



Contact Email for February 2018

In an article, published in *The American Sociologist* in 1979, Jack Gibbs wrote:

*Unless sociology undergoes a radical change, the field will be deprived of the resources it now commands. Those resources now exceed our collective accomplishments, and sooner or later there will be an accounting. Directors of governmental agencies and officers of foundations will commence giving sociologists a medium hello, and the beginning of the end will be signaled when a tough dean puts this question to the head of a sociology department: "What have you people accomplished in over a century?" Even a glib head will have a difficult moment. This vision of doom is tempered by the promise of contingent salvation, in the form of another prophecy: Sociologists will avoid collective extinction only by pursuing theories and research that have policy implications. A theory has policy implications if it makes assertions about realizable means to goals sought by a group whose interests transcend scientific and scholarly activities. Correlatively, research has policy implications if it bears on the empirical validity of an assertion about such means. My plea for theory and research with policy implications reduces to this: do something or say something that someone might find both interesting and useful. (Gibbs, 1979:79-85)*

In his and Michael Micklin's 1981 book "Handbook of Applied Sociology", he repeats his earlier contentions and goes on to say:

*These contrasting prophecies about the future of sociology, as envisioned by Jack Gibbs, pose a sharp challenge that applied sociologists cannot ignore. Confronting and responding to that challenge during the 1980's could be highly invigorating. To launch that quest, we must face a demand, surmount a dilemma, resolve a paradox, respond to an imperative, and answer an ultimate question. To carry out that quest we must also clarify our analytic perspective, select the kinds of roles we seek to enact as applied sociologists, and learn to communicate clearly with policy makers.*

The outside world is much less tolerant of useless theorizing and data collecting, however, especially when it is paying the bill for those activities. It wants to know: "What can you, as a sociologist, tell me that will help solve this problem." The most insistent demand is that sociology be relevant to real problems. Hence, they are insisting that sociologists contribute directly to the attainment of an employer's goals, if they are to receive either a hearing or funding.

Although sociologists have made far fewer inroads into private business and industry than into government, sophisticated corporate managers are becoming aware that many of their problems—both inside and outside the firm—have social as well as technical and economic aspects. Going beyond traditional concerns with employee satisfaction and public image, in the U.S. at least, corporations have been known to hire sociologists to examine organizational structures, communication patterns, and changing life styles. Indeed, I was once given such a task. In business, however, the bottom line is always the final arbiter. Hence, sociologists must demonstrate that they can contribute to the positive side of that balance sheet or else go job hunting.

Another expanding employment opportunity for sociologists is private consulting and research firms, ranging from one-person operations to organizations employing a number of researchers from various disciplines. All such firms depend on the research contracts they can secure from public and private organizations. Those sponsors fund research to obtain answers to questions and problems with which they must deal. Hence, the research firm must be able to give the sponsor whatever information or advice it needs. The sponsor calls most of the shots in this process, and the target is research that is both relevant and useful and sometimes they demand it is self fulfilling.

We have moved on over 30 years since much of the above was written, so what has changed, Sociology has been absorbed into other faculties, and, as I hear it, is not being taught as an exciting approach to making the world a better place. Employment opportunities for Sociologists have not expanded and indeed hardly exist.

Are we at deaths door or can we still prove ourselves?

The February Webinar has not materialised, perhaps we can get one going on this issue.

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