Sociology in the Netherlands: Problems and Opportunities

Theodore Caplow

National and local differentiation is characteristic of sociology. Although we may speak of Austrian economics or Russian psychology or British anthropology, there is no other branch of social science in which the scholar's location makes as much difference in his work. National and regional viewpoints may develop in any field of investigation, but the coloration that the sociologist takes from his environment is particularly strong. He cannot help visualizing the major categories of social experience in local costume, so to speak, and even when he defines his terms rigorously they carry parochical overtones.

Such commitments are unavoidable. They distort the observation of local phenomena and at the same time, they provide sources of illumination for the discipline as a whole.

The appraisal of alternative lines of development for a national sociology must take account of at least five of its current aspects:

1. Resources in men, institutions, and equipment, considered both quantitatively and qualitatively. In most countries, the facilities for academic training are centrally important.

2. Orientation to the communications network of the total discipline. Language problems must be treated under this heading, particularly as they affect the readership of foreign books and journals and the circulation of national journals abroad.

3. The role of sociologists in the country's scientific structure, for example, their position in academic and government institutions.

4. The obligations imposed on sociologists by their society, both with respect to the solution of practical problems and the consideration of theoretical issues that have special relevance.

5. The contribution the national sociology can make to the discipline as a whole because of distinctive elements in its own intellectual history.

In the remainder of this brief paper, I shall discuss sociology in the Netherlands according to this schema, hoping that the defects of my factual knowledge will be somewhat offset by the objectivity of an outside observer.

My impressions of Dutch sociology are largely based on my experience as a visiting professor at the sociological Institute of Utrecht ten years ago. At that time, it was still possible for a visitor to meet everyone involved in the sociological enterprise in the Netherlands. I had the privilege of working closely with Kruijt and Groenman at Utrecht and of meeting frequently with Van Heek, Den Hollander, Hofstee, and a number of doctoral students, like Van Doorn and Lammers, who have since advanced to chairs of their own. These men appeared very much a cadre for the recruitment and training of a larger professional group.
At Utrecht, the excellence of the library, the elaborate administrative structure, research and clerical assistance above American standards, the enthusiasm and single-mindedness of the students, and the multiplying contacts between the Institute and non-academic institutions — all suggested the prospect of a rapid but orderly expansion. Elsewhere in the country, the meetings of Isonevo, the wide readership of this journal and other sociological publications, the sky-rocketing demand for applied social research, and the announcement, almost monthly, of new university positions, reinforced the impression of headlong but disciplined expansion. I had taught in France a short time before, where the forces of academic conservatism were successfully resisting the creation of a single new chair in sociology. The contrast was stimulating. Even American sociology, which developed under favorable conditions, had a demi-monde reputation among its sister disciplines until after the Second World War. Dutch sociology, emerging late, was able to forego the climb up the ladder of academic respectability. To the students, the public, and those who approved institutional budgets, sociology combined all sorts of attractive qualities, appearing both avant-garde and authoritative at the same time. In proportion to population, sociology was launched in the Netherlands with a higher level of support than anywhere else in the world.

Its place in the global network of the discipline was equally unique. The English-language collection in the library at 14 Trans was small but extremely well-selected. Very few departments of sociology in the United States have working libraries of equal quality for their staffs. But in addition, the library at Utrecht had three other collections (Dutch, German, French) of equivalent excellence, and all of them were constantly in use. In contrast to American students, who are expected to learn just enough French and German to satisfy the doctoral requirement and then to put foreign languages aside with a sigh of relief, or the French and German students whose linguistic training stops forever in secondary school, my Dutch students read English and French with facility, and German as a matter of course. They stood at a confluence of the major streams of sociological literature, with equal access to them all.

Not only books, but people were accessible. In one short interval, René Koenig came from Cologne, Georges Friedmann from Paris, and David Glass from London, to be greeted by Dutch students as familiar figures. Those students who chose to take part of their training abroad could choose the Sorbonne or Columbia with equanimity, secure in the knowledge that no scholarly chauvinism would prevent their using what they had learned when they came home.

In one respect, however, this strength becomes a weakness. Few sociologists in the Netherlands write my foreign language as well or nearly as well as their own. Most of their best work appears in Dutch and reaches only a local audience. In this, they resemble their colleagues the world over. We have no modern substitute for medieval Latin, and the man who writes more than one language well is a rarity anywhere. Linguistic pride sometimes obscures these facts. Whoever reads English is presumed to write it as easily. This is absurd, but sufficient to discourage Dutch scholars from having their works translated. They are known to be fluent in English. If they write in Dutch, it is by choice. If they needed translation, they would do it them-
selves. Therefore, very little is translated. Although Dutch sociology receives a high input of communication from other countries, its output is almost negligible. Most of its research and theorizing remains hidden at home, which entails a double disadvantage. The rest of us derive little benefit from this impressive body of work which, in turn, is never fully reviewed and criticized. Thus, unnecessarily, the sociologist in the Netherlands stands half in and half out of the communications network of the discipline as a whole.

As a participant in his own society, the Dutch sociologist has certain significant attributes. His prestige as professor or doctor or even doctorandus is very high. Few countries so often select professors as cabinet ministers and ambassadors. In no other European country does an academic man receive equivalent deference, almost obesiance, from the public. The real incomes of Dutch sociologists are relatively large, even without taking into account the custom of holding multiple appointments. The sociological institutes are unusually autonomous with respect to the supervision of their students, the establishment and revision of their curricula, and the conduct of empirical research.

The price of these privileges is personal and social responsibility. The responsible attitude sits naturally on the typical Dutch sociologist. In contrast to countries where sociologists are rebels against, or at least critics of, the established order, he prefers to serve it faithfully, assuming duties towards government, church, party, and even the nation at large. It is partly for this reason that he tends to restrict himself to the study of Dutch society and its problems. Although his curiosity may range wider, his duty lies at home, and there are always friends and colleagues ready to remind him that community development in the polder areas has more pressing interest for them and for him than modernization in the Near East or role conflict in Japan. The great sociographic tradition of Steinmetz owed a good deal to this conception of sociological responsibility and still serves to reinforce it.

The obligation to study one’s own society first, and perhaps exclusively, does not seem oppressive for Dutch sociologists. This is perhaps because their country contains a set of unusually interesting problems, presented under optimum conditions for observation, as if designed for the convenience and edification of the investigator. As examples of such problems (but there are many more) we may note the following:

Dutch society is heavily compartmented by religious and political affiliations. For some purposes, the compartments can almost be viewed as separate nations. In a manner that is generally understood by sociologists, but has not yet been fully analyzed, the rigid internal barriers contribute to national cohesion.

The system of social stratification is rather intricate. It takes account of lineage, education, occupation, income, and personal achievement, sensitively weighted, and it limits vertical mobility severely, by the current standards of western Europe and North America. Yet the level of aspiration remains high, and deviance rather low, although competition is intense, rewards are limited, and withdrawal from competition is heavily sanctioned.

All the phenomena of urbanism take on special interest when examined in the
Netherlands, where migration is effectively controlled by the central authorities and the factor of distance is reduced nearly to zero by geography and modern transportation.

Problems like these illustrate how certain types of analysis are inherently simplified in this setting. Taken in conjunction with extraordinarily complete, consistent and continuous statistical records, they suggest two additional contributions that Dutch sociology might make to the discipline as a whole. The first may be called *analytical sociography*, and the second, *routine replication*.

Analytical sociography involves the application of sociological theory to large-scale, unique historical phenomena with the aid of statistical data, handled by computer techniques. Such data are more readily available in the Netherlands than anywhere else. They would permit the study of such massive events as the impact of modernization on family structure, or the political consequences of urbanization. This type of inquiry has already been undertaken to some extent, notably by Van Heek and by Groenman.

The other type of research for which Dutch sociology is admirably equipped is the replication of significant studies made in other modern societies that are less amenable to controlled observation. Thus, for example, recent studies of bureaucratic structure in France, and of anomie and deviance in the United States, would benefit enormously from literal replication in another setting. The social system of the Netherlands, because of its moderate scale, its accessibility to study, and the quality of its sociologists is quite uniquely suited to this purpose.

The suggestions are merely pointers towards a more definite goal — the better integration of this national sociology with its parent discipline. It is difficult to describe the stages of such a development in advance but one concrete feature can easily be discerned — the extensive circulation of the research findings of Dutch sociology in languages that are less melodious but more widely understood.