Theoretical Ideas and Analysis as the Focus of Graduate Education

GIDEON SJÖBERG AND TED R. VAUGHAN

An emphasis on theoretical ideas and analysis in graduate education highlights the contributions that sociologists can make to the major issues of the modern world. Such a strategy will bring sociology into a dialogue with the intellectual community and policy makers and will provide a greater degree of focus to a now disparate enterprise. Sociologists can make a distinctive contribution in addressing major social issues if they recognize the rightful relationship between theoretical ideas and research procedures.

Although there is considerable disagreement about the state of the discipline, we believe that, if viewed in historical context, contemporary sociology is mired in an intellectual malaise and suffers from a paralysis of theoretical imagination. This is reflected in the marginal, limited contributions of the discipline to the discussions and debates regarding the great issues in the modern world—nuclear war, the potential for a peace economy, human rights (including the issue of apartheid), and international stratification (including such issues as world hunger), to take note of but a few of these major problems. If sociology is to recapture its rightful place in the intellectual community, it must elevate its concern with theoretical ideas and scholarship to a central place in graduate education.

Having stated the problem boldly, we shall now highlight the historical context of our argument. Modern sociology had its origins in the efforts to make theoretical sense of the empirical realities associated with the great transformation in the West. Marx, Durkheim and Weber—as well as lesser figures such as Spencer—all were concerned with the reasons for, and the consequence of, this great social upheaval. More generally, they were intent upon understanding the nature of human existence in the context of modernity.

If we examine the history of sociology more narrowly—notably, American
sociology since World War II—we find an uncomfortable coexistence of two major traditions. One tradition, prominent in the 1950s and the early 1960s, was represented in the writing of such sociologists as Pitirim Sorokin, Talcott Parsons, Daniel Bell, C. Wright Mills, and David Riesman. In diverse fashion, they sought to analyze large-scale social trends and to inform the nature of public discourse. Their works reached well beyond the confines of sociology and, in the case of Mills and Bell, significantly shaped the manner in which public debate on certain issues was conducted.

The other major sociological tradition has had at least two wings. One involves a concern with small-scale, discrete investigations. This building block approach assumes that if enough bricks (research findings) are created, even without an overall theoretical blueprint, the bricks will automatically come together to produce a magnificent sociological edifice (knowledge). This orientation has been most dramatically reflected in the so-called Wisconsin school.

Another wing of the empiricist or positivist tradition has been articulated in the works of Jack P. Gibbs, Hubert Blalock, and other formal theorists, who have called upon sociologists to integrate these discrete projects through some form of logico-deductive reasoning. At best, this approach has met with limited success.

In the past two decades sociology has moved steadily away from large-scale theoretical concerns in the direction of more and more discrete investigations. This trend has been accentuated by increased specialization within the discipline. Thus, in its most extreme form, we witness an emphasis upon technical expertise in statistics and mathematical model building directed to narrow topics published in specialized journals.

Admittedly, there are important countervailing trends. There has been something of a revival of the qualitative tradition. Yet, many of its practitioners are also trapped in a concern with narrowly focused research within their particular area of specialization. Moreover, there is a considerable effort to formalize the process of qualitative analysis so as to emulate more closely the hard science dimension of sociology.

The most significant countervailing trend is that which seeks to sustain a concern with the realm of ideas and scholarly analysis. There are still a few sociologists who are committed to innovative theoretical analysis of major topics that are central to the late twentieth century. In our judgment two stand out—Immanuel Wallerstein and Robert Bellah. Wallerstein, utilizing an inductive approach in his historical analysis, has—through his world system perspective—provided academicians and non-academicians alike with a new way of examining the global order. In a very different manner, Bellah stands out among sociologists in bringing the issue of meaning in life back to the forefront of intellectual and broad public debate.

Despite these counterrtrends, the technical tradition is well entrenched. The dominance of this perspective may be further noted in most of the textbooks in theory and research methods in sociology. Except for advocates of the logico-deductive format, who strive to link theory and methods in very narrow terms, the