Boundaries under Construction

Abstract: The success of the new discipline was predicated on canny strategic choices and effective boundary work. Segerstedt and his allies employed an effective rhetorical model, in which contemporary international sociology was described as divided into two distinct traditions – one American and empirical, the other Continental and speculative – with the former proposed as the appropriate choice for Swedish sociologists. Dissenting opinions were effectively suppressed. This struggle served to determine the boundaries between sociology and other, closely related disciplines, thereby creating an exclusive domain. By the 1960s, Swedish sociology was a well-established discipline enjoying wide acceptance and respect. It was distinctly defined and uniform, albeit narrow in scope.

Keywords: Social Science Research Committee; boundary work; George A. Lundberg

During its establishment phase, Torgny T. Segerstedt, the first and long only professor of sociology in Sweden, exercised the greatest influence. His views on sociology dominated in Uppsala and influenced sociologists throughout the country. But his view was not the only one, and it did not become dominant without encountering resistance. On the contrary, there was an ongoing struggle, intense and often harsh, about how to define and pursue sociology in a suitably scientific manner (Larsson & Suolinna, 2009). In fact, this rivalry might be part of the explanation to why the tone of the argument about the core character of sociological research and how it was to be conducted was so harsh.

The decision by parliament to set up chairs in sociology at the state universities in 1947 was based on the recommendations of an advisory panel assembled by the government the year before and known as the Social Science Research Committee (SSRC). Reports from this committee functioned as guidelines for the expansion of the social sciences in the early postwar period. Segerstedt served the committee as expert adviser. Thus, the views on sociology expressed in the inquest reports were largely Segerstedt’s own.

In the broadest sense, according to the SSRC, sociological research has existed for a long time. In the modern, limited sense, however, it has only been conducted in the past century.

Schematically, one must say that this research has been characterized in part by a decidedly speculative, in part markedly empirical orientation. Among representatives for speculative sociology are a number of well-known French and German scientists. The empirical current, on the other hand, has been richly developed in the United States of America. There should be no doubt that when the need to introduce sociology as a scientific discipline in Sweden is under discussion, it is as an empirical science charged with studying modern social conditions. (SOU, 1946:74: 80)

International sociology is thus described as divided into two distinct traditions, one American and empirical and the other Continental and speculative. The kind of sociology Sweden needs to adopt and cultivate is the former.

This description is hardly uncontested. International sociology can more probably be described as dominated by four or five nationally influenced currents – American, German, French, English and perhaps Russian or Italian (cf. Connell, 1997; Wallerstein et al., 1996). Regardless, the committee chose to speak of two traditions, one of which is the obvious choice to meet Swedish needs. This dialectic of two traditions – one