Image and Conviction in Sociology

Three contributions to the January 1988 Footnotes have prompted these reflections. They were Amitai Etzioni's article about the currents and needs for sociologists to champion the public importance of sociological knowledge, Kathleen McKinnon's recommendations about teaching controversial topics and the advertisement for Michel Richard's recent book on the sociology of crime. In an odd way, these pieces both resonated the British experience as well as conjured up a historical perspective on the ups-and-downs of sociology.

Etzioni was able to demonstrate, by the simple citing of one article by Lestage, that the tendency towards 'overbreadth' is more prevalent in economics than in sociology, for which crime sociology is far more often accused. It was a telling way of exposing this folly. But why is it that it is sociology which gets singled out for this criticism (amongst many others)? McKinnon's discussion of the problems involved in teaching 'value-laden' topics such as sexuality, any roles and pornography was as encouraging as it was admirable. She showed a level of sensitivity and self-distanciation in dealing with particularly threatening or embarrassing subjects which is most certainly light-years ahead of even many other social scientists in neighboring disciplines. These important and well-expressed observations are, however, only poignant contemporary examples of the general problems which have faced sociology since its inception. Sociology has always been asDave as the social scientists who have espoused and taught it. The reasons for this are not hard to discover. Being part of the society which it studies, and traditionally committed to social diagnosis in the widest sense, sociology inevitably gets caught up in the political conflicts of the class-race society in which it has developed a tenacious hold. It competes with one-sided ideologies for an explanation of society and impinges upon the pat prescriptive nostrums offered by politicians. In addition, sociologists investigate society on any and every level, so in principle there are no 'No-go' areas in sociology. We can hardly therefore make a move without stepping on someone's toes. So it is not surprising that sociology makes everyone's hackles rise; Left, Right and Center, because it exposes political myths and the realities of power. It also undermines people's comfortable prejudices and cherished beliefs. In Peter Berger's words, sociology is a "way of seeing" which can threaten people in many ways. Their fear induces the responses of scapegoating sociologists and, for undermining their credibility. There is thus a continuum of sensitivity of topics in teaching identified by McKinnon. The ones she mentions are just among the most deleterious but in many other areas such as religion, political belief systems, unemployment, ethnicity, and working class culture, one has also to be careful because of the sociological commitments people bring to their study of sociology.

Sociologists, whether teachers or learners, have to face the relativization of their own prejudices and beliefs more than the practitioners of any other discipline, except perhaps psychoanalysis. But there is a world of difference between the extent to which sociologists can handle this and the level of detachment of this kind attained elsewhere by other groups in the society at large. For all those reasons there has been in the history of sociology a wave of attacks upon the discipline, of varying degrees of shallowness and from various quarters. They run from those on the darkhams in the French Third Republic, to Weimar Germany and up to the Sixties in the West (by the Left) and into the Seventies and Eighties (by the Right). In 1985, Merton began an article in the New York Times defending sociology against the assault launched attacks with the wearisome words "Once again the enemies of the anti-sociologists is upon us." In recent years British sociologists have experienced a definite feeling of historical deja-vu.

The task of communicating the usefulness and importance of sociology, rightly brought out by Etzioni, firstly has to devise a way of dispensing with the mountain of prejudice and negative stereotyping of sociologists which marks the path of the acceptance of the important contribution of the discipline. Humour is one option. For a Departmental exhibition at a University Open Day at Leeds a couple of years ago, we anticipated Michel Richard's song and sent up the British public image of sociology and sociologists. We ridiculed the smear and stereotypes by a sign outside our exhibition which read: "Sociology: The Unanswerable in Pursuit of the Unanswerable!". Our boards said do we really look like the trendies, ranting, militant, crazed feminists and smear corrupters of the moral fiber of the young who you expect? We also distributed a free badge which announced: 'I've shaken hands with a sociologist'. Then followed a serious exhibition of Departmental research projects into religious, communities, ethnic minorities, social mobility, and so on.

My point in reporting this exhibition is to raise the issue of how best to promote sociology's importance when its practitioners face scepticism, jokes and hostility. We chose to send up our public image, but does this only reinforce the stereotypes? Is it preferable rather to remain aloof from the detractors and not bother with them, on the principle that even to ridicule the smokings of the potter is to give them credence? There is an old Polish proverb which says that if you meet a man in the street don't fight it, because whether you win or lose you come away smelling of it. There is a real problem of strategy here, this way forward clearly depends on the nature of the context, i.e., for example, on the achieved level of public credibility of the discipline, its degree of institutional autonomy, the strength of its professional organization, cultural expectations, and so on. In these respects the American and British experiences may be very different.

For the most part British sociologists have staunchly defended their discipline in recent years when faced with slating departments, dwindling resources, disappearing graduate schools, mergers with other departments and calls for sociology to become the handmaiden of social policy. But there is another scene that can be detected which has very important consequences. When