

Applied Sociology Thematic Group
For Sociologists who work outside University

Contact email for July 2012

Greetings All,

Old theorists never die, they simply fade away.

Some years ago I was inveigled to go to hear a lecture from the latest psychologist on his marvellous new theory. When it came to question time I pointed out that I had heard bits taken from various older theorists, strung together without acknowledgement, to make what was now being billed as a challenging new theory. The people who had inveigled me to go said to me afterward, who were these people you were talking about. Theorists that had been important to me were no longer known. In itself there is nothing wrong with revamping older theories, as long as you show how and where you have drawn the ideas from. But because the theorists of the past tend to fade into the background, later generations understand less and less about them. Cahnman & Heberle make the point that Tönnies 1887 'Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft', is well known to sociologists but few have read the book cover to cover and how many of us have followed through on his later development and redefinition of these early ideas in the 900+ other publications he wrote over the next 49 years?

In the practice of applied sociology, I have always found Tönnies a helpful theorist. Whether I have always used his ideas in the way he intended, is another matter. What I find helpful about Tönnies is that in 1887 he uncovered for us the foundations on which the 20th century was built and the 21st is still building.

One of the social issues that is currently of concern for people and communities in Australia, is the number of people losing their jobs - a social catastrophe for many families and communities. At the same time we have it being argued there is a need to import several thousand workers for the mining industry. Then we have several thousand other people in immigration detention doing nothing productive but costing the country a great deal of money.

In 1887 Tönnies was pointing out that the more extensive the commercial trading area, the more probable it is that the pursuit of profit for its proprietors will prevail over any or all the needs and concerns of other people. In recent times, Piotr Sztompka has drawn to our attention a new weapon that is underpinning the pursuit of profit and politics – the use of 'crises'. Where once a 'crisis' was temporary and soon to be fixed, now, it is a chronic, permanent and endemic feature of modern society. Sztompka also observes that people have become accustomed to accept the recurrent or endemic 'crises', to enforce economic, political or cultural changes. They understand there will always be a crisis that is said to require social

change to maintain the economic status quo. Where Tönnies identified the *gesellschaft* as the platform on which these social crises would be acted out, Sztompka extends this by arguing that the way to study social change is by identifying the effects of change so that the social trauma that is generated is laid bare.

Because a theory was promulgated what seems a long while ago, it doesn't mean that it has no value. However, as Cumming (2000) has said; "The usefulness of a theory depends upon its ability to explain the present and predict the future". Where does applied sociology stand in challenging the present overarching dominance of the need for profit and increasing profit against the needs of people? Can we afford to lay bare the social trauma generated by large scale redundancies? Dare we point out what these decisions do to the fabric of communities? Has applied sociology a role in critiquing the effects of political and economic policies?

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