

SOCIOLOGY AS A SCIENCE¹

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I

SINCE, by the grace of our President, I have to talk on the nature and subject matter of sociology and its relationship to other social sciences, I shall begin with a critical remark intended to clear the ground for a subsequent construction. This remark consists in the claim that most of the existing definitions of sociology appear to me unsatisfactory. The samples and reasons follow.

Sociology has been defined as the *science of culture*. Such a definition hardly defines, since culture is a broad term and nearly all of the social sciences,—economics, history, jurisprudence, philology, political science,

science of arts and literature,—are sciences of culture. The definition is far too loose and does not differentiate sociology from other social sciences at all. It stops where it should begin its task and analysis.

Again, sociology has been variously defined as the science of *human relations*, of the phenomena of *social interaction*, of *social forms*, of *group interpretation*, or simply as the *science of society*. So far as such definitions stop at these points and do not try to show how and in which way sociological study of these phenomena differs from a study of the same phenomena by all the other social sciences, these definitions are open to the same objection of lack of any precision. They fail to go far enough to differentiate properly sociology from the other social sciences, all of which also

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study human relations, social interaction, social forms and society. Whether you take economics, or history, or the science of law, or political science, or ethics, or any of the social disciplines, they all deal with these phenomena.

Some of our colleagues have tried to find the proper field of sociology in the so-called "*group interpretation*" of social facts. I am afraid their "property-claim" will also be disputed. If "group-interpretation" means that sociology deals with groups rather than with individuals, then obviously it does not differ from most of the social sciences since they also deal with groups and associations. Political science deals with the state, municipality, community, Congress, Parliament, court, and other groups and institutions. Economics deals with corporations, trusts, co-operative groups, various associations, social classes, and other groups. The same is true of history which deals with all kinds of groups; of the science of language, religion, arts, and what not. "Language-group," "Roman-Catholic Church," "Gothic or Classical art" and so on imply neither an individual nor a mere sum of individuals but groups as integrated social bodies. If by group interpretation is meant that sociology explains social phenomena as a result of group activities, then again it must be said that hardly any social science interprets social phenomena as a result of the activity of isolated individuals, but always as a result of group activity.

Mutadis mutandis the same can be said of sociology as a science of society and some other definitions. So much for a criticism; now, for a construction.

II

Any satisfactory definition of sociology will show: first, that sociology studies a set of social phenomena either not studied

systematically by any other social science or studied by sociology from a point of view different from that of the other social sciences; and second, that the class of phenomena studied and the standpoint from which they are studied are logically consistent and scientifically important. Let us take, first, the sociological standpoint.

In the observation of any set of phenomena our attention may be directed either to the traits and relationships *peculiar* to this set or to the traits and relationships *common* with many other sets. Studying any phenomenon—physical, chemical, biological, social, psychological—we may busy ourselves either with marking the characteristics which belong to our phenomenon only, which are not found in any other phenomenon and consequently are unique and unrepeated in time or space; or we may concentrate on marking the traits in which the phenomenon studied is similar to other phenomena; which, therefore are repeated in time or in space or in both. The first standpoint is *individualizing*; the second, *generalizing*. The disciplines in which the first viewpoint predominates are *individualizing* sciences (like all historical disciplines); those in which the second viewpoint predominates are *generalizing* sciences, like physics, chemistry, and general biology. The individualizing disciplines are concerned predominantly with a description of the unique—unrepeated—phenomena and relationships, in all their concreteness; the generalizing sciences, with a description of uniformities and formulation of laws, that is, the sets of relationships repeated either in time-series, or in space or in both. The inner structure, the scope and the methods of these two types of sciences are profoundly different, almost opposite as it has been brilliantly shown by Cournot, W. Windelband, and H. Rickert. Since that

is so, the first thing which every sociologist has to decide in defining the nature of sociology is as to whether sociology is to be an individualizing or generalizing science. Without a solution of this pre-problem there is no possibility of arriving at a clear and logically consistent concept of sociology. On the other hand, the decision predetermines all the essential traits of sociology which would be profoundly different in both cases. In my opinion sociology is and should be a generalizing science. It has been a generalizing discipline in the conceptions of all great sociologists from Confucius, Plato, Aristotle, Ibn-Khaldun and Vico to August Comte, Herbert Spencer, Tarde, Durkheim, and Pareto, and it should be because such a discipline is needed among social sciences and because otherwise it would be identical with history, that is non-existent, *de facto*. Such is my choice. When it is properly understood it becomes evident at once that through this generalizing standpoint it radically differs from all the *historical* social sciences. The contrast is as great as it could be. In contradistinction from any historical discipline busy mainly with the unique and unrepeated aspects of social phenomena (like the history of Rome, of China, of the Roman-Catholic Church, of Abraham Lincoln, of Yale University, and so on—each subject being a unique phenomenon not repeated either in time or space), *sociology is interested only in those aspects of social phenomena and their relationships which are repeated either in time or in space or in both; which consequently exhibit some uniformity or constancy or typicality*. Historical sciences paint the individual picture of the unique phenomenon studied (a certain person, institution, social object, social constellation of certain conditions); sociology gives either an abstract formula (law) which describes (quantitatively or otherwise) a repeated uniformity (or the degree of

variability) in the relationship between two or more societal variables or a *type* as a composite photography of the repeated social phenomena of a certain kind. This difference sharply differentiates sociology from all historical disciplines.

III

When this cardinal point is well understood, the nature of general as well as special sociologies becomes easily comprehensible. Under these conditions the task of *general* sociology may consist evidently in nothing but a study of those traits and relationships which are *common to all social phenomena*. To be common to all social phenomena means to be given in any social phenomenon wherever and whenever it exists or to be repeated any time and anywhere where any social phenomenon is given. *Through this subject-matter general sociology radically differs from all the other social sciences*. None of them studies this problem and none is competent to study it, as long as it remains a special social science. Each of these other social disciplines studies only its special variety of social phenomena: economics, the economic variety; political science, the political variety and so on. But insofar as all these varieties are subclasses of the same general class of social phenomena, they all must have, side by side with their specific characteristics and relationships, some traits and relationships common to all of them; otherwise they cannot belong to the general class of social phenomena and cannot be styled by a common name of the social sciences. Schematically this can be expressed in the following way. Let the following varieties of social phenomena consist of the following elements and relationships:

economic: a, b, c, n, m, f, e
 political: a, b, c, h, d, j, p
 religious: a, b, c, g, i, q, r
 and so on

Granting that all the other varieties of social phenomena have the same common elements and relationships: *a, b, c*, these *a, b, c*, would compose the field of general sociology. *An isolation, description, analysis, and classification of these common elements and relationships is the subject-matter of general sociology.* This field is not studied by the other social sciences, on the one hand; on the other, for its study there must exist a separate discipline. The logical requirement of adequacy and the principle of the economy of effort urge imperatively the existence of such a discipline. The logical adequacy requires that where there exist *N* subclasses of a certain class of the phenomena, the number of the scientific disciplines for their study has to be $N + 1$. If there are two sub-classes of organisms: plants and animals, there must be not only botany and zoology but the third discipline—general biology which studies the traits common to all organisms. If there are *n* varieties of the physical phenomena—sound, electricity etc., there must be and there is, besides special physical disciplines each of which deals with one variety, an additional part—general physics. Besides a discipline which studies, say, the female sex of *homo-sapiens*, and a discipline which studies its male sex, there must be a discipline which studies the traits common to both sexes. Otherwise, if the traits belonging only to one variety are ascribed to the whole class of phenomena (for instance specific traits of plants to all organisms) the theory will be inadequate or fallacious. If, on the other hand, each special discipline dealing with a special variety of the given class of phenomena would repeat all the traits common to the whole class, the theory would also be inadequate and immensely wasteful from the standpoint of the economy of effort. Suppose that a special discipline dealing with a certain variety of matter, for instance with

“Lucky Strike” cigarettes, would begin seriously to contend that “Lucky Strikes gravitate in direct ratio to the mass and in inverse ratio to the square of the distance,” that in their field “the action is equal to the reaction”, and so on, enumerating thousands of laws of physics and chemistry and general biology valid not only for “the Lucky Strikes” but for matter generally and for all organisms, you can easily see that such a discipline would be a caricature on a scientific discipline and besides exceedingly wasteful from the standpoint of the economy of our efforts. Any real scientific achievement has always consisted in a reduction of numerous valid partial regularities to one more general valid regularity. Newton’s law of gravitation was a great achievement because it embraced in one formula an infinitely great number of the partial uniformities and showed that this law was applicable not only to “the Lucky Strike” or to a more narrow field as it was in Kepler’s law, but to all matter. The same can be said of the social sciences. If each of them would repeat in application to its special variety the statements applicable to all varieties of social phenomena, such a discipline would be not far from our “science of the Lucky Strike.”

One more remark before I pass to special sociologies. Many people seem to mix the above concept of general sociology with a vague synthetic philosophising. They think that such a concept of sociology does not make out of it a special science but makes a kind of a “synthetic hodge-podge” or encyclopedia of all social sciences. I emphatically stress that such a conclusion is utterly wrong. Instead of a long analytical disapproval of this fallacy, let me briefly allude to its nature. The director or bookkeeper or treasurer of a firm deals with the whole firm, in contradistinction to the various employees,

each of whom deals only with a small portion of the firm's business and activity. Shall we conclude from this that the functions of the director, or bookkeeper, or treasurer are "encyclopedic" and not special? Go to any firm or to any school of business administration and you can easily learn a simple truth: though their specialty involves dealing with the firm as a whole, nevertheless, their functions are highly specialized, much more so than the functions of a worker who does only one kind of operation. This shows that there are many kinds of specialties and among them a highly qualified specialty of "isolation, description, analysis, and classification (or management) of the traits and relationships of all classes or divisions of 'the firm' of social phenomena." This means that sociology in the above sense is a very special science but its specialty is different from that of the other social sciences. So much for the subject-matter of general sociology.

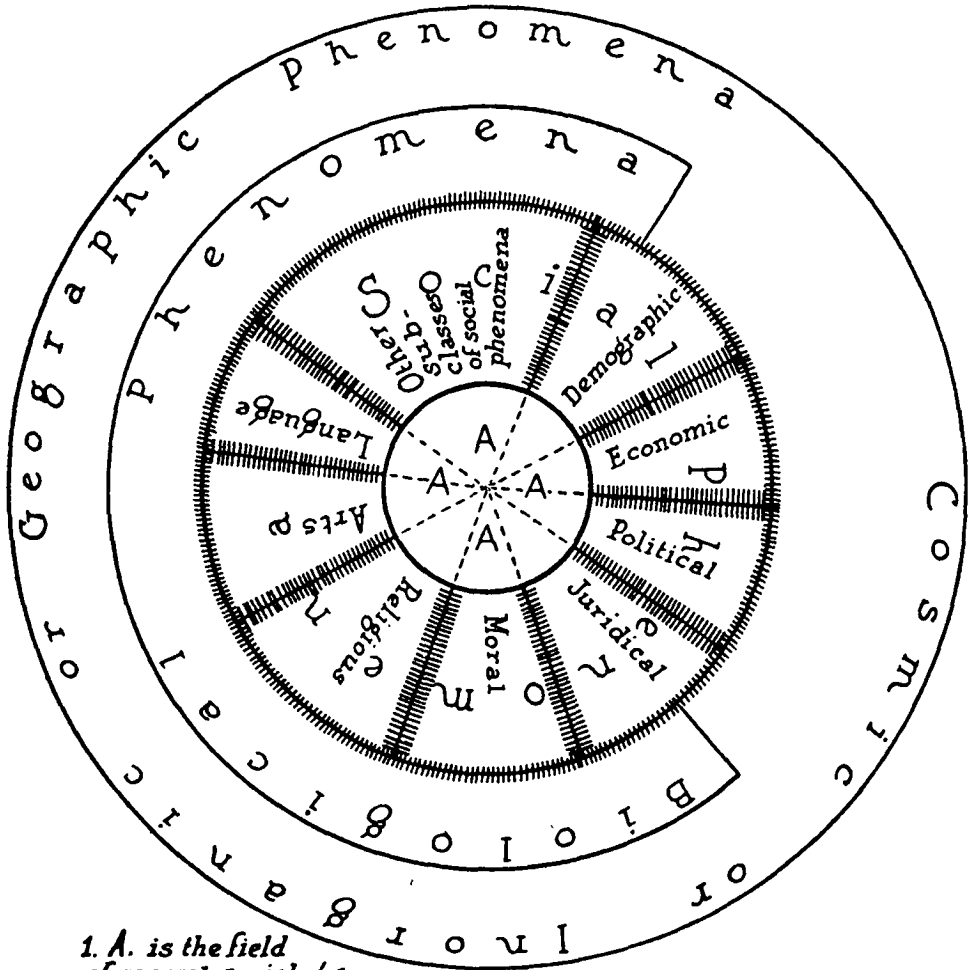
IV

You know well that side by side with general economics there is a number of special economics like economics of transportation, banking, agricultural economics, etc. The same is true of political science, psychology, and some other disciplines. Similar is the situation in sociology. Side by side with general sociology there exists and should exist a number of *specialized sociologies*. As to their standpoint, it is the same in regard to their particular fields as that of general sociology to its field, that is the viewpoint of a generalizing discipline. As to their subject-matter, it is a study of the traits and relationships common not to all social phenomena (this is the field of general sociology) and not to one variety of social phenomena (that is the field of the other

social sciences), but *repeated uniformities and relationships given between two or more varieties of different social phenomena or between the social and non-social phenomena*. As you see, the subject-matter of the special sociologies is "interstitial." The relationships between various forms of economic phenomena are studied by economics. The same is true of the relationships between various forms of the political phenomena studied by political science. We know well, however, that in social reality the economic phenomena are not isolated from the political; they interact and influence one another. Many economic conditions affect forms of political organization and processes, and vice versa. If economics is competent to study the economic phenomena, and political science, the political phenomena, neither one of these disciplines is logically competent or is entitled to study these "interstitial" problems. They, by virtue of their nature and definition, are beyond either economics or political science. They do not belong to their field. The same may be said of hundreds of other "interstitial" problems. Relationships between business cycles and vital processes; economic conditions and criminality; the suicide movement and religion; religion and economic organization; forms of recreation and forms of law and morals; heredity and genius; the racial factor and inventiveness; geographic factors and economic phenomena; climate and civilization; temperature and social rhythms; these and thousands of other problems are "interstitial." There is no science among the other social sciences within which these problems fall. Meanwhile they have to be studied. For their study there logically has to be a discipline. On account of the nature of sociology, these problems fall logically within its territory. They logically should belong to its special branches. And as a

matter of fact they have belonged to them since long ago. Sometime ago there appeared geographical sociology with its repeated study of the uniformities in the relationship between social and cosmic

and other social phenomena; demographic sociology busy with the relationships between the vital and various social phenomena; sociology of religion trying to find out the relationship between the



1. A. is the field of general sociology
 2. Places marked by B show the interstitial fields of special sociologies
- M.B. The division of the whole field of social phenomena into a number of fields of social sciences is only illustrative*

conditions; biological sociology as a study of the relationship between biological factors and social phenomena; economic sociology as a study of relationships between economic and political, religious,

religious and the other varieties of social phenomena; sociology of arts; political sociology, and so forth.

These special sociologies have been existing and the above shows that my concept

of sociology logically and naturally fits the existing facts. Its logical "should" coincides with the factual "is." Such a coincidence is one of the best tests of the validity of a concept.

It is to be stressed that in outlining the field of the special sociologies I have in view the logical nature of these fields and their problems but not the specialty of men who study them. These "interstitial" problems may and have been studied by doctors, farmers, emperors, professors of economics, philosophy, theology, and many others. The point is the logical nature of the problems which do not and cannot fall within the field of the other social sciences except sociology but not the vocation of the man who studies them. Newton wrote his famous "*Principia*" and the same Newton wrote his less famous commentaries on Apocalypse. From the fact that both of these works were written by the same man, famous naturalist, does not follow that both works belong to the same science of physics or theology. One logically falls within the field of physics; the other, within that of theology. Many great sociological studies were made by the non-sociologists *ex-officio* (Le Play; Ibn-Khaldun; Malthus, and so on) and vice versa; some of the sociologists *ex-officio* (e.g., G. Tarde, E. Durkheim) made very important contributions to the fields of other sciences, like Constitutional Law, Psychology, etc. The logical nature of a problem and its belonging to the field of a certain science is one thing; and by whom,

according to a man's occupational status, the problem is studied is quite another thing. One should not mix them.

According to the logical nature of the problems discussed, many portions of such works as Plato's *The Republic*, Confucius's *Texts of Confucianism*, Aristotle's *Politics*, Ibn-Khaldun's *Prolegomènes*, Dante's *De Monarchia*, Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Laws*, Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, Malthus's *Essay on Population*, and so on, are nothing but a variety of either general or specialized pure sociology.²

Such in outline appears to me the logical nature of general and specialized sociologies, their standpoint, and their subject-matters. This concept is logically consistent; it gives to sociology not only a system, but inner coherency and unity; it makes sociology a special science in a particular sense; it is supported by the factual history of social thought and the present status of sociology; and last but not least, it clearly and definitely separates sociology from all the other social sciences, so far as a separation of various disciplines exists and is plausible.

The accompanying diagram depicts the concept given visually and may be helpful for a more concrete representation of the above.

² This shows, by the way, that the usual idea that sociology is a young science born with August Comte is utterly fallacious. Sociology, as a matter of fact, is as old as almost any other science. Only the clumsy word: "sociology," invented by Comte, is young.

Professor Leopold von Wiese of the University of Cologne will be travelling in India, Burma, and Malaysia during the fall and early winter of 1931 for the purpose of gathering material for his forthcoming *Bio-Sociology*, one of the series of detailed sociological studies outlined in and complementing his *General Sociology*. He will be in Ceylon and southern India during October, and will then go by way of Bombay to northern and northwestern India and then to Burma, arriving in Malaysia early in December, where he will stay until his return journey from Singapore shortly before Christmas. He is especially desirous of meeting any American sociologists who happen to be in the same or adjacent regions during the periods named; exchange of scientific views and establishment of personal acquaintance would be welcomed. Letters addressed to the *Forschungsinstitut für Sozialwissenschaften* at the University of Cologne will be forwarded if so marked.