

FAT-CAT SOCIOLOGY

by Martin Nicolaus

This speech was given in August 1968 at the Annual Meetings of the American Sociological Association in Boston. Martin Nicolaus was on the platform with Wilbur Cohen, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare. Columbia University graduate students and the New University Conference sociologists came together and formed the Sociology Liberation Movement. They led a protest against Cohen's appearance as a major speaker and requested that Nicolaus speak. It is not incidental that the events in Boston coincided with the Democratic Convention in Chicago.

Forty years later the ASA is again meeting in Boston. It is unlikely that the Democratic Convention in Denver this year will be as eventful as Chicago in 1968, yet it promises to be nonetheless historic. Both the profession and discipline of sociology has greatly changed since 1968 evidenced by many of the insurgents of 1968 now holding the highest positions within the ASA and playing key roles in defining the discipline as well.

To mark the 40th anniversary of the Sociology Liberation Movement and to reflect on how far we have come and how far we still need to go, it is indeed worth (re-) reading Martin Nicolaus' classic speech on the state of sociology in 1968.

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 establishment 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, a 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 reserve 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 not a coming-together of those who study or promote the 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 mutual affirmation of a falsehood, in common consecration of a myth.

Sociology is not now and never has been any kind of objective seeking-out of social truth or reality. Historically, the profession is an outgrowth 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 exercise of governmental power. Since the class of rulers in this society identifies itself as the society, in the same way that Davis and Moore in their infamous 1945 propaganda article identified the society with those who run it, 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 sociologically "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 their masters on the movements of the occupied populace. The more adventurous sociologists don the disguise of the people and go out to mix with the peasants in the "field", returning with books and articles that break the protective 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 relatively 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 economy 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 people. It is no secret and no original discovery that the major and dominant sectors of sociology today are sold-computers, codes, and questionnaires-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 projects 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 sociologist, 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 so many years of isolation that, 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 in this sociological ethic of servility, to socialize them into this soclocracy, is a criminal undertaking: one of the many felonies against youth committed 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 drop-out could understand them and predict the actions of his landlord to manipulate and control him?

Would the War in Vietnam have been possible if the structure, function, and motion of the US 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 phrase -- 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 exercise 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.