

The Australian Sociological Association

Applied Sociology Thematic Group

Contact email November 2011

Sociology: n. *the study of the development, structure, and functioning of human society.*

The Concise Oxford Dictionary

One issue that has been on my mind over the last few weeks has been the phenomenon of people power. There have been the riots in Britain, the Arab Spring in the Arab world, Occupy Wall Street, and similar demonstrations have been held in 670 U.S. towns, and more than 900 towns and cities around the world, including Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. They are mainly protesting about social and economic inequality, corporate greed, corruption and influence over government - particularly from the financial sector and lobbyists. Many of the participants have been mobilised by social networking, internet sites or mobile phones. Mostly people have been seeking change to the present social structure. To try to stop them, the politicians in power have used the police or the military to break the protests up but they keep coming back.

I have seen or heard journalists, psychologists, politicians, even economists, commenting on these events, but I have yet to see or hear a sociologist being asked to comment. I can imagine one or two Ph.D. students thinking about it as a topic but even if they take it up it will be several years before they finish and perhaps then it will have little relevance. Yet explaining what is happening in society now is supposed to be our specialisation. You would therefore expect a sociologist would be the first to be asked for comment. This raises the question of whether our discipline is dynamic enough to offer an explanation of the 'development, structure, and functioning' of society as it happens or can we only think about it in the abstract over time?

Suppose a miracle happened and tomorrow morning, your boss came to you and said: "You are a professional sociologist, I want you to give me an assessment of the social changes likely to occur because of these 'Occupy' demonstrations and how they could impinge on this business (or department)." What would you say in your report?

Perhaps some of the things you could consider are:

1. That demonstrations by the 'silent majority' are not new and are recorded through history.

Ancient Egypt 1152 BC. A demonstration by the equivalent of Public Servants because of corruption and the loss of supplies. See Romer, J. (1984:118-23, 124,), *Ancient Lives*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London.

England 1832. A Trade Union was formed (Not by the Communist Party but by Members of the Methodist Church) for which they were arrested tried and transported to Australia. This generated such an outcry and 800,000 people signed a petition for their release and their supporters organised one of the first successful marches in the UK. The men were released and trade unions permitted. See Marlow, J. (1985), *The Tolpuddle Martyrs*, Grafton Books, London.

More recent examples are of course those that have filled the TV screens over the past year or so that have resulted in significant social change.

2. Perhaps your report could then point to the fact that when a large number of ordinary people become sufficiently concerned about a particular abuse of power and protest, and are prepared to continue protesting, despite the application of force against them, then social change is likely to occur in the area of their concern. To this you can add something of Tönnies concern about the loss of community, Durkheim's concern about anomie and moral chaos, Gasset's concern about the decay of mass culture and the dangers of massification, Weber's point of the iron cage of bureaucracy and instrumental, manipulative rationality. To this you should perhaps add Sztompka's point that change has an unequal influence on the various components of society, and does not have an inevitable impact, or necessarily any impact, on all sections of society.

3. Finally, you will have to assess where your organisation sits in the social structure and judge whether or by how much the particular issues of social change being demanded will have on its operations.

If you feel like it, I would like to see your answer to the question. Then perhaps those of us going to the Conference can have a discussion about the question.

Alan Scott,
Convenor