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Sociological Thought Experiments: Five Examples from the History of Sociology¹

Michael R. Hill

INTRODUCTION

I am honored to speak with you today about several topics close to my professional and personal heart. I say personal as well as professional because for some twenty years now my interest in the history of sociology has developed and deepened in tandem with the pioneering research conducted by my life-partner, Mary Jo Deegan. Her work on *Jane Addams and the Men of the Chicago School, 1892-1918* (Deegan 1988a) has become the paradigm example for the “new history” in sociology, and it is my inspiration for today’s discussion.

My topic today is “Sociological Thought Experiments.” I will briefly introduce you to five exemplars drawn from the history of sociology, and conclude with my own example that asks, “*What if* the values and principles of Harriet Martineau, the first woman sociologist (Hill 1991; Hoecker-Drysdale 1992; Hill and Hoecker-Drysdale 2001), were applied to sociology today and tomorrow?” That is to say, I hope to show that in seeking “alternative futures” for the discipline of sociology, there is a nice role for “thought experiments” to play in linking our disciplinary history to our disciplinary future. First, however, I must note the history of “thought experiments” in physics and philosophy, and outline a few pertinent conceptual issues that have been illuminated by the work of the late American sociologist, Erving Goffman.

¹ Keynote address, Iowa Sociological Association, Simpson College, Indianola, Iowa, 25 April 2003. My special thanks to Mark Freyberg, President of the Iowa Sociological Association, for his kind invitation and encouragement to write and present this paper. Notes and references to works published subsequent to the presentation of this address have been updated.

WHAT IS A “THOUGHT EXPERIMENT”?

First, let us ask, “What is a *thought experiment*? But, let’s be careful. This sort of question—together with the potential extensions and variations—can keep professional philosophers employed by the dozens for years at a time (*see*, for examples, the selected citations in the list of references, below): “What does it *mean* to think *about* a thought experiment?” “Are *all* thoughts experiments of a similar *sort*?” “When is a thought *not* an experiment?” “What *is* experimental thinking?” “Is it an *experiment* to ask if a thought *is* an experiment?” etc., etc. My tactic today is to avoid such philosophical play, enticing though it is, by simply ignoring it. This will not do intellectually in the long run, of course, but as a practical stratagem it keeps my discussion within the allotted time.²

In 1987, when I first wrote about thought experiments, in an article published in *Teaching Sociology* (Hill 1987), it was generally agreed that the initial discussion of *Gedankenexperiment* appeared in an essay written by the German physicist, Ernst Mach, in 1897.³ Mach (1897/1973: 451) wrote that conducting thought experiments involves a researcher who “conceives circumstances and associates with these the idea, expectation, or supposition of certain results.” Mach concluded that experimental exercises in the mind are “on a higher intellectual level” than actual physical experiments. He also noted the fiscal and practical economy of thought experiments. Further, said Mach, the question-and-answer exchanges generated by proposing and discussing thought experiments gave him an outstanding way to assess his students’ intellectual capabilities.

In the nine decades since Mach wrote about *Gedankenexperiment*, some philosophers now argue that “thought experiments,” as a set of methodological procedures, comprise a “family,” some members of which bear little resemblance to each other (Cole 1984). But, for our purposes today, Tamar Gendler’s (2000: 34) recent general characterization sets the tone I want to strike:

To draw a conclusion on the basis of a *thought experiment* is to make a judgment about what would happen if the particular state of affairs described in some imaginary scenario were actually to obtain.

I also continue to like what I wrote in 1987 regarding the application of thought experiments to sociology, that is: I advocate thought experiments that (a) involve the disciplined exploration of emancipatory *alternative futures* (the latter term is Anthony Giddens’) and that (b) attempt to explicate the transformational routes between existing social patterns and desired social structures (Hill 1987: 39).

² We could easily (and profitably) begin such a digression, for example, by exploring George Herbert Mead’s (1899) inherently experimental approach to social reform, and thence to the necessarily provisional character of all sociological theories.

³ From the German, *Gedanken* = “to think.”

For the sake of an accurate record, however, it turns out that Ernst Mach was not the first to use the term *Gedankenexperiment*. That honor currently rests with Hans Christian Ørsted, a Danish philosopher and chemist, who used the term in 1811 in a work ponderously titled: *Prolegomenon to the General Theory of Nature* (Witt-Hansen 1976).

Before leaving physics and physicists to the side, I must observe that “thought experiments” have proved useful in physics and that Albert Einstein was a noted practitioner. His “moving trains” conjecture is considered a philosophical paradigm example of a “thought experiment” (Gendler 2000: 19). Einstein:

. . . asks us to imagine a situation in which there are two groups of people: one group assembled at a certain point along the embankment of a railroad track, and the other group riding on a train that is moving with respect to the embankment. Suppose that lightning strikes the embankment “at two places A and B far distant from each other” such that those standing on the embankment stand at a point exactly between them. Suppose further that from the perspective of the people standing at that point, the flashes occur simultaneously. Does it make sense to say that the flashes occurred simultaneously? (Gendler 2000: 29).

Einstein’s simple answer is “No”—and we can happily leave it there to move on to matters more directly sociological.

SOCIOLOGICAL PARALLELS AND CONCEPTUAL ISSUES: ERVING GOFFMAN

Physics aside, there are several issues related to “thought experiments” that sociologists can and should feel right at home with. Most of these concerns have been nicely itemized and detailed by the late American sociologist Erving Goffman (1974) in his penultimate book, *Frame Analysis*. *Frame Analysis*, in my judgement, is one of the most potentially important—and most overlooked—books written by a twentieth-century sociologist. It is not a perfect book, but it does many things well, including the insightful specification of many types of what Goffman (1974: 40-82) calls “keys.”

Keys, in Goffman’s technical terminology, are identifiable forms into which some action that is defined as *real*, and therefore potentially *dangerous*, can be rendered harmless for various purposes. Take, for example, the detonation of an atomic device or a deadly biological weapon—these are very real, very harmful things (Hill 1988). Goffman demonstrates that we are capable of applying several types of *keys* to such events, including turning the reality of a potential nuclear detonation into a:

Daydream or fanciful conjecture—in which, for example, we blow up our horrible neighbors, but only in our mind’s eye.

Unscripted play—as when children, especially young boys, play at lethal matters, such as “war” or “cops and robbers.”

Scripted doing—such as a doomsday movie script or theatrical play that “isn’t real.”

Rehearsals and practicing—in which we go through the motions, but don’t hurt anyone, stopping short of lethal action.

Such keys are all parallels to “thought experiments,” especially where, for example, in the case of large-scale social programs, the carrying out of the *actual* program on *real* people might result in harm to the society in the long run. For instance, if someone proposed the automatic sterilization of everyone with an IQ below 100, I hope we would not want to just “try it out” to see what happens. Rather, by thinking of such programs as “thought experiments” we are invited to “key” reality in various controlled and formulaic ways to try to estimate the possible outcomes and consequences of any proposed social program.

We must never forget that *thinking* is a fundamental and guiding principle for all meaningful sociological research. C. Wright Mills (1956: 362) pointedly reminded us that “Our desire for tight proof and our genuine need for facts do not at all mean that reasoning together is not still a very important part of the proper way of arriving at the truth.” Learning to think and reason outside the bounds of large, readily available “data sets” requires making robust commitments to study the whole of society, not just its overtly accessible parts. Mills (1956: 362) observed further:

Neither the very top nor the very bottom of modern society is a normal part of the world of those who read and write books; we are more familiar with the middle ranks. To understand the middle classes we have only to *see* what is actually around us, but to understand the very top or the very bottom, we must first seek to discover and describe. And that is very difficult to do: the very top of modern society is often inaccessible, the very bottom often hidden.

The terms of such national surveys as are undertaken are far too gross to catch such numerically fine groups as make up the American elite; much public information about their character and their activities is systematically misleading; and they are themselves busy and aloof and even secretive. Were we to select our field of study according to the ready availability of much unworked material, we should never choose the elite. And yet, if we are trying to understand something of the true nature of the society in which we live, we cannot allow the impossibility of rigorous proof to keep us from studying whatever we believe to be important. We must expect fumbles when, without authority or official aid, we set out to investigate something which is in part organized for the purpose of causing fumbles among those who would understand it plainly. Yet, by asserting what we can under such conditions, we may engage them and their agents in controversy, and thus learn more.

For sociologists, thought experiments provide a crucially important tool for conceptualizing investigations of the many substantive parts of society that are “often inaccessible,” to use

Mills' felicitous term. For those of you who want, as Mills put it, "to understand something of the true nature of the society in which we live," then you must, from time to time, put aside large, abstracted "data sets" that may indeed be "systematically misleading" or—worse—specifically "organized for the purpose of causing fumbles among those who would understand [society] plainly."⁴ Mills (1956: 364) usefully concluded, "We do not want to so busy ourselves with details that we take the world in which they exist for granted." Indeed, *what if* the world and its large, readily available data sets are expressly organized to deceive and obfuscate the actual state of things? *What if* institutional review boards, for example, are effectively—possibly nefariously—designed to keep us from learning anything sociologically damning about powerful elites, in general, or about high-ranking university officials, in particular? *What if* we undertake research projects on elites "without authority or official aid?" What consequences might befall us? Such questions are the very stuff of thought experiments; they help us avoid the methodological traps of mistakenly taking our sociological world for granted.

When I first wrote about thought experiments in 1987, I did not at the time, and only recently fully realized, that a mini-explosion in philosophical work on thought experiments was about to occur. A lot of sophisticated work has since been done in cognate fields (see references section, below, and—especially—the bibliographies in Nersessian 1993, and Gendler 2000: 161-250). It is now time for sociologists to play catch-up. Goffman, in giving us a clearer understanding of the nature and fine tuning of various "keys," as tools in our fundamental human conceptual apparatus, opens the way, in my view, for us as sociologists to begin thinking much more seriously about how to better design thought experiments in the social sciences—but following that road today would take us far from my assigned focus: the history of sociology.

THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS IN SOCIOLOGY: FIVE EXAMPLES

What intrigues me, as a student of the history of sociology, is the realization that several major sociologists—although largely unsung within the discipline as a whole—have usefully employed "thought experiments" in one guise or another throughout the early history of our discipline. It's not a new idea in physics, and it's not a new idea in sociology. Today, in quick order, I will present five historical examples. Each person noted below was a prolific author, and bibliographies of their individual writings are books in themselves. Please understand that in each case I provide only the briefest of introductions to the sociologists in question.

Harriet Martineau — *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832-1834)

Harriet Martineau, the first woman sociologist, was born in England in 1802 and died in 1876 (Hill 1991). She is best known for her major observational study of American life:

⁴ "Fabrications"—the outright organization of the world for purposes of deception—are more fully explored in Erving Goffman's *Frame Analysis*.

Society in America, published in 1837. She deserves to be much better known for her methodological treatise: *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (Martineau 1838), a seminal work that predates and is in many ways superior to Émile Durkheim's (1895) *Rules of Sociological Method* (Hill 1989a; Lengermann and Niebrugge 2001). And, although Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* is often touted as a great "classic," Martineau's methods in *Society in America* are far more sophisticated (Hill 2001a).

Martineau became the talk of England by writing a twenty-five part presentation of the then current theories of political economy, appropriately titled: *The Illustrations of Political Economy*, published at the rate of one volume a month for two years, 1832-1834. In each volume, Martineau conducts a variety of "thought experiment," by showing how some specific economic principle would work out in a given setting, describing the setting in as realistic terms as space allowed. The problem, of course, is that in real life single economic principles do not work in a vacuum, they work in combination and in conjunction with many other social forces. Nonetheless, Martineau gave it a good try. She wrote (Martineau 1832-34, I: x-xi):

. . . if we want to teach that security of property is necessary to the prosperity of a people, and to show how and in what proportion wealth increases where there is that security, and dwindles away where there is not, we may make the fact and the reasons very well understood by stating them in a dry, plain way: but the same thing will be quite as evident, and far more interesting and better remembered, if we confirm our doctrine by accounts of the hardships suffered by individuals, and the injuries by society, in such a country as Turkey, which remains in a state of barbarism chiefly through the insecurity of property. The story of a merchant in Turkey, in contrast with one of an English merchant, will convey as much truth as any set of propositions on the subject, and will impress the memory and engage the interest in a much greater degree. This method of teaching Political Economy has never yet been tried, except in the instances of a short story or separate passage here and there.

This is the method in which we propose to convey the leading truths of Political Economy, as soundly, as systematically, as clearly and faithfully, as the utmost pains-taking and the strongest attachment to the subject will enable us to do.

For Martineau her mental conjectures of the working out of economic principles in real life were to be not only sound, systematic, and faithful to logic, but also doubly experimental, in that writing theory in the form of fiction as an instructional device had not yet been tried to any great extent. As to the success of this endeavor, I can tell you happily that the English public waited impatiently for each new monthly installment in Martineau's series. It was a smash hit—boffo! And whether or not we agree today with Martineau's version of economics, as a

model for communicating sociological ideas and concepts to the general public, Martineau has much to teach—and we are all well advised to attend carefully to her.⁵

W.E.B. DuBois — Crossing the Color Line in the American South (1988)

William Edward Burghardt DuBois (1868-1963) was the foremost African-American sociologist of the twentieth century (Deegan 1997a; Hill 1996a). He should be better-known for his major study, *The Philadelphia Negro* (published in 1899) with its detailed ecological mapping. In concert with teaching, DuBois was an activist sociologist, and for years he edited the *Crisis*, the official voice of the NAACP.

In the following thought experiment, published in 1904 in the *International Journal of Ethics*, DuBois creatively finds a way to bring a white person into a setting where he or she could not enter in reality: DuBois writes (1904: 297-8):

Let me take you journeying across the mountains and meadows, threading the hills of Maryland, gliding over the broad fields of Virginia, climbing the blue ridge of Carolina and seating ourselves in the cotton kingdom. I would not like you to spend a day or a month here in this little town; I should much rather you would spend ten years, if you are really studying the problem; for casual visitors get casual ideas, and the problems here are the growth of centuries.

From the depot and the cluster of doubtful houses that form the town, pale crimson fields with tell-tale gullies stretch desolately away . . . The whole horizon looks shabby . . . But I do not want you to see so much of the physical as of the spiritual town, and first you must see the color line. It stands at the depot with “waiting room for white people” and “waiting room for colored people,” and then the uninitiated might lose sight of it; but it is there, there and curiously wandering, but continuous and never ending. And in the little town, as in a thousand others, they have an eleventh commandment, and it reads “Thou shalt not Cross the Line . . .”

Were you there in person I could not take you easily across the line into the world I want to study. But in spirit let me lead you across . . .

And so he does. DuBois, using the framework of a thought experiment, helps those on the other side of the color line explore and better understand a world they cannot easily enter in real life.⁶

⁵ Martineau, it should be noted, also carried out several practical and successful social experiments in real life, including: miniature farming, lectures for working people, and a scheme to build better housing for laborers. For details, see Hill 2005b and Martineau 2004.

⁶ Going beyond thought to action, E. Franklin Frazier engaged in risky, real-life “breaching experiments” during the 1923 meeting of the American Sociological Society (Deegan 2002).

Jane Addams — If Men Were Seeking the Franchise (1913)

Jane Addams (1860-1935) is also one of the foremost sociologists of the twentieth century, a winner of the Nobel Prize for Peace, and – with W.E.B. Dubois – one of the few sociologists ever honored on a U.S. postage stamp. Addams' early sociological efforts culminated in the pioneering *Hull-House Maps and Papers* in 1895 (Residents of Hull-House 1895). Its detailed ecological maps of a Chicago neighborhood strongly influenced the subsequent work of W.E.B. DuBois in Philadelphia (Deegan 1988b) and presaged the so-called “Chicago school” of ecological sociology by two and a half decades (Deegan 1988a: 55-70). Addams engaged the community in which she lived, and she worked passionately for unpopular causes, including pacifism in time of war (Deegan 2003) and the right for women to vote.

In a delightfully satirical essay published in the *Ladies Home Journal* in 1913, Addams used a thought experiment to turn the tables on men who denied women the right to vote. What, she asked, would *women* do if women could vote but *men* could not. Would women allow men to vote? Addams (1913: 107-108) wrote:

Let us imagine throughout this article, if we can sustain an absurd hypothesis for so long, the result upon society if the matriarchal period had held its own; if the development of the State had closely followed that of the Family until the chief care of the former, as that of the latter, had come to be the nurture and education of children and the protection of the weak, sick and aged [L]et us assume that the political machinery of such a society, the franchise and the rest of it, were in the hands of women because they had always best exercised those functions. Let us further imagine a given moment when these women, who in this hypothetical society had possessed political power from the very beginnings of the State, were being appealed to by the voteless men that men might be associated with women in the responsibilities of citizenship

[L]et us consider various replies which these citizen women might reasonably make to the men who were seeking the franchise; the men insisting that only through the use of the ballot could they share the duties of the State

In the remainder of the essay Addams skillfully puts in question the patterns of greed and violence evidenced in the real behavior of many men in positions of power, outlining no less than six major reasons why men should not be entrusted with the ballot. But Addams was neither a sexist nor an essentialist, and concluded:

I do not believe that women broadened by life and its manifold experiences would actually present these six objections to men as real reasons for withholding the franchise from them, unless indeed they had long formed the habit of regarding men not as comrades and fellow-citizens, but as a class by themselves, in essential matters really inferior although always held sentimentally very much above them. (Addams 1913: 112).

How ought we to think and act responsibly in a world that is structurally opposite to the present arrangement? That is the interesting and insightful question which Addams posed, and one that we can usefully set again and again in situations of dramatic social inequity.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman — The Herland/Ourland Saga (1915/16)

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) was another major American sociologist who, like Addams, with whom she was friends, exerted her primary influence outside the academy. Gilman is best known in the social sciences for her landmark volume, *Women and Economics* (1898), but she clearly deserves to be known for many other works. During 1909 to 1916, Gilman published an experimental sociological magazine, *The Forerunner*, for which she wrote *all* the copy for each monthly issue. In addition to short articles, and even some poetry, each year she published two or more full-fledged books in serial form, including the well-known book, *Herland*.

Herland (1915) was the first half of a two-part saga, concluded in 1916 as *With Her in Ourland*, and I am pleased to have collaborated with Mary Jo Deegan in co-editing a timely new edition of *With Her in Ourland* (Gilman 1916/1997). The saga tells how a male sociologist (Van) stumbles into a woman-only society (Herland), falls in love with a Herland forester (Ellador), marries, and goes on a tour of “the real world” (i.e., Ourland), only to conclude that Ourland is, at present (i.e., 1916, during WWI) in much too terrible a state of affairs to raise a child in (and thus Ellador and Van return to Herland, hoping, however, that someday Ourland can become a fit place for men, women, and children to live together in peace and harmony). This is a complex and lengthy sociological thought experiment (Deegan 1997b; Hill 1996a). What would a world be like if governed solely by women’s values? What would a woman raised in such a world think about the realities of Ourland? Could a man from Ourland come to love and understand a woman from Herland? Should a Herland woman and an Ourland man have children? If so, where should they live and raise their child? If in Herland, what are the potential consequences of introducing men permanently into Herland’s previously women-only social structure?

Gilman’s answers to these conjectures are found in this narrative passage, near the end of the book. Van, the sociologist, speaks to the reader:

We settled back into the smooth-running Herland life without a ripple. No trouble about housing; they had always a certain percentage of vacancies, to allow for freedom of movement. No trouble about clothes; those perfect garments were to be had everywhere, always lovely and suitable. No trouble about food; that smooth, well-adjusted food supply was available wherever we went.

No appeals for deserving charity—no need of them. Nothing to annoy and depress, everything to give comfort and strength; and under all, more perceptible to me now than before, that vast, steady, onmoving current of definite purpose, planning and working to make good better and better best.

The “atmosphere” in the world behind us [i.e. Ourland] is that of a thousand mixed currents, pushing and pulling in every direction, controverting and opposing one another.

Here [in Herland] was peace—and power, with accomplishment.

Eagerly she [Ellador] returned to her people. With passionate enthusiasm she poured out, in wide tours of lecturing, and in print, her report of world conditions. She saw it taken up, studied, discussed by those great-minded over-mothers of the land. She saw the young women, earnest eyed, of boundless hope and high purpose, planning, as eager missionaries plan, what they could do to spread to all the world their proven gains. Reprints of that encyclopedia were scattered to every corner of the land, and read swiftly, eagerly, to crowding groups of listeners. There began to stir in Herland a new spirit, pushing, seeking, a new sense of responsibility, a larger duty.

“It is not enough,” they said, “that we should be so happy. Here is the whole round world—millions and hundreds of millions of people—and all their babies! Not in a thousand years will we rest, till the world is happy!”

And to this end they began to plan, slowly, wisely, calmly, making no haste; sure, above all, that they must preserve their own integrity and peace if they were to help others (Gilman 1916: 192-193) .

Charlotte Perkins Gilman employed an intricate thought experiment to explore the world during World War I. Nebraska’s Mari Sandoz, another novelist, brings us up to the eve of World War II.

Mari Sandoz — Fascism on the Great Plains (1939)

Mari Sandoz (1896-1966) is best known as a novelist of the American west (Stauffer 1982), but she was also a sociology student at the University of Nebraska where, as an undergraduate, she took what she called a “provocative” course with Professor J.O. Hertzler. As a result of Hertzler’s course, Sandoz conducted one of the earliest participant observation studies on record, an investigation of young men who picked up women “at the curb” on the streets of Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1930 during the Depression (Sandoz 1988). Sandoz posed as a young woman willing to be “picked up,” and after attracting the notice of young men, she promptly interviewed them. Often pegged as an historian who wrote novels, Sandoz considered several of her works to comprise a large, interconnected sociological series (Hill 1987, 1989b).

Her most ambitious project along sociological lines is *Capital City*, published in 1939. Here, Sandoz conducted an excruciating thought experiment, asking what if Midwesterners unthinkingly and unwittingly took a right-wing turn of mind?—was fascism possible in America?

To explore this question, Sandoz draws her characters in *Capital City* as ideal types, such that the city itself becomes the protagonist, which may explain the failure of the book in the eyes of literary critics, and its success from a sociological point of view. Sandoz took

enormous steps to insure the socio-structural accuracy of her characters and situations, and the archival record demonstrates that she immersed herself in research just as demanding and meticulous as if she were writing a non-fiction analysis of urban society in the Midwest.⁷ The reality of her fictional creation was to her palpable. She wrote to her publisher:

The book promises to be pretty good, and certainly unlike anything that I've ever seen. It has grown so convincing to me I can hardly believe that it isn't the story of a real community . . . (Sandoz to Weeks, 24 April 1939, Box 6, Mari Sandoz Collection, University of Nebraska Archives).

But, could Nebraskans be lulled into fascism? Sandoz provides her answer in the final chapter. She wrote:

Then the [fascist] Gold Shirts charged the pickets, the trucks roared and started to move. As the Hammond watchman unlocked the big chain inside the fence, a woman came fighting through the crowd, waving, shouting to the man. "Wait! Wait!" she cried, running directly into two Gold Shirts stomping down men with their boot heels, swinging the butts of their rifles upon them. (Sandoz 1939: 341-342).

Yes, Nebraskans could become fascists, *if they weren't careful, if they became complacent, if they didn't pay attention to power and politics.*

Sandoz intended her thought experiment as a "wake-up call," but when Nebraskans read her book they turned angrily on the messenger—Sandoz received threats against her life and she wisely left town, eventually settling in New York. It took a full decade for the storm to pass, but in 1950 Sandoz was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Nebraska in recognition of her substantial contributions to American literature (Stauffer 1982: 181). Working outside the academy, Sandoz applied her sociological acumen as a self-supporting professional writer and novelist, but not without risk or consequences. The public reaction to Sandoz' "thought experiment" underscores the point that sociology, when it is accessible rather than esoteric, has the power to move people—sometimes in unpredictable and unanticipated ways.

LESSONS LEARNED — THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS AND ALTERNATIVE DISCIPLINARY FUTURES

We have now briefly surveyed five exemplars of sociological thought experiments from the early years of sociology. Martineau, DuBois, Addams, Gilman, and Sandoz skillfully employed creative hypotheses and logical conjectures to convey sociological understanding to their readers in new, effective, and dramatic ways. These instrumental and insightful writers demonstrate that sociological communication outside the confines of academe is not only

⁷ Sandoz' research memos have been archivally preserved. For a note on the general methodology of archival research in the history of sociology, per se, see Hill (1993).

possible but can also be popular, rewarding, and influential. But, beyond knowing about thought experiments, and realizing that thought experiments were successfully utilized by several early sociologists, do these sociologists have anything else to tell us?

In the years since Mary Jo Deegan's pioneering work on Jane Addams, we have learned that there are *many* such interesting and little-known sociologists peppering the history of sociology, and that we can know about their ideas *only* if we take the time to read more widely and examine our disciplinary record more carefully and critically. As a result of such research, Joe R. Feagin (2001), in his presidential address to the American Sociological Association called on all of us to pay special attention to Harriet Martineau, Jane Addams, and W.E.B. DuBois, in particular. These sociologists, Feagin observed, are typically *superior* to the traditional academic sociologists emphasized in most sociology courses and reading lists.

Feagin, Deegan and many others are now asking: What does our disciplinary past tell us about our present? What models from the past are worthy patterns for our future? What, in short, are our *alternative futures* as a discipline? Although we have long used the concept of change and planning for the future, the idea of specifically constructing *alternative futures*—and then deciding which one we would most prefer, and figuring out how to make it happen—was coined by British sociologist, Anthony Giddens (1986).

Thus, I have asked, as a thought experiment: *What if* sociology tomorrow were founded on the principles of observation and action advocated by Harriet Martineau? I addressed this question in a recent book, co-edited with Susan Hoecker-Drysdale, and here is my projection (Hill 2001b). A distinctly Martineauian sociology would have the following characteristics:

- It would insist on logically ordered and carefully reasoned expositions of social processes and situations—and avoid simplistic, ad hoc formulas.
- It would feature a fundamental quest for systematic understanding of social institutions as *larger wholes* rather than constantly focusing on minute and often irrelevant questions.
- Direct empirical observation would be respected, as would in-depth qualitative investigations of social patterns, in contrast to today's near total reliance on survey questionnaire data.
- Discourse would be used for corroboration, never as a primary source of empirical evidence.
- Applied demographic, economic, environmental and epidemiological research would be more highly valued, as would the careful, systematic review and analysis of government reports and census materials.
- We would demand integrity, egalitarianism, and high moral standards in personal and professional conduct.
- Further, we would embrace rather than eschew sociological research into social questions in which we have a profound personal interest.
- We would be sensitive to ethnocentrism and its consequences.
- Recognition for the importance of conducting inclusive investigations across divisive social attributes, including gender, class, race, physical disability, and the like, together with active concern for oppressed peoples.
- Concern to better understand the patterns of everyday life and routine experiences.

- Heightened sensitivity to the impact of metatheoretical assumptions on our inferences and research designs.⁸
- We would reconstruct sociology to be a socially purposeful activity intended to be useful beyond the idyllic groves of academe.
- Dedication to a strong personal work ethic.
- We would respond as a discipline to local as well as national social and political issues.
- We would disseminate sociological insights and findings to the lay public in comprehensive formats, including essays, editorials, didactic fiction, and newspaper columns.
- Sociological reflexivity, together with individual reflection on the self and its circumstances, capabilities, constraints, and opportunities.
- An abiding faith in the possibilities for human social improvement.
- We would mutually encourage our ever increasing capacity for personal growth and intellectual insight.
- And last, we would all exhibit independence of thought, and steadfast public commitment and private sacrifice, when conscience dictates—and thereby necessitates—support for unpopular ideas and perspectives.

By taking Martineau seriously, and conducting a thought experiment based on her ideas, we can project an alternative future sociology that differs greatly from sociology as it is practiced today. Is it a future we want to adopt? Is it workable? I think so, but that discussion would likely take us well into the late evening.

CONCLUSION

For now, suffice it for me to leave you with a general conclusion and a recommendation: On the evidence, we can conclude that the history of sociology provides many alternative models of sociological methods and examples of professional activity, including “thought experiments” and meaningful sociological work outside the ivory tower. Given this conclusion, let each of us make a commitment to search out models that inspire and amaze us, to look actively for models that provide constructive alternative futures for our discipline.

When we look to the past, we need not ask if the *past* could be different, but we can and *should* ask . . . *What if* long-ignored lessons from the past were put into play again. *What if* we build a *new* sociology based on the ideas and practices of Martineau, DuBois, Addams, Gilman, Sandoz and dozens of other humane, intelligent, and worthwhile sociologists who have been too long forgotten?⁹ *What if* we all conduct a “thought experiment” in which we envision

⁸ The larger implications of metatheoretical assumptions are outlined in Hill (1977, 1981, 1984, and 2005a).

⁹ The exciting and enormously interesting work of recovering unsung sociologists has resulted in an increasingly large number of publications since the 1980s, the bibliographic details of which lie beyond the scope of the present paper. Readers interested in this burgeoning (continued...)

a sociology that is more interesting and exciting, more useful and purposeful, and more meaningful and understandable?

Let's keep an eye on the rear view mirror. Let us learn from our collective past when it makes sense to do so. Let us all examine our disciplinary history more closely, carefully, and critically—and then let us all look to our collective future and seriously ask, *What if . . . ?*

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⁹(...continued)

research can begin profitably with the books and articles published by Kay Broschart, Mary Jo Deegan, Michael R. Hill, Susan Hoecker-Drysdale, Patricia Madoo Lengerman, Lynn MacDonald, Jill Niebrugge-Brantley, Shulamit Reinharz, and Linda Rynbrandt, among others.

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