Sociology in secondary schools*)

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Noot van de redactie. In het licht van de hier te lande gevoerde discussie over aard en inhoud van het vak maatschappijleer, leek het ons instructief, de hieronder afgedrukte bijdrage van Amerikaanse bodem aan de lezers voor te leggen. Bij alle verschillen in constellatie tussen het onderwijs in beide landen blijkt uit dit artikel ook een duidelijke verwantschap in problematiek, waar het de relatie met de sociologie betreft.

It is the thesis of this paper that sociology should be taught to teachers of history, mathematics, and literature. By this route, sociology should reach students in secondary schools more effectively than by its establishment as yet another subject matter. Sociology has developed into a mature discipline. The scientific approach to the study of society has yielded a conceptual scheme, a body of knowledge, and a system of methods of inquiry that rate a place in the curriculum of the secondary school system. Efforts are now under way to provide for such a place.

Four years ago, in 1961, the American Sociological Association established a Committee on the Social Studies Curriculum of American Secondary Schools. This Committee has not expressed itself on the desirability of separate high-school courses in sociology but has set up a special organization entitled "Sociological Resources for Secondary Schools". The work of this organization is now in progress, and it appears to focus upon the design of instructional material.

Concern with the introduction of sociology in secondary schools has spread to the members of the various regional and specialized societies, and is reflected in the programs of their annual meetings. A section of the annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Social Problems in Montreal in August 1964 was devoted to this

*) The theme of this article has first been presented under the title "Sociology for Secondary School Teachers of History, Mathematics and Literature" at the annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Social Problems in Montreal on August 30, 1964.

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matter, as was a section of the annual meeting of the Eastern Sociological Society in New York City in April 1965.

It is the purpose of this article to question the advisability of introducing sociology in secondary schools as an independent subject matter. Instead, *sociology should be introduced into the school system through teachers of mathematics, history, and literature.* An understanding of sociology requires a certain level of maturity and sophistication. Immature and poorly educated students may be taught to mouth sociological concepts like magic shibboleth but such education will, at best, leave them indifferent. At worst, this will deter further study. Professor John Dewey articulated what educators have always sensed when he pronounced that “acquaintance with” should precede “knowledge about” because nothing is more barren than knowledge about something one is completely unacquainted with. It is therefore hardly surprising if students profit little from knowledge about the scientific study of society before they have become acquainted with their society and its culture.

We have several indications that it is not sound practice to teach sociology to the poorly educated and the immature: Few, if any, of America’s leading sociologists have received their undergraduate training in sociology. Nearly all competent sociologists came to their graduate work in sociology from undergraduate work in economics, history, mathematics, psychology, and other disciplines. Conversely, the results of undergraduate training are discouraging. Only a fraction of the students exposed to introductory courses in sociology take further courses, and those who do seem to learn very little about their subject matter. Graduate students in sociology who majored as undergraduates in subjects other than sociology are a great deal more successful in their careers as sociologists than students who had majored in sociology as undergraduates.

We have no empirical data on the background of American sociologists that antedate the late fifties. A survey conducted at the end of the fifties suggests unequivocally that those who concentrate as undergraduates on subjects other than sociology do better as graduate students than those who as undergraduates major in sociology. According to this survey former undergraduate majors in sociology constitute 67 percent of all beginning graduate students, 49 percent of those with M.A.’s, and only 41 percent of Ph.D.’s. These data suggest that among graduate students in sociology those with an undergraduate major in sociology will be less likely to complete their graduate work successfully than those who had done their undergraduate work in other fields than sociology. It is noteworthy that only 1 percent of all M.A.’s, but 7 percent of all Ph.D.’s in sociology had majored as undergraduates in economics.

We have no statistics on the absolute number of graduate students who fail to obtain their M.A., and of those who obtain their M.A. without going on to the Ph.D. It is, however, highly significant that among beginning graduate students in sociology those who had majored in sociology as undergraduates are less likely to succeed than those who had not. It is furthermore noteworthy that among beginning graduate students

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2) Ibid.
students sociologists obtain lower scores on the Graduate Record Examinations than
graduate majors from most of 15 other academic disciplines. Among them sociolo-
gists rank 13th in verbal aptitude and 15th in quantitative aptitude; in the former
they top majors in biology, geology, and "education", and in the latter they only top
majors in "education"3). It is therefore not too surprising that the rigors of graduate
work seem to favor undergraduate majors from other disciplines over those from so-
ciology throughout their academic careers — even in sociology.

Elbridge Sibley comments on the low quality of undergraduate majors in sociology:
"No statistics are available to show how many of the future sociologists apart from
a tiny majority who have majored in scientific disciplines, have had during their
undergraduate years any serious exposure to rigorous scientific study, but it is certain
that many have taken only the undemanding kind of science courses customarily
offered for students not primarily interested in science. The curiosity about social
problems or zeal for social reform which typical students bring with them to graduate
school is not as a rule accompanied by a strongly scientific orientation or a desirable
amount of training in skills which is basic to science in general"4).

The poor calibre of students who major in sociology is related to the poor quality of
sociology courses offered to undergraduates. The above survey also takes note
of the failure of introductory courses at the undergraduate level to attract majors.
Thus it is cited "as an example" that one university reports one thousand enrollments
in introductory sociology courses but only 15 juniors and seniors majoring in sociolo-
gy"5). Thus we find that introductory courses in sociology motivate only a minute
fraction of the students to major in sociology, and we find further that undergraduate
majors in sociology are less successful than others in graduate study. Only a fraction
of the students who take introductory sociology proceed to take additional courses.
A survey of 437 students from twenty-five institutions in the mid-western United
States suggests that students who take such courses do no learn much sociology6).
These students had all taken at least three courses in sociology, 5.3 on the average,
and seventy-seven percent of them were planning a career in sociology or considered
doing so. Yet these students exhibited a great deal of ignorance and confusion regard-
ing sociology7).

One out of seven students of this sample mentioned anthropology, social work, and
psychology among the subfields of sociology8). When asked to name five eminent
American sociologists the students named not only Max Weber and Durkheim but
also Toynbee, Freud, H. G. Wells, and Charles Darwin. Worse yet, even the students
who could name prominent American sociologists have only rarely read anything pro-
duced by the scholars they identified9). The author quite properly considers his find-

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3) Ibid., pages 80-81.
4) Ibid., page 88.
5) Ibid.
7) Ibid., page 24
8) Ibid.
9) Ibid., page 31
ings a confirmation of the statement that “A large proportion of graduate students in sociology... enter the graduate schools with little specific preparation for what lies ahead” 10).

On one hand, the difficulties experienced with the presentation of sociology to undergraduate students raises questions regarding the advisability of even considering its introduction in secondary schools. On the other hand, the schools have to prepare their charges for citizenship in a rapidly changing society from which distance — and with it cultural isolation — have vanished. For the task the traditional disciplines that prepared for life in a more static and culturally contained society hardly suffice. Today educated men and women need the insights and — even more important — the techniques and methods of inquiry of sociology as aids in their efforts to orient themselves in our pluralist global society. While sociology may not have good prospects as an autonomous school subject, it might well have excellent prospects if introduced in the context of other subjects that form already part of the secondary school curriculum.

It is the purpose of this paper to propose that sociology be introduced into the curriculum of secondary schools through the subjects already taught rather than as a new subject. History, mathematics, and literature might well serve to bring sociology into the classroom. In turn, the injection of sociology should endow these subjects with added significance and appeal, and at the same time bring them into more meaningful relationship to one another. If offered as a separate subject matter, sociology would be merely another elective or requirement; for the pupils of secondary schools, its significance would most likely be well outside of their experience and beyond their grasp. Teachers of history, mathematics, and literature might well welcome instruction in sociology for themselves as a source for the enrichment of their own subject matter.

It is probably worse than useless to expose any student to the study of sociology who has no knowledge of history. The phenomena that are the concern of the sociologist have to be understood in terms of their genesis. It is, therefore, no accident that the founding fathers of sociology as well as the men who have made the most significant contributions to the discipline have all been competent historians. Conversely, all competent historians, whether they are aware of it or not, are also sociologists. Those who view history simply as “a record of all that happened”, and who are unable to abstract from totality what is pertinent to specific themes are mere chroniclers rather than historians. The methods of inquiry developed in sociology can help the historians in their work by sensitizing them to the significance of the problems they are dealing with, and by enhancing their self-awareness of what they are about.

For all these reasons, history teachers should be encouraged to acquaint themselves with sociological theory. They will find such theory pertinent to the understanding of social stratification, race and ethnic relations, complex organization, urban sociology, social movements, and other social phenomena of consequence for the historian.

History teachers with a grasp of sociology should find themselves in a better position to render their subject meaningful, and their students should derive from them a better foundation for a systematic study of sociology than if they were presented with sociology in a vacuum.

Competence in statistics is essential for sociologists. Many sociologists employ statistics in their research, all need it in their study and evaluation of research results provided by others. Too many sociologists know just enough statistics to apply formulae like cooking recipes without any understanding of the underlying rationale. As a consequence, the literature abounds with reported misapplications and misinterpretations of correlation coefficients and other statistical concepts. A grasp of finite mathematics and theory of probability should provide a sound basis for the subsequent study of statistics.\(^{11}\)

Familiarity with the methodology of sociology and other behavioral sciences should provide a competent teacher of mathematics with the basis for the application of mathematics to social problems. A solid background in mathematics that is applicable to sociology and the other behavioral sciences should provide a better basis for subsequent specialization in sociology than subject matter courses. These, at best, can only convey the findings of research without references to the rationale and the techniques by which such research was carried out.

The compatibility of literature and sociology is well established. Teachers of sociology and other behavioral sciences draw upon literature as readily as upon life-in-the-concrete for illustrations that illuminate sociological theories and concepts. Conversely, teachers of literature should find a background in sociology and other behavioral sciences helpful in their efforts to interpret literature to their classes. An instance of the latter is presented in a manual issued by the English Demonstration Center in metropolitan Cleveland. This manual, under the title “Concepts of Man”, shows English teachers how they may enrich their discussion of literature in order to make their presentation more stimulating. Under the title “A Unit On Man and Culture”, Betty Lou Miller demonstrates how Huckleberry Finn’s values clash with the practices of the slaveholding society which in turn clash with its own basic values of democracy and justice. Conflicts that result from differences between two cultures are demonstrated in this project by references to *Light in the Forest* and *Anna and the King of Siam*. Pearl Buck’s *The Good Earth* is presented so as to illustrate problems of social mobility within one’s society.\(^{12}\) This demonstration project to acquaint English teachers with social sciences has been undertaken at the initiative of English teachers in order to stimulate interest in literature rather than in social sciences.

Teachers of English literature interested in the behavioral sciences and teachers of the behavioral sciences interested in sociological and psychological interpretation of


\(^{12}\) Betty Lou Miller, “A Unit on Man and Culture,” *Concepts of Man*, mimeographed by the Project English Demonstration Center of Euclid Junior High School and Western Reserve University - 1963.
literature should find the writings of Leo Lowenthal and Eric Erikson helpful. Lowenthal presents as a theme "the changing image of man in relation to society as revealed in some of the great literature of the Western world from the end of the sixteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth". He accomplishes this through interpreted selections from Cervantes and other Spanish writers of his time, Shakespeare, the French dramatists, Goethe, Ibsen, and Knut Hamsun. Lowenthal's interpretations relate these writings to the key concepts of the behavioral sciences.13) Erikson creates a synthesis of psychoanalysis and sociology in his study of "the ego's roots in social organization". In his exploration of the processes and problems of socialization under diverse cultural conditions, Erikson draws freely upon diverse literary sources.14)

An exemplary collection of readings from the literature has been brought together by Lewis A. Coser under the title "Sociology Through Literature". Ninety selected readings of an average length of about four pages are divided into sixteen different sections. These sections serve to illustrate sociological concepts such as "Culture", "Anomie", "Social Control", "Stratification", and others.15) A great deal of care has gone into the selections and their arrangement into sections. The result is a superb collection of illustrations of the significance and applications of the respective sixteen key concepts. Coser's book should assist English teachers in their efforts to familiarize themselves with the problems involved in bringing sociological concepts into their literary interpretations.

Professor Coser's reader is, however, of doubtful value to the students themselves because of the extreme fragmentation of the literary pieces presented. Since student experience is too fragmented already, educators should strive to provide synthesis rather than further fragmentation. In short, students should read unabridged works from end to end rather than fragmented selections. All worthwhile literary creations provide for interpretations through sociological and psychological concepts. The affinity of sociology and literature is denied by devotees of an outmoded pseudopositivism. From this quarter comes the analogy that literature is as useful to the sociologist as poetry about flowers or stars is to the botanist or the astronomer. This analogy does not stand up for two reasons:

(a) Social scientists are concerned with culture in all its manifestations. Their interest encompasses therefore, the activity and motives of the poet and the expressions of his subjective experience — as well as the motives and the activity of the natural scientist, for that matter.

(b) Literature often reflects society and social relations in such ways that the sociologist is often able to study them through their literary mirror images. Writers often abstract from the totality of human experience certain essential features. They thereby produce writings that are especially useful in the teaching of sociological concepts.

15) Lewis A. Coser, Sociology Through Literature, An Introductory Reader, Englewood Cliffs,
Thus sociology is as unhospitable to those unfamiliar with literature as to those ignorant of history.

English teachers with an adequate grasp of sociology might be expected to infuse their interpretation of literature with sociological insights and concepts at their own discretion. For them as well as for teachers of history and mathematics, instruction in sociology should serve as "a light by their feet and not as a hand guiding through the darkness".

CONCLUSION

Sociology should be introduced into the curriculum of the secondary schools but not as an autonomous subject matter. Instead, sociological knowledge and sociological methods of inquiry should be conveyed through history, mathematics, and literature. This should eliminate the problem of selecting special teachers for autonomous sociology courses and the task of providing contents for the courses. It would be more difficult to supply sociology teachers for secondary schools than to instruct in sociology, the teachers of history, mathematics, and literature.

Close contact between sociologists and secondary schools should be of benefit to both. Involvement in the problems of secondary education should assist sociologists in their task of diagnosing the state of affairs and the trends in their society. At the same time, such close contact should improve the rapport between sociologists and the school system.16)

Sociology is basically a humanistic discipline. Its methods of inquiry are, however, scientific rather than intuitive or impressionistic. This pronounced dual character places it beyond the grasp of the immature and the poorly educated. The injection of sociology into the teaching of history, literature, and mathematics in secondary schools should help to place sociology within the reach of a larger number of students earlier in life. Also, the infusion of sociology into diverse disciplines might well serve to bring them closer together in the students' mind, because the resulting overlapping of the subject matters should undo some of the departmental fragmentation of the educational experience.