

ON THE INTRODUCTORY COURSE IN SOCIOLOGY

HOWARD WOODHEAD
The University of Chicago

We do not seem to be quite in agreement regarding the introductory course. Some think it should be "practical," and some "theoretical," and some do not see why any one course should precede another.

One may gather from the discussions of the subject, however, that a great many of us realize that the student should have a preliminary survey of the field of sociology, in order that he may know what work to take up later; that he should have a real foundation of sociological principles if he is to do advanced work. We know that such a course is good for the student who is taking but one course in sociology, as it gives him a real notion of what sociology is; for the student who is going into practical sociology, as it gives him the relationship between his partial sociology, and sociology as a whole; for the student who will do advanced work in sociology, because it maps out the subject and introduces the student to various subdivisions of sociology, and indicates to him the relationships between these divisions, so that sociology can have some unity for him.

This course in principles of sociology is, however, very often too abstract, and the student finds it dry and uninteresting, or even stupid. Some of us sympathize with him and seek to better things by offering courses that are "concrete" or "practical." Some of us do this to prove to college authorities that the students like sociology. The enthusiastic following is flattering, and we are liable to yield to temptation.

A great deal of the difficulty arises, however, because in our theoretical sociology we keep too far aloof from the facts of common experience. Textbooks too often state a principle, then discuss the matter for a few pages to make it clear; and finally give illustrations. This order should be reversed, I think.

The introductory course should present the principles, but it should deal with concrete material in developing those principles. On the other hand, if an introductory course in social problems is interrupted for the interpolation of sociological principles, these principles will seem to the student to be unnecessary, superfluous—the result of an attempt to

develop a science where none really exists. The social theory, or principles of sociology, must constitute the main cause of the course, with the concrete material subsidiary. However, when the student has learned, in the introductory course, to value categories and laws, he will welcome illuminating references to sociological principles in the courses in applied sociology. Moreover, he can realize in this way that the principles of sociology really are applied in such courses.

Our problem is, then, to make the introductory course a real survey of sociological principles, a presentation of social theory, and yet keep the interest of the good student. (I do not know that I care much about the student who is merely seeking "an interesting course"—unless I can show him that all study may be interesting if he can but go at it in the right way.)

In order to develop a common knowledge of social conditions—to use as the basis for theories to be tested or developed in the introductory course—I have the class discuss, for instance, the narrative in the *Introduction to the Study of Society* by Small and Vincent. In the class discussions a great deal of material is presented. Then we gradually work toward a codification of our conclusions. Very often some member of the class is able to state the principle. Then we discuss the meaning of a principle; the value of it. The class gets the idea that a principle is a helpful concept, rather than a curious jumble of polysyllabic words. When the principle has been developed we have a shorthand expression—a label; or we have a pigeonhole that is helpful in collecting further material; or a guide card to assist us in filing our data. Each general concept is developed in the same way: using concrete facts of our social life—and, too, using the concepts that have come to be common class property—to work toward further codification and statement. In this way the class comes to take a great deal of interest in the course, notwithstanding the fact that it is theoretical. Indeed, although the emphasis is on the side of theory, it is a "practical" course, because everything starts with concrete facts. It seems to me to be a blending of the abstract and concrete, or theoretical and practical, such as every course should be. In my "practical" courses, I have the same blending; although here I put the emphasis on the presentation of special problems, and the references to theory serve to throw additional light on points, and to show wherein certain activities are parts of a great social process. A student can comprehend the work in applied sociology much more readily and much better if he has in mind the important sociological concepts, I find.

Now a word as to the social sciences in general. The course I have spoken of is an introduction to sociology, not an introduction to the social sciences. I think, though, that there may well be a Social Science I. It was this course that Professor Small referred to¹ in discussing the introductory course. Such a course should be an introduction to the whole field of social science, and every student of social science ought to take it. This should be followed, moreover, by courses in several of the social sciences before the student begins to specialize in any one of them.² Co-operation between the social science departments will be necessary for the proper working-out of such a program.

We need organization in our own departments of sociology, also. Not only should we agree on a basic course, but we should differentiate graduate from undergraduate courses, or college from university courses, or elementary from intermediate, and the latter from advanced courses.

We have started on a very interesting problem, and I hope we may continue to follow it up. The formlessness and lack of coherence in sociology is much more apparent to the younger instructor and the student than it is to the older sociologist, and so it may be that this problem should be referred to the younger men for solution.

¹ *American Journal of Sociology*, XVI, 789.

² The Department of Political Economy at the University of Chicago is planning just such a program.