Chapter 15

Fat-Cat Sociology

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THESE REMARKS are not addressed to the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare. This man has agreed voluntarily to serve as a member of a government which is presently fighting a war for survival on two fronts. Imperial wars such as the one against Vietnam are usually two-front wars—one against the foreign subject population, one against the domestic subject population. The Secretary of HEW is a military officer in the domestic front of the war against people. Experience in the Vietnam teach-ins has shown that dialogue between the subject population and its rulers is an exercise in repressive tolerance. It is, in Robert S. Lynd's words, dialogue between chickens and elephants. He holds some power over me—therefore, even if he is wrong in his arguments, he is right; even if I'm right, I'm wrong.

I do address myself to the secretary's audience. There is some hope—even though the hour is very late—that among the members and sympathizers of the sociological profession gathered here there will be some whose life is not so sold and compromised as to be out of their own control to change or amend it.

While the officers of this convention and the previous speaker were having a big meal in the hotel, I was across the street in a cafeteria having a hot dog and two cups of coffee. This may be why my perspective is different.

The ruling elite within your profession is in charge of what is called health, education, and welfare. Those of you who listened passively to what he had to say presumably agreed that this definition—this description of what the man did—carried an accurate message. Yet among you are many, including the hard researchers, who do know better or should know better. The department of which the man is head is more accurately described as the agency which watches over the inequitable distribution of preventable disease, over the funding of domestic propaganda and indoctrination, and over the preservation of a cheap and docile re-
serve labor force to keep everybody else's wages down. He is secretary of
disease, propaganda, and scabbing.

This may be put too strongly for you, but it all depends on where you
look from, where you stand. If you stand inside the Sheraton Hotel these
terms are offensive, but if you gentlemen and ladies would care to step
across the street into Roxbury you might get a different perspective and a
different vocabulary. If you will look at the social world through the eyes
of those who are at the bottom of it, through the eyes of your subject
population (and if you will endow those eyes with the same degree of
clear-sightedness you profess to encourage among yourselves), then you
will get a different conception of the social science to which you are
devoted. That is to say that this assembly here tonight is a kind of lie. It is
not a coming together of those who study and know, or promote study
and knowledge of, social reality. It is a conclave of high and low priests,
scribes, intellectual valets, and their innocent victims, engaged in the mu-
tual affirmation of a falsehood, in common consecration of a myth.

Sociology is not now and never has been any kind of objective seek-
ing out of social truth or reality. Historically, the profession is an out-
growth of nineteenth-century European traditionalism and conservatism,
wedded to twentieth-century American corporation liberalism.

That is to say that the eyes of sociologists, with few but honorable (or
honorable but few) exceptions, have been turned downward, and their
palms upward.

Eyes down, to study the activities of the lower classes of the subject
population—those activities which created problems for the smooth ex-
ercise of governmental hegemony. Since the class of rulers in this society
identifies itself as the society itself—in the same way that Davis and
Moore in their infamous 1945 propaganda article identified the society
with those who run it—therefore the problems of the ruling class get
defined as social problems. The profession has moved beyond the tear-
jerking stage today: "social problems" is no longer the preferred term;
but the underlying perspective is the same. The things that are sociologi-
cally "interesting" are the things that are interesting to those who stand at
the top of the mountain and feel the tremors of an earthquake.

Sociologists stand guard in the garrison and report to its masters on
the movements of the occupied populace. The more adventurous soci-
ologists don the disguise of the people and go out to mix with the peas-
ants in the "field," returning with books and articles that break the pro-
tective secrecy in which a subjugated population wraps itself, and make it
more accessible to manipulation and control.

The sociologist as a researcher in the employ of his employers is
precisely a kind of spy. The proper exercise of the profession is all-too-
often different from the proper exercise of espionage only in the rela-
tively greater electronic sophistication of the latter’s techniques.

Is it an accident, to name only a few examples here, that industrial
sociology arose in a context of rising “labor troubles,” that political econ-
omy grew when elections became less predictable, or that the sociology
of race relations is flourishing now?

As sociologists you owe your jobs to the union organizers who got
beat up, to the voters who got fed up, to the black people who got shot
up. Sociology has risen to its present prosperity and eminence on the
blood and bones of the poor and oppressed; it owes its prestige in this
society to its putative ability to give information and advice to the ruling
class of this society about ways and means to keep the people down.

The professional eyes of the sociologist are on the down people, and
the professional palm of the sociologist is stretched toward the up peo-
ple. It is no secret and no original discovery that the major and dominant
sectors of sociology today are sold—computers, codes, and question-
naires—to the people who have enough money to afford this ornament,
and who see a useful purpose being served by keeping hundreds of
intelligent men and women occupied in the pursuit of harmless trivia—
and off the streets. I am not asserting that every individual researcher
sells his brain for a bribe—although many of us know of research proj-
ects where that has happened literally—but merely that the dominant
structure of the profession, in which all of its members are to some
extent socialized, is a structure in which service to the ruling class of this
society is the highest form of honor and achievement. (The speaker’s
table today is an illustration.) The honored sociologist, the big-status soci-
ologist, the jet-set sociologist, the fat-contract sociologist, the book-a-year
sociologist, the sociologist who always wears the livery, the suit and tie,
of his masters—this is the type of sociologist who sets the tone and the
ethic of the profession, and it is this type of sociologist who is nothing
more or less than a house servant in the corporate establishment, a white
intellectual Uncle Tom not only for this government and ruling class, but
for any government and ruling class—which explains to my mind why
Soviet sociologists and American sociologists are finding, after all, they
have something in common.

To raise and educate and train generation after generation of the
brightest minds this country’s so-called educational system has let survive
to this sociological ethic of servility, to socialize them into this sociocracy,
is a criminal undertaking: one of the many felonies against youth com-
mitted by those who set themselves up in a loco parentis situation that is
usually far more oppressive than any real parental relation. The crime which graduate schools perpetrate against the minds and morals of young people is all the more inexcusable because of the enormous liberating potential of knowledge about social life. Unlike knowledge about trees and stones, knowledge about people directly affects what we are, what we do, what we may hope for. The corporate rulers of this society would not be spending as much money as they do for knowledge, if knowledge did not confer power. So far, sociologists have been schlepping this knowledge that confers power along a one-way chain, taking knowledge from the people, giving knowledge to the rulers.

What if that machinery were reversed? What if the habits, problems, secrets, and unconscious motivations of the wealthy and powerful were daily scrutinized by a thousand systematic researchers; were hourly pried into, analyzed, and cross referenced; were tabulated and published in a hundred inexpensive mass-circulation journals and written so that even the fifteen-year-old high school dropout could understand them and predict the actions of his landlord, manipulate and control him?

Would the war in Vietnam have been possible if the structure, function, and motion of the U.S. imperial establishment had been a matter of detailed public knowledge ten years ago?

Sociology has worked to create and increase the inequitable distribution of knowledge; it has worked to make the power structure relatively more powerful and knowledgeable, and thereby to make the subject population relatively more impotent and ignorant.

In the late summer of 1968, while the political party currently in power is convening amidst barbed wire and armored cars, the sociological profession ought to consider itself especially graced and blessed that its own deliberations can still be carried on with a police-to-participant ratio smaller than one to one. This may be because the people of the USA do not know how much of their current troubles stem, to borrow Lord Keynes's phase, from the almost-forgotten scribblings of an obscure professor of sociology. Or it may be that sociology is still so crude that it represents no clear and present danger.

In 1968 it is late, very late; too late to say once again what Robert S. Lynd and C. Wright Mills and hundreds of others have long said: that the profession must reform itself. In view of the forces and the money that stand behind sociology as an excercise in intellectual servility, it is unrealistic to expect the body of the profession to make an about face.

If the barbed wire goes up around the ASA convention in a future year, most of its members will still not know why.