The Social Preconditions of Sociology (196?)
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Transliteration und Kommentar von Reinhard Müller[1]

During the last three decades fellow sociologists have applied their discipline to an increasing variety of subjects. They have expanded their area of legitimate explorations farther than has any other discipline. As one would expect, this expansion of the range and variety of interests has inspired a parallel growth of the concern for the common core of the field. The major portion of the literature so concerned is devoted to methodology as the seat of unity in an increasing diversity of pursuits. It appears that the efforts of earlier sociologists to locate the generic character of their field in its subject has been largely abandoned. This essay attempts to reconsider the proposition that it is its subject which demarcates the field of sociology.

What social conditions provide the environment and the focus for sociological explorations?

The rise of sociology offers half a clue. The literature on the development of the discipline may be divided into two groups. One, which I call the school of gradualism, treats the history of the discipline as an evolution from ancient rudiments to an eventual stage of maturity. Textbooks written in this vein assemble pertinent fragments from Hammurabi[2] through Aristotle[3] to [Auguste] Comte[4] and beyond., with a view to recording significant stages of growth as well as occasional blind alleys. The unspoken rationale of this treatment is that sociology is an application of scientific method to social subjects. The subject, society, has always existed, but the scientific method evolved gradually from sporadic groping into a mature code of procedural criteria. Sociology could not put parallel that development.

Personally, I am encouraged by another view which is more prevalent in the recent literature, namely that the discipline is of recent origin and, except for Comte's programmatic pronouncements, its frame of reference did not emerge much before the latter part of the 19th Century. To say this is not to ignore the evidence of well conceived social interests throughout the ages. King Herod's survey[5] and the Domesday Book of William the Conqueror,[6] among many others, employed logical devices for classifying people by status, property, subsistence, and location. Nor is, what has been occasionally called, sociography, the description of occupations, strata or communities, a modern invention. There are, moreover, plenty of generalizations in works of all ages, from Confucius[7] and Plato[8] to St. Thomas[9] and Hobbes,[10] about the nature of man, the family, political authority, the city, the relationship of man and women, super- and subordination, and conflict. Nevertheless, to put it pointedly, sociology as an analytical pursuit lacked a subject. Nor could the scientific method, as it had evolved before the end of the 19th Century, be fruitfully applied to social phenomena much before the middle of the century.

For the limited purpose of this essay sociology may be defined as a systematic attempt to map the actions of individuals and groups with reference to the variable components of their situations, including the roles they accept by choice or under constraint, and the order in which their roles cluster. It may be well to indicate the sense in which these term will be used subsequently.

The social situation of an individual comprises the acts of others to which he is in a position to respond. A role is a mode of behavior which follows expectations associ-

ated with a given situation. A role cluster is a conventional pattern which governs the aggregation of roles, The American presidency is the seat of a constitutionally prescribed complex of roles. The President is the head of the cabinet, commander in chief, leader of his party, and Initiator of legislation. In some other republics these functions are allocated to different officials and do not form a cluster.

Sociology does not emerge in a milieu in which role clusters are frozen and form an inseparable complex. The work of Justus Moeser,[11] an 18th Century German writer, offers an illustrative example. Moeser gave a revealing account of the social strata of his city, Osnabrueck. His portraiture consisted essentially of an inventory of a set of social types described by the clustered roles which fixed the position of the artisans, the officials, the patricians, and the noblemen. Informative as this record of social conventions is, it is not a forerunner of sociology. Nor is Moeser an early sociologist. He reported, but did not have to explain or map the behavior of his contemporaries. Their well circumscribed actions identified them as members of their respective guild and church and as subjects of their sovereigns, hardly as Germans, and not at all as actors on a scene whose boundaries vary with the actors' preferences.

There is a limited parallel between the inhospitality of 18th Century Germany to sociology and the circumstances which delayed its arrival in the Soviet Union decades after the discipline demonstrated its usefulness for implementing designs for change, regardless of the political system under which it takes place. At a convention held a few years before the inauguration of our discipline in Russia, a Soviet social scientist explained why sociology was not needed for planned change and for predicting the responses of Soviet citizens. This is accomplished by the network of party cells which channel the decisions of the governing organs of the party to the rank and file at their place of employment. The close rapport between the party and the worker and the sanctions which reinforce that rapport provide a more adequate basis for a prediction of his responses and for understanding his motivations than could sociologists. Although dated, this comment an how the Soviet environment affected social inquiry is not pointless. I am likewise inclined to attribute the delayed development of Soviet sociology to the effective control and limited mobility of the worker rather than to the ideological apprehensions of the party hierarchy.

The subjects of sociological inquiry emerge from fluid situations which entail choices and demand variable responses. Such open structures can arise under various conditions, but it was the social consequences of the Industrial Revolution which maximized their range in selected countries. The same emergent conditions provided the impetus to psychology and provided the scope for economic analysis. The mechanization of production and the consequent rise of a mobile and adaptable labor force gave reality to the abstract category "labor", as it is distinguished from the particular worker's skills and previous experience. The easy transfer of labor and capital from one industry to another shifted the focus of explanation of economic behavior from the particular social milieu of the worker and entrepreneur to the market which provides opportunities and incentives for maximizing wages and profits. The drift toward a wage and profit equilibrium is an explanatory construct which introduces a measure of predictability into the economic process.

Similar developments gave rise to the sociological point of view. The progressive separation and fragmentation of social and economic functions tend to break up conventional role clusters which fix the position of the individual. Once his actions are no longer circumscribed by rigidly clustered roles, they become unpredictable unless the focus of interest shifts from the description of particular social types to the structural inventory of the situations in which actors make choices and which provide

them with acts of motives. It is such a state of relative social indeterminacy which poses sociological questions and creates a need for explanatory constructs. To explain a social phenomenon is to map the limits of its indeterminacy. Although the practice of sociology includes a verity of procedure, they are subsidiary to its explanatory phase.

Such a conclusion requires qualifications. It my appear to suggest that, what should be called, frozen structures are proper subjects for descriptive case studies but are not amenable to analytical treatment. It may seem that pre-industrial societies are impervious to sociological inquiries and that sociologists must confine their attention to the contemporary scene. It would be absurd to make such requirements. It is true, however that frozen structures do not respond to the type of approach which bears dividends in fluid situations. The sociologist who wishes to practice his profession on phenomena which are located in a pre-industrial environment is forced to adapt his treatment to the nature of his subject. He is likely to proceed comparatively.

Comparative studies are no mere substitutes for the genuine article. On the contrary, they form part of the sociological repertoire. But instead of deriving explanatory constructs from variables within a single social system or a single action situation, sociologists can find rewards in exploring the variants of social systems across cultures as a key to the understanding of processes which take place in a traditional milieu. The analytical concepts gained in inquiries of this type apply to an area of variations which comprise divergent social systems or elements of such systems. The variability of functions in cross cultural perspective constitutes a genuine sociological dimension as legitimate as is the variability of roles within one social system. It is no mere accident that the comparative method has flourished not in the United States, which has offered the most responsive environment for sociological studies, but in countries in which traditions had been more resistant to change. It was in England, Germany, and France, where a more rigidly clustered allocation of social functions continued well into the 20th Century, that the interest in the conditions of social variability found a more attractive outlet on the cross cultural scene than in the domestic arena.

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1 Das Original befindet sich im Archiv für die Geschichte der Soziologie in Österreich, Graz, Nachlass Ernest Manheim, Signatur 31/5. Zuerst abgedruckt in: Ernő – Ernst – Ernest Manheim. Soziologe, Anthropologe, Komponist. Zum 100. Geburtstag. Katalog zur Ausstellung anläßlich des 100. Geburtstags an der Universitätsbibliothek Graz vom 3. März bis 14. April 2000. Herausgegeben von Reinhard Müller. Graz: Universitätsbibliothek Graz [2000], S. 98-100.
Handout für seine Studenten an der University of Kansas in Kansas City, Mo. Anm. R.M.

2 Hammurapi, 1728-1686 König von Babylon, dessen „Kodex Hammurapi“ als wichtigste Rechtssammlung des Alten Orients gilt. Anm. R.M.

3 Aristoteles (*Stagira 384, †bei Chalkis 322), griechischer Philosoph, gilt als Mitbegründer der klassischen philosophischen Tradition des Abendlandes. Anm. R.M.

4 Auguste Comte (*Montpellier 1798, †Paris 1857), französischer Soziologe, einer der Mitbegründer der Soziologie als eigenständiger Wissenschaftsdisziplin. Anm. R.M.

5 Herodes I., genannt der Große (*um 73, †4 v.Chr.), Herrscher des jüdischen Staates, der laut Bibel eine Volkszählung durchführen ließ. Anm. R.M.

6 Wilhelm I., genannt der Eroberer (William I. the Conqueror; *Falaise 1027, †Rouen 1087), Normanne, seit 1066 König von England; gab 1086 den Auftrag für das „Domesday Book“, eine Art Grundbuch mit Informationen über Eigentümer und deren Besitzverhältnisse. Anm. R.M.

7 Kong Fu Zi, genannt Konfuzius (d.i. Kong Qiu; *Stadtstaat Lu 551, †Lu 479), chinesischer Philosoph. Anm. R.M.
8 Platon (d.i. Aristokles; *Athen oder Ägina 428/ 427, †Athen 348/347), griechischer Philosoph. Anm. R.M.
9 Sir Thomas More (latin. Morus; *London 1478, †London 1535), englischer Staatsmann und Humanist, vom Papst 1886 selig- und 1935 heiliggesprochen. Anm. R.M.
10 Thomas Hobbes (*Westport [Malmesbury], Wiltshire 1588, †Hardwick Hall 1679), englischer Philosoph und Staatstheoretiker. Anm. R.M.
11 Justus Möser (*Osnabrück 1720, †Osnabrück 1794), deutscher Publizist und Historiker; vgl. sein mehrfach wiederaufgelegtes Buch: Osnabrückische Geschichte. 2 Bände. Osnabrück: Schmid 1768. Anm. R.M.