism diminished. The change was marked ideologically by the ascendancy of pragmatism as the dominant American philosophy. In social science it meant the piecemeal rationalist approach to social reform operating through legislation that was the hallmark of the Progressive era. During this period Social Work split from sociology and sociologists became more concerned with more general theoretical issues. This had the effect of muting what critical aspects sociology did possess in its period of anti *laissez-faire* agitation as the professional practitioners became somewhat more removed from social problems.

The tendency of its formative period, however, had been less towards comprehensive study as the sociologists "applied themselves to the task of detecting and dissecting the various social problems that marred the societal scenery" ultimately producing a greatly fragmented discipline (Shaskolsky 1970: 12-13). The empiricist tradition, strong in the U.S. Universities, meant that 'neutral' facts were to be the final

arbiters of scientific questions. As in Britain following the statistical inquiries and social surveys, it was discovered that facts did not automatically speak for themselves but, on the contrary, were collected within a certain frame of reference, only meaningful within it, and susceptible to alternate interpretations. The result was two-fold: either a more systematic reformulation of methodology (as in Social Psychology) or a coming to terms with the ideologies implicit in social research in some manner. The early generation of sociologists, in America, tended to take the social psychological approach.

VII

The rise of sociology, finally, was intimately connected with another aspect of the general movement towards social reformism. The Darwinian controversy forced many liberal theologians to attempt to reconcile their beliefs with the latest scientific discoveries which seemed to gain validity with time, a process that the clergy had not originally anticipated. The argument of design was consequently stretched farther and the 'first cause' was held as the last line of defense.

Industrialization was accompanied by fears of the consequences of a growing rationality and the decline of some aspects of religious behavior on the part of the working class. To the church it seemed futile in the case of the lower classes to minister to the soul when the existential conditions were not conducive to any interest other than material survival. Therefore, "alarmed by the violence of labor conflict ... [degrading] living conditions, and troubled by the failure of the churches to win an adequate following among urban workers," the progressive churches became a social force "to make a contribution to solving the new moral problems of industrialism" (Hofstadter 1963: 18). By looking after their material as well as spiritual needs the church acted in the classical terms of self-preservation.

The Christian message was given increasingly a social interpretation. Inspired by Christian Socialism in Britain, the Social Gospel movement was intimately connected to the sociology of the period, partly through common objectives and methods in the realm of social reform, partly through a common ethical and moralistic basis, and partly through individuals, the majority of early sociologists having some connection to a ministerial background. On the one hand, then, Sociology retained the religious, moralistic message in its teaching and, on the other, it was legitimized as a discipline through its connections with Christianity. Like sociology, the Social Gospel Movement attempted to chart a course midway between socialism and extreme individualism.

VIII

It is this 'middle' course which contributes greatly to the conservatism of the entire 'Progressive' period. The early sociologists believed in the central validity of the American way of life, an ideological stance in the discipline by no means confined to the forefathers. Odum's *American Sociology* (1950) is permeated throughout with a thinly veiled worship of things American and an unabashed reverence for all his predecessors. According to Smith, "sociology developed within the reform movements created to

salvage the capitalist system." Their anti-*laissez-faire* ideology was simply the expression of their support for the emerging new form of capitalism, and its accompanying imperialism (Smith 1970: 69). Sumner, quite logically it now appears, resisted both; his immediate sociological successors supported both.

Lester Ward who, according to Odum, put his faith in the technical and artificial, and whose concepts "foreshadowed social planning" (Odum 1951: 81-82), attempted to reconcile elitism and democracy. "The prime necessity was the creation of an intellectual elite that would guide the society in such a manner as to benefit all its members" (Shaskolsky 1970: 11). His 'sociocracy' involved "the planned control of society by society as a whole" (Hofstadter 1955: 83) which was, however, to be achieved through an education of the public conducted by the same scientific elite that would initiate policies. This clearly opened up the possibility of mass manipulation, especially in light of the complexity of the solutions.

Giddings, for whom the fittest tended to be the 'best', was devoted to the competitive principle and followed it to the logical conclusion that there existed a natural aristocracy "that rules the state behind the constitution" (Giddings, quoted in Smith 1970: 73). He advocated education to reconcile the inferiors to their position, but at the same time provide equality of opportunity, but feared that the tendencies of the citizens to go too far in the direction of 'radical democracy' would lead to socialism.

Small, in the lead article in the first edition of the *American Journal of Sociology* echoed this fear, which derived from the more militant aspects of populism – as was shown by his part in the Bemis affair at the University of Chicago where he rejected activism of the "popular" sort, a stance that caused Metzger to label him 'timorous' in his distinction between 'popular sociology' and 'scientific sociology', Small considered mass participation to be negative and premature, before all the facts were in, and assigned the role of collection and interpretation to sociologists. Small's presentation of the specific frame of reference within which facts should be couched reveals the specific interests served by the new science: sociologists must present their data in a specific form, and "that form will frequently be the one in which ... men of affairs themselves view the facts concerned" (Small 1895: 14).

This identification rests on the assumptions shared by all sociologists that the state did not represent the interests of one class but rather represented the general welfare. In their legitimation of the extended role of the state in social affairs, the early sociologists acted as an intellectual vanguard for the consolidation of monopoly capitalism. Edward Ross, considered by some to be the most 'socialistic' of the early sociologists, was in fact hardly so, and in his academic freedom dispute not only openly disavowed such notions, but declared that they would be, if true, certainly grounds for dismissal. He is a radical only from the perspective of the free-enterprise conservatives, a simple reflection of the fact that ideological perceptions are often closely related to objective social position.

It is paradoxical to note that the one sociologist who opposed state intervention, Sumner, the arch-conservative against whom all the liberal sociologists were in reaction, did so because he recognised that the state is essentially a political power and often the instrument which social classes employ to advance their own special interests.

The benefits accruing from governmental intervention are accordingly distributed predominantly to members of the social class in control of the state, while the burdens rest disproportionately with members of other classes (Hinkle and Hinkle 1954: 13).

There was a radical kernel to his conservatism.

IX

In conclusion, four aspects of their teaching best reflect the conservative nature of early sociologists. One is the moralistic tone of the discipline, developed on the basis of the early courses in moral philosophy and strengthened by the close association it had with the Social Gospel movement. Second is the individualism inherent in their social psychological interpretation of human society, developed in opposition to Spencer and in alliance with pragmatism. Thirdly, arising in part from the transformation of higher education and the effects of the scientific revolution, was an elitist conception of scientific knowledge and a corresponding belief in the positive administrative role of social scientists. Finally, arising from efforts at melioration, the recognition of the necessity for the objective transformation of circumstances, coupled with anti-democratic elitist principles, led to a conception of the state as the appropriate instrument for legislating piecemeal reform that left basic institutions and social trends intact.

The success of the pragmatic ideology of social melioration, on the basis of consciously manipulative state intervention guided to some degree by social scientific considerations and resting on a return to prosperity, was based on the recognition of two facts: on the one hand, that the *laissez-faire* policies had led to undesirable social consequences, and secondly that these had given rise to a radical labour movement and an influential socialist party (Weisenstein 1967). The policies pursued, to which the sociologists tried to lend support through research and theory, were aimed at establishing the new capitalism on a firmer round. While it cannot be claimed that, as Ward had hoped, "the government was to be the guiding brain of this system, and trained sociologists were to be the officials" (Maus 1962: 67), the sociologists of the day played the role as though they were in such a position. The similarity in outlook amongst the monopoly capitalists, the federal officials and the sociologists reflect a fact of social stratification which manifested itself economically, politically and ideologically.

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