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TOWARD RIGOR IN THE UNDERGRADUATE SOCIOLOGY CURRICULUM:  
SOME THOUGHTS ON CHANGE AND INNOVATION <sup>1</sup>

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CHANGE IS OVERDUE in undergraduate sociology. The present situation is too often dominated by classroom charlatans, textbook sophistry, and mental torpor. In a science which confronts complex intellectual puzzles and deeply problematic social issues, we bore the average student nearly to death, we chase the brightest scholars from our midst, and we reward one-dimensional rote memorizers with good grades and glowing letters of recommendation. Given this stifling state of affairs, a change toward intellectual rigor in the undergraduate curriculum would indeed be a welcome and revolutionary development.

By asking for “rigor,” I do not mean more sociology statistics courses or the unthinking scientism that would limit sociology instruction to POET (population, organization, environment, and technology) curricula. I am not, however, opposed to increased math, logic, and writing requirements for sociology majors — as long as the courses are not taught by sociologists. What I do ask is for texts that challenge undergraduate students to read, comprehend, and apply the ideas, concepts, and points of view expressed by such contemporary sociologists such as Hannah Arendt, Simone de Beauvoir, Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, Erving Goffman, Jurgen Habermas, Alfred Schutz, and/or Dorothy Smith, and of such classical writers as Edith Abbot, Jane Addams, Emile Durkheim, W.E.B. DuBois, Sigmund Freud, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Harriet Martineau, Karl Marx, George Herbert Mead, Jessie Taft, and/or Max Weber. I have grown very weary of pabulum texts that summarize, simplify and distort such theorists rather than confront students with original readings from their works or, at the least, present students with well-reasoned arguments and clear prose at approximately the same intellectual level.

The difficulty here does not lie inherently with our students. They possess, on balance, more than adequate native ability and innate intelligence. What they do need, as Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot would say, is something to stimulate “the little grey cells.”

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<sup>1</sup> Invited comments prepared for a Roundtable on Change and Innovation in the Undergraduate Sociology Curriculum, Annual meetings of the American Sociological Association, Cincinnati, Ohio, August 25, 1991.

Our students often lack adult challenges. As a case in point, I recall a respected colleague who balked at putting Rosabeth Moss Kanter's *Men and Women of the Corporation* on a graduate sociology reading list because he thought it much too sophisticated for his students to handle independently. Meanwhile, across campus, Kanter's book was routinely assigned without incident as supplementary reading in a sophomore-level women's studies course. Same school, same student body, but very different challenges and expectations.

The pursuit of intellectual rigor is hard work for students and instructors alike. And the difficulty of this task is only exacerbated when pabulum textbooks and lax (if not altogether dull) instructors together create a sophomoreic milieu of lowered expectations and diminished challenges. Thus, I applaud the collegiality of Anthony Giddens in trying seriously to rectify the current malaise, first through the two editions of his *Sociology: A Brief but Critical Introduction* (cf., Hill 1988b), and now with British and US editions of his weighty introductory text, *Sociology* (Polity Press 1989, 1990). These works represent welcome and revolutionary innovations in the undergraduate curriculum.

The innovation that Giddens represents is fundamentally a return to scholarly values and traditions that have been largely lost in American sociology. In my own archival and historical research projects (e.g., Hill 1988a, 1989), I am digging into the origins and foundations of American sociology — and it is sobering to review the high-level text materials that were assigned to undergraduate students in those early years. Take, for example, E.A. Ross' rigorous introductory works: *Social Control*; *Foundations of Sociology*; and *Social Psychology* (cf., Keith 1988). Or, compare our textbooks today with the adult challenges posed in Park and Burgess' *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*. These and many other early writers provided adult, substantive intellectual content from which novice sociologists could draw real nourishment.

There has never been a more important time than now for thorough change in the undergraduate sociology curriculum. The innovation we need is conceptual and intellectual rigor. As a teacher, I advocate a move toward raised academic expectations in our classrooms — and I ask for solid, challenging texts to use across the curriculum (from introductory courses to senior seminars). As a colleague, I ask for open, inter-campus support for the few teachers who at this moment are working, virtually in isolation and without reward, on campuses across the nation to initiate the sorely needed transformation of the undergraduate sociology curriculum toward rigor. This is an uphill battle complicated by many institutionalized obstacles, but the effort is worth making if we want sociology to fulfill its mission as a scientific discipline.

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