Review Essay: Reflections on Reynolds

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Over the course of more than three decades, Larry Reynolds has presented a series of thoughtful critiques of the sociological enterprise as it is organized in the United States. This essay will focus on two volumes published recently by Larry Reynolds on the sociology of sociology (hereafter referred to as “Reflexive” and “Self-Analytical”), which are essential reading for anyone who is remotely concerned about the state of American sociology. Throughout the pages of these texts, Larry Reynolds raises important questions about the fundamental nature of sociology. His basic premise is that the assumptions underlying the discipline interfere directly with the self-correcting activity of a scientific field. Instead of resembling a science, research generated by members of the discipline typically serves as a proponent of state-sponsored capitalism (Reflexive, pp. 12–22). Reynolds believes this direction leads to a bureaucratically successful discipline that is intellectually weak. To reverse this direction, Reynolds argues for a thorough critique and period of renewal for American sociology (Reflexive, pp. 204–232).

Disciplinary Culture

Disciplines, like organizations, possess a culture that rests on fundamental premises—i.e., basic underlying assumptions about how members manage their external environment and internal integration. According to Edgar Schein (1992: 22), these basic assumptions—the content of culture—define for the organization's members, “what to pay attention to, what things mean... and what actions to take in various kinds of situations.” In essence, these assumptions subconsciously guide members’ behavior and, over time, perpetuate themselves into stable and predictable patterns. These assumptions are typically not challenged by members—nor are they necessarily apparent; instead, they are taken-for-granted perspectives that define the organization.

Implicit throughout Reynolds’ work is a view that American sociology is characterized by a pattern of three basic assumptions. As sociologists attempt to solve their problems of academic relevance, these assumptions are reinforced among its membership at an organiza-
tional level. The first of these assumptions aligns the foundations of American sociology with the prevailing social order of the United States. Specifically, a democracy—an elected representative government—is assumed to be the most efficient and egalitarian social order. Second, within this social order, individuals are motivated by rational, self-interest (see, e.g., Coleman 1990). Capitalism, as a rational choice mechanism based on self-interest, is further assumed to be a necessary condition for an efficient democracy. Third, social problems can be corrected within the context of the prevailing social order. Thus, within a social order characterized by a democratically elected government and the collective pursuit of individual rational self-interests, the purpose of sociology is to solve, scientifically, the problems resulting from this social order.

To understand the state of American sociology, Reynolds argues that we must understand our social context—i.e., the history, values, and basic assumptions underlying our discipline. Placed in an historical context, American sociology emerged during the recurring economic crises of 1880–1900. Early sociologists did not typically challenge the basic assumptions underlying their discipline but, instead, worked to solve social problems within the social context of a capitalistic system. The essays included in Reynolds' books document how persons recognized as the founders of American sociology forged the discipline into being an advocate of a democratic republic within the context of late-nineteenth century capitalism. To illustrate, in the essay on William Sumner (Reflexive: 172–197; repeated in Self-Analytical: 37–64), Reynolds offers evidence that Sumner supported a disciplinary focus on the “harmony between economic conditions and political institutions,” with the intent to maximize optimization of the social order. An essay on the development of sociology (Self-Analytical: 95–113) documents how Franklin Giddings, as the first chair of the sociology department at Columbia University, directed attention toward the study of prevailing social problems. Albion Small and Edward Ross focused on social reforms within the context of the prevailing social order while Lester Ward advocated upper-class benevolence. George Homans' exchange theory is shown to reinforce an image of a rational social order (Self Analytical: 114–123). Moreover, James Coleman’s 1992 presidential address to the ASA is reprinted to illustrate that rational optimization of the social order has been a consistent theme throughout the discipline’s history—largely reinforcing the notion of the sociologist as social engineer. Martin Nicolaus eloquently captures the collective scope of these essays with his contention that the successful sociologist working within this context reinforces the stability of the social order and prevailing power structure (Self-Analytical: 65–70).

Perhaps noteworthy is Reynolds’ inclusion of two chapters on feminism in Self-Analytical. The first (Stacey and Thorne: 427–432) focuses on feminism as a modus operandi of disciplinary and social reform. The second (Smith: 433–436) speaks to the institutional contexts necessary for feminism to flourish. Neither of these essays explores how disciplinary founders are defined or how the social and academic contexts of the early twentieth century effectively omitted women from its institutional history. However, the essay by Smith is more closely aligned with the perspectives of Deegan (1988, 1991) and Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley (1998), who have promoted the position that women involved in the disciplines founding were effectively written out of its history. Nonetheless, while Reynolds might have selected essays that speak more directly to the influence of women in the disciplines early history, the essays, when placed within the overall context of his text, acknowledge, albeit implicitly, that the institutionalization of discipline framed the content of and contributors to sociology.