

The old question is a serious one, a searching one. As sociologists, are we going in the right direction, knowing where we want to go? In what follows I will try to draw from a long-time experience in the field. I will reflect on what may be seen as the decline and fall of the credibility of our profession, and what I see as some of its future possibilities.

There will be a lamentation over failures, an embarrassing list of *faux pas*, and an attempt to explain why some of them took place. The background of the narrative will range from the Southern hemisphere to the Arctic, over four continents and three decades. Being a personal account it draws on my own experience rather than on a bibliography, and invites readers to apply their own knowledge, and healthy skepticism, to the matter of how sociology and its sister disciplines have tackled a number of major issues since the 1960s. It will end with a pep talk on how badly sociologists are needed, now and in the foreseeable future.

First, let us recall where sociology started - in the quiet comfort of an armchair. A few people - very few but very bright - pondered on what society was doing. They were philosophical rather than empirical. But their ideas provided the impetus for generations of researchers who streamed into the streets, flooded the factory floors and

assaulted all and sundry with their note-pads and questionnaires. Sister disciplines were tapped for theories and techniques: from anthropology to psychology and statistical analysis.

The level of activity was prodigious, and vitalized with the urgent energy that went into making sociology a new tool for understanding what was going on in a rapidly changing society. Methodologies became more and more developed. So did the ambition to come closer to the precision and prediction validity of the exact sciences. The pragmatic and empirical character made sociology a respected and useful tool for decision makers.

For the better part of 35 years I tried my best to make practical use of what sociology had to offer. I focused on how to solve some of the rural development problems which were among the burning issues of the 1960s and 70s. At the same time I became increasingly involved in the mitigation of natural and human-made disasters. This background is mentioned to explain the pragmatic attitudes presented here. More importantly, it serves to justify my hope that society will eventually realize that it cannot do without well trained sociologists.

In the 1950s, there was not much distinction between theory and practice, between academic and applied

sociology. The University of Stockholm gave a good grounding in theory building and the Theory of Knowledge; including the limitations of knowledge. The ideal that one should be sound on methodology was taken for granted, and so was the constant striving for the greatest possible objectivity.

The early 60s saw a sudden U-turn in many countries. The reasons were complex: partly due to the high increase in admissions to the universities and a lowering of academic standards, and partly to political reasons. Objectivity was no longer in, and since it could never be one hundred percent in the less than exact domain of social science, it was considered pointless to even pursue it. Why not acknowledge this and instead candidly aim for subjectivity? There was no time for academic plodding. The world had to be changed, imperialism had to be crushed. A new generation of sociology students rushed to the barricades, issued condemnations and voted on resolutions.

The increasing turbulence of the 60s appeared to leave sociology in an ivory tower of its own making. If it was not high above, it was at least far from any reality. In particular, that kind of reality that included giving attention to the mundane matters of what people were doing and why. Among those who dealt with practical things, questions were asked with an urgency that was not always free from elements of panic, especially on Third World issues. Colonialism was breaking up, and old and new decision makers were facing

hard choices about what to do. A rapidly developing awareness that new questions needed up-to-date answers was permeating the whole world of donors and recipients. It became obvious that political independence generated not only promises, but also a vast new range of problems.

The United Nations responded to a number of the challenges. With its Development Programme acting as *primus inter pares*, FAO, ILO, UNICEF, UNHCR and other field agencies helped in designing programs which were to set the patterns and the strategy for large-scale transfers of resources, skills and competence. Technicians of every conceivable kind were recruited to provide the necessary expertise, and things began to move. Not always without difficulty. Technical expertise was more often than not adequate, sometimes actually more sophisticated than what was called for. Nevertheless, things went wrong much too often. Cooperatives failed because the local moneylenders blocked them. Fishing projects failed because people in the area thought fish were ritually unclean. Water projects in India forgot to take the caste system into account. African pastoralists refused to accept settlement programs and moved with their cattle into the neighboring countries causing no end to border-related conflicts. People were urged to produce food which they would not eat. Dairy projects collapsed because nobody had noted that the local population suffered from lactose intolerance. Housing projects failed,

rather expensively, because they disregarded deeply rooted habitation patterns and cultural preferences. Relocation programs failed because they overlooked micro-political conditions in the area. Ambitious vocational training schemes recruited Grade 10 boys without taking into account that local values prevented anybody at that educational level from ever doing manual labor. And an endless number of projects flopped because nobody had taken the trouble to identify the local leadership, not to mention consult and collaborate with it.

New technologies often created more problems than they solved by taking for granted that novelties would be immediately understood, used, and welcomed. This particular kind of failure soon became so obvious that it caused a countermove, a wave of new and seemingly innovative projects for the introduction of appropriate technology. However, in their enthusiasm the experts on appropriate technology rarely found time to explore if the technology in question seemed equally appropriate to the villagers who were supposed to make use of it.

As the fiascoes multiplied, a new fad came into the picture: infrastructure. All the big donors fell for it. There were major advantages. It used the donor's technology, was technical in nature and did not require any extraneous ideas about participation from the local communities, and it was easy to document money inputs. At the end of

the work, the project's output could easily be shown on maps and photos. That a new dam could silt up a river and that a new road might cause havoc in local politics and often took away the livelihood from people who had depended on trade and transport did not have to be mentioned in the evaluations.

Essentially, however, it was gradually acknowledged that technical expertise was not enough. A technical soil survey had to be complemented by a study of what people were capable of, and, most of all, willing to do: how they used the soil, how well, for what crops, with what tools and techniques. Further, by which gender, under which tradition of ownership, with what degree of openness to innovation, under what handicaps of malnutrition caused by protein deficiency and debilitating diseases. A failure to understand the human component meant a failure of the project and the unaffordable loss of time, resources and momentum. There was only one kind of experts trained to find out how and why human beings behaved as they did: socio-logists and anthropologists. Between the two, the former was more preferred because of their reputation for being scientifically sound.

I went abroad and learned about the problems of Asian refugees in Europe, and the parallelisms in the Inuit acculturation in Greenland, in North Africa, in South Asia, and in East Africa. There seemed to be job opportunities all over the place as long as

one was prepared to rough it in the field, especially if one had a down-to-earth broad-based interest in rural development. Donor agencies needed base-line surveys and social soundness analyses. NGOs were hungry for feasibility studies, governments were interested in evaluations. Most project proposals mentioned the need for sociologists, especially during the planning and evaluation stages, sometimes also for monitoring during the actual implementation.

Later in the 70s, several new assignments took me to Central, West and Southern Africa. In the 80s, I was in South East Asia. But now something had changed as far as the role of sociologists was concerned. Project documents would still include some kind of pro forma request for them, but it was becoming painfully and embarrassingly obvious that there was a wide and spreading skepticism going against their work. The UN High Commissioner uncompromisingly said he regarded it as counterproductive. Others said with a bland put-off that sociologists might offer interesting information, but the general trend was clear: Official policy might still talk about the importance of sociologists, but in the field, the coordinator, project manager, resident representative and so on tended to regard them as useless, possibly of some entertainment value, but more often than not a downright nuisance. A not uncommon tendency among local military and police to suspect them of political sub-version and possible links with the CIA did not help.

Sad to say, sociologists often seemed to deserve some of the hostility. Those with a tendency towards academic snobbery disappeared fast, but the real difficulties were elsewhere. Sociologists would be hired to assist in an effort to help people, and their employers expected them to come up with valuable contributions. But only a few academically trained sociologists knew how to be of service by addressing such relevant issues as demography and migration patterns, health situations, work performance, food production, local politics including feuds and mechanisms for conflict resolution, and other essentials. Few if any knew how to conduct field research under severe time pressure, few were used to work within a multidisciplinary team, fewer still had any understanding of complex administrative procedures. Worst of all would be the classical mistake of writing for the wrong audience: instead of providing information which could be used for decision-making, the sociologist would write as if he were addressing fellow academics.

This general lack of understanding of what a situation called for had its counterpart in the attitudes of the organizations involved. Problems often got worse because of the lack of understanding of what a sensible sociologist can do, the misuse or underuse of skills and the ability to adapt to new issues, and - again - not knowing what to make of reports.

Paradoxically, scientific imagination, and the ability to conceptualize and

identify causal links could give rise to other difficulties of communication. The basic training of a social scientist teaches him to play around with assumptions and hypotheses: suppose that...? what if...? What if we find evidence that the whole process under study is in fact going in a different direction? Can we at least consider this possibility?

Unfortunately this was anathema to those who planned development programs. Projects might demand more time and frequently more money than had been thought of originally. This was as common as it was regrettable as a rule. But it was not acceptable, nor conceivable, that they might have negative side effects, which would cause more problems than they solved. Planning went on as it had before: Full speed ahead and damn the torpedoes. This was even more obvious in emergency operations, when the daily pressure of high death rates often called for immediate action. Yet it was striking how often mistakes could have been avoided if elementary knowledge of people and their ways had been used. There was a surplus of wheat, ergo that is what was airlifted - to people who did not know how to use it and went on starving while the ground was white as from a snowfall. In a parallel case a WFP logistics expert worked out, quite correctly, that the lowest ton/kilometer price for high energy food was to be had from flying in large quantities of cooking oil. Unfortunately nobody in the area knew what to do with it. But the plastic cans were liked, so the oil went straight into the river which for

weeks gleamed with beautiful mother-of-pearl hues. The rampage of the famine was not affected.

My subsequent work with disaster mitigation, most recently with the WHO in the Western Pacific Region, has repeatedly indicated how useful - indeed necessary - social scientists can be, if given realistic tasks, and the training and the responsibility to carry them out. For those in search of new fields of activity, it is worth noting that the understanding of disasters is changing in two fundamental ways. First, with regard to the cause; the emphasis has gone from natural to human-made disasters. This emphasis subsequently called for major efforts by social scientists to figure out both how and why people are making disasters happen, and how to try to prevent things from getting worse. Second, with regard to the effects: from the dramatic but often brief calamities and the call for emergency relief activities, awareness is now slowly moving towards the more serious long-term impact with its enduring legacy of economic and human poverty. This situation requires complex planning for rehabilitation measures, which should be followed up by development activities intended to prevent a one-time disaster from becoming recurrent.

I began with the question of where sociologists are going. Sociology itself seems to be back in the old armchair, contemplating its navel and expressing itself in a language reserved for a selected circle of initiates. Occasional

attempts at improvement do not appear to have produced much. The level-headed Encyclopedia Britannica notes sociology's "lack of triumphs and slow pace of progress," attributed to "the appetite of sociologists for neologisms and jargon, a disposition for pseudo-quantification, and excessive concern with imitation of the methods of natural sciences, overdependence on data from interviews, questionnaires, and informal observations" (EB 15th ed. 27: 385).

An illustration to what was happening to sociology came in a 1970s report from the US National Science Foundation. There were 35 sub-fields of sociology then, raising fears of the proverbial specialist who knows more and more about less and less. In round figures: Out of some 5,000 sociologists, 1,000 were doing research and 500 were in academic administration and management, 3,000 were teaching. Altogether 12 were in consulting, and 25 in forecasting. For those who believe that society actually requires active sociologists with an ability to help us out in a confused and bewildering world, these figures are staggering.

The need for sociology grew out of a necessity, the need to understand and predict what was happening during the extraordinary drama of the extended and often painful process of the industrial revolution. In short, it responded to the need to understand change in order to be able to cope with it.

That necessity has not gone away. It has intensified. We are in dire need of understanding what is going on in our changing world. Technicians can tell us their part of the picture, but they have not told us how to handle an urbanization which is without precedent. Or the political consequences of threatening food shortages of a horrifying magnitude, or how to predict the turmoil of old and new political, religious and ethnic conflicts. One case which is close to my heart is that of Rwanda. Official reports in 1993 observed that all available arable land was being used and subject to erosion, but noted complacently that the government carried out economic and social improvement programs. The following year one of the most brutal genocide in modern times killed up to one million people, causing total surprise and revealing a complete absence of effective preparatory action. It is easy to trace the roots of the tragedy to the inability of the colonial regime to make use of the anthropological information that was available to them even before the massacres in 1959, 62 and 67; it is beyond comprehension that nothing was done to avoid or mitigate the inevitable disaster.

Technical experts are sorely needed and can proudly point to a long list of major achievements. It is not their fault that they sometimes appear to prefer not to confuse the issue with local nonsense nor that they are not trained to investigate the end result of their work: how human beings are

affected, how people react and respond to out-side intervention in their lives. It is not their fault when the intended beneficiaries may lack the necessary understanding of, for instance, an environmental issue, or have not been sufficiently encouraged to give their full cooperation. There is still truth in the old image of the outsider holding out a pitcher full of expertise intended to fill up the villager's empty cup, only to find that it was not empty at all but filled to the brim with the villager's own knowledge. It takes an expert on human behavior to tell how much there is in the cup, and how it is likely to mix with the new brew.

Sociologists have that training. We have had close to a century and a half to think about how people function together, to analyze the structures and the mechanisms of human interaction. We have theorized and tested, attempted and on occasion failed to grasp the workings of society and its many subcultures. The results may be less impressive than the efforts, but at least we have tried and if we are willing to learn from the past we can try again, perhaps with better results.

It sounds melodramatic to use a phrase like "in our time of need." But that is what it is. In the 80s there was a strained, and very internal, discussion in the inner circles of UNDP triggered by an uncomfortably frank paper called "From Aid to Aids." This hinted broadly that many of the efforts to assist much of the world had caused

new and insoluble problems, without necessarily removing the original ones. Briefly stated, in a time of enormous change we seem to stagger on blindly, on a trial and error basis, with little or no sense of direction. In this situation sociologists, the technical experts on human behavior, should be called upon to make themselves useful, both in the established fields of rural and urban development and in the emerging ones related to out-of-control urbanization and creeping disasters. Here are some of the ways in which we might be able to contribute:

First, let us get out of the comfy armchair and talk to people again. Second, let us focus on priority issues in order to give us a sense of direction. Third, let us document our findings in such a way that they can be appreciated by non-specialists. Fourth, let us cooperate; with each other, with colleagues in related disciplines, with all who can make use of our skills. There has been a lot of lip-service to interdisciplinary work over the years, it is high time to put the words into action.

My own approach has been simple. When you do research, in the library and in the field, make it action-oriented. In other words, concentrate on phenomena which appear to have a bearing on the fate of the community. When planning or managing a project, make your decisions research-based, as far

as possible. With this basic strategy I have on a number of occasions been lucky enough to be able to identify a problem or a problem area, made the necessary base-line survey, written the project proposal, and several times been asked to implement the project.

Over the years, sociology has more or less parted company with anthropology, leaving it behind like a country cousin who is poor and unsophisticated and clearly finding it difficult to renew himself and get on in life. To the old internal confusion between ethnology, ethnography, cultural and social anthropology and so forth comes the more recent difficulty of explaining to the layperson what anthropologists actually do.

But there are signs of a new trend. I first encountered it in Sudan when top planners showed more interest in Evans-Pritchard's 1940 study. The Nuer than in contemporary surveys. Obviously the relative informality of classical social anthropology appealed to inquisitive minds. There is also a growing awareness that the holistic view and the intuitive approach, which is a major part of using participant observation as a main research method, can produce insights which a more detached sociological method is less likely to reveal.

But let us not focus on the possible differences between two closely related social sciences. We are constantly confronted with today's complex syndromes contained in new buzz-

words like globalization, human poverty, and the rise of the megalopolis. It would seem that sociology and anthropology alike have to search for ways to make them more specific, more graspable, to come up with ways to assess and analyze issues like susceptibility versus resistance to change, and meta-issues like the viability of values and ultimately of cultures. A step in the right direction would be to work for a smooth merger of the two disciplines. Let anthropological openness and flexibility combine with the more precise methods of sociology, provided that both are ruled by the common sense, the quintessence of social science. Anthropology has begun its own much needed house-cleaning. It would be hard today to find a field researcher who bothers about the kinship studies of Levi-Strauss which once seduced academic circles. There are no more personality cults of the kind which adulated Margaret Mead as "The Mother of Anthropology" and "Mother of Mankind." Attempts at making Pathan warriors explore their inner selves with the help of Rorschach blobs have been discontinued, and the travails of striving for political correctness have produced a number of dictionaries where the boundary between earnestness and sarcasm is sometimes hard to find.

However, several problem areas remain unresolved. One is an all too common kind of hubris. It tends to go like this: I practice social science, science is rational and so am I, therefore the phenomena I study are also rational.

Fortunately, this is often true. But a wide range of the most difficult and most enduring problems in lifting those in greatest need out of what seems to be terminal misery, does indeed call for an understanding of how and why people can lose their rationality. Many years of work with disaster victims, and of trying to come to grips with the dreaded uprooting syndrome, have taught me how often people act and react irrationally, and how crucial it is to be aware of frequent deviations from an assumed rationality.

The old nature versus nurture issue is another. Most of this century has seen an almost unchallenged emphasis on nurture. This is readily shown in the concept of social engineering which has dominated the policies and politics of most Western nations, and the hyper-organized Nordic countries. It is only the recent floodwave of discoveries in neuro-chemistry which have raised doubts, and led to more and more frequent observations that it is all in the genes. This is probably as unfounded as thinking that it is all in the nurture. However, the social sciences have a big job on hand in trying to identify the proportions and explain the process of the interaction.

Sociology is not a difficult subject. When we try to make it look that way we do service to no one. It can do with a touch of elegance, yes, but not with needless sophistication or embellishment. While we are still waiting for the publication of "Sociology for Dummies," common sense and a pragmatic order of priority in our work can take us a long way. Let us unabashedly declare that all societies need sociologists in the field. Maybe a different kind, perhaps better. But more, many more. The need is there, and it is growing.

And last but not the least: we must practice our craft with conviction and compassion. Conviction - to see us through the frustration which comes from lack of credibility. Compassion - because our ultimate concern is on the welfare of human beings.

Ours is a grave responsibility and if we do not handle it well there will be more suffering in the world. We are obliged to do our best as interpreters and catalysts in the work of trying to help society know where to go, and helping people understand each other, and themselves.