

THE PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS AS RITUAL AND REFLECTION:

AN ANALYSIS OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESSES TO
THE AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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The basic thesis of this paper is that certain broad changes which take place in the historical development of sociology can be observed in the content of the annual presidential address. The presidential address is a significant document for witnessing such changes because of the freedom afforded the president in preparing his address. A sense of permissiveness can be seen in the words of past presidents. For example, in his 1949 address Ogburn stated that

... it should be remembered that one of the customs of long standing among us is that a president of a scientific society in his presidential address is not expected to be bound so rigidly by the restriction of date, nor in his imagination to be so disciplined as would be the case if he were presenting the results of a piece of scientific research. (p. 1)

In a similar vein, Louis Wirth observed in his 1947 address that

On such an occasion as this it is customary to offer a discourse on one's favorite topic, under unusual conditions of freedom bordering on license. If one is so inclined, he is even permitted to preach a sermon, though it is well to remember that the congregation is free to depart before the benediction. (p. 2)

Similarly, in his 1961 address George Homans noted that "... if I have only one chance to speak *ex cathedra*, I cannot afford to say something innocuous. On the contrary, now if ever is the time to be noxious." (p. 809)

Because of this latitude the presidential address elicits value judgments, and it is precisely this fact that makes the address so reflective of the state of the discipline. As is discussed below, the presidents have delivered one of four types of address. By classifying each address according to a fourfold

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typology and by dividing the development of American sociology into four periods, it can be seen that each period is characterized by a certain type of address. This paper is organized on the basis of first sketching some basic characteristics of American sociology during each of the four periods, and then examining the contents of the addresses for each period as they relate to these characteristics.

Classification of the Addresses

A reading of the presidential addresses to the ASA suggests that there are four avenues open to a president when preparing his address. First, he can focus on a substantive topic within the discipline, such as Sutherland did in 1939 with his address on white-collar criminality. Secondly, he can discuss the role of the sociologist, especially with regard to social action. Thirdly, he can address himself to the general state of the discipline. And, fourthly, he can assume the stance of a polemicist in discussing certain social problems.

Table one lists and classifies the presidential addresses according to this fourfold typology. Although this table indicated certain shifts in the type of address from one period to another, it does not capture the qualitative distinctness of these transitions. Therefore, we shall follow the work of Hinkle and Hinkle³ in sketching the development of American sociology, and then discuss how the addresses reflect the changing concerns of the discipline.

THE FIRST PERIOD: 1906-20, PROGRAMMATIC P. C. LASCENDES AND APOLOGETIC ESSAYS

The State of the King (1906)

Hinkle and Hinkle point out that many sociologists of the first period were in search of scientific laws of human behavior which were equivalent to laws

³ Roscoe Hinkle and Cicely Hinkle, The Development of Modern Sociology: Its Nature and Growth in the United States, New York: Doubleday, 1954.

governing the physical universe. They also tended to equate social change with social progress, and many considered social evolution as subject to melioristic intervention using sociological knowledge. Lewis Wirth has suggested that American sociology in this period was characterized by an abundance of writing on topics which had been examined by social reformers, social critics, and social revolutionaries who, for lack of any other academic refuge, identified themselves with sociology.² Turning now to the presidential addresses of the first period, one can see these characteristics reflected.

The Presidential Addresses

A reading of the presidential addresses from 1905 to 1920 shows the interest that sociologists had in the melioristic application of sociology. No less than 12 of the first 15 addresses focused on the central social problems of the day. Their dissatisfaction with the state of society, especially in its political and economic aspects, is revealed in a series of addresses on the evils of war and capitalism. The problem of war was analyzed in addresses by Giddings in 1910,¹ Ross in 1915, Howard in 1917, and Dealey in 1920. Giddings, for example, maintained that sociology can be of use in coping with other social problems only to the extent that sociology can answer the big social question concerning the causes of war; Giddings pointed out that

. . . exceptional men, and especially all exponents and presidents and ministers of war, are not puppets of the Zeitgeist, but in a scientific sense of that word, are the true social causes of war, and, as such, are very responsible for the maintenance of peace. . . . Conspicuous men of peace . . . are the true social causes, and centers of social order." (p. 13)

The connection with problems accompanying industrialization and capitalism is

²Lewis Wirth, "American Sociology: 1915-17," American Journal of Sociology, June to October 1951, p. 773.

manifested in addresses by Ward in 1907, Small in 1913, Ross in 1924, Vincent in 1916, and Blackmer in 1929. Edward Ross, for example, in his 1924 address entitled "Was an Extensionist" contended that

Now, if ever, labor needs every weapon which its forefathers gained. . . . And yet, during the last dozen years, the labor of suppression of free assemblies, free speech, and free press by local authorities or by the state operating under martial law have been as numerous as to have become an old story. . . . Underneath the "law-and-order" movement nothing is found but the pecuniary aims of a handful of greedy and arrogant local magnates, who by the unholy use of their financial power have been able to force the city authorities, the public courts, the businessmen, the politicians, and the newspapers to fight their battles. (p. 6)

Lester Ward's 1906 address contains an interesting statement of the belief that sociological laws can be applied to the eradication of social problems:

(Sociology) has not only discovered the laws of society; it has discovered the principles according to which social operations take place. It has gone farther even than physics. . . . Sociology has not only established the law of social evolution, but it has found the principle underlying and explaining that law. . . .

Social dynamics . . . is the domain of social transformation, and explains all change in social structure and human institutions. It is the science of social progress. The laws of both these sciences (statics and dynamics) have been to a large extent discovered and formulated. (p. 7)

It is perhaps symbolic that the first period should end with Hawley's address entitled "The Science of Economics" and the second period begin with Hoyer's 1921 address entitled "The Sociological Point of View." In a sense, the titles suggest a transition from programmatic pronouncements to more modest endeavors by sociologists.

THE SCIENCE OF ECONOMICS, THE QUEST FOR SCIENTIFIC RESPONSIBILITY

The State of the Field

During this second period, sociology tried to become a more objective and value-free discipline, and its reach was later likely to exceed its grasp. During the first period the passion for solving the social problems of the day was

supported by little more than a faith that sociology would discover a scientific foundation for social policies. Sociology then was guided in its investigations largely by broad philosophical notions concerning human nature and the social order. In reaction to this sociology of the first period which was characterized by philosophies of history based on deductive laws, the sociologists of the second period turned more toward the natural sciences for models. An increasing realization of the need for sociology to deal inductively with empirical data led to an emphasis on multi-causal explanations, more microscopic phenomena, and the importance of statistical and quasi-history methods. Although concern was still directed to social problems during the second period, they were viewed more as sociological questions rather than as social problems. The sociologist was becoming more interested in understanding social life rather than changing it.

The Presidential Addresses

Table One shows a marked spacing off of political addresses during the second period. Only two such addresses were given in this period -- Weatherly's 1973 address entitled "Racial Assisted" and Ellwood's 1928 address entitled "Intolerance." However, both of these men were born before 1875 and can be considered as belonging to sociology's formative period. Table One also shows a shift toward addresses on specific substantive topics. The following addresses are examples of the type of specific and generic social phenomena which characterize the second period: Ellwood's "Urban Inflow and Selection," Ogburn's "Folk and Engineers," Burgess' "Social Processes on the Pacific Coast," and Becker's "Social Control Contacts."

Burgess' 1921 address entitled "The Sociological Point of View" provided the concern of sociologists in the second period with more delimited research questions. His state-of-the-discipline address is also an interesting example of

the building-block approach to science, as compared to the more deductive approach of the first period. Hayes stated that

... If sociology is to fact to reach a body of discoveries, that is to say, of new facts and not principles of explanation, it must do so by the accumulation of a multitude of special researches bearing upon small problems, each by itself incapable either of establishing any sweeping generalization, or of leading to any far-reaching practical application. (p. 2)

The 1926 meetings were devoted to the topic of the Progress of Sociology, and Gillin delivered an address entitled "The Development of Sociology in the United States." Gillin noted that the sociologist increasingly realizes that sociology has its own problems and attempts to understand them by its own methods. He mentions the social survey, the census, case studies, and the statistical method. Gillin observed that "... a tendency has appeared, such as emerged long ago in the physical sciences, to abandon one-chair generalizations. . . ." (p. 18)

Ogburn's 1939 address entitled "The Fallacies of Scientific Sociology" is perhaps the most prophetic of all the addresses. His predictions about the future of sociology are based on an imaginative projection of the sociological tendencies of that day. Ogburn predicted that sociology in the future will be characterized by

... a marked decline in the prestige of intellectuality as such. . . . With the decline in intellectualism it will be less easy to achieve fame as a scientist, and, with the rise of science, regulations will be built up, records, and measures. . . . Verification in this future mode of sociology will be almost to a fetish. . . . That, whether it be within the dull and . . . repeating person. For science will rest on a base of a great deal of long, painful, painstaking work. . . . and stupid persons are . . . careful, patient and methodical.

In this future . . . program will be a substitution. . . . The universities will be . . . mechanical laboratories, and individual workers will have plenty of machines, all of them electric. (pp. 14-5)

Arthur Bernard's 1938 address entitled "Sociological Research and the Exceptional Man," along with Giddens's address, is indicative of an incipient reaction to the empiricism of the second period. Bernard pointed ^{ly}suggested that "There can be no great research without great and capacious, well-filled minds to direct and interpret it. . . . And no piece of research is worth more than the mind that produced it. . . . It can be successfully undertaken and carried through only by the exceptional man." (pp. 9-10) Then, in a criticism reminiscent of G. Wright Mills, Bernard stated

. . . I think I have seen altogether too much money wasted on research projects made to order and carried through by individuals and groups of persons of mediocre ability who are seeking to build for themselves and their political cronies reputations as sociologists which should have been laid more securely in the mastering of knowledge already gained. (p. 1)

In this second period, then, one can see that the presidential address was not always a reaffirmation of the conventional wisdom of the day. Rather, the address was beginning to serve as a crucible for the discipline -- that is, some presidents reacted to the dominant trends of the day.

THE THIRD PERIOD: 1935-45, FROM THE UNIVERSITY TO THE WIDER WORLD

The State of the Discipline

As Ninkle and Ninkle have pointed out, the Depression and World War II had a major impact on sociology. These events led to a shift away from making sociology scientific toward making the discipline more socially useful. This alteration in intellectual sanctions and goals of the discipline reopened discussions concerning the role of the sociologist. As most sociologists began to participate in governmental and public agencies, members of the discipline re-examined the concept of value-free sociology and began to justify the discipline as more utilitarian grounds. In the previous period, the quest for an objective science had led many sociologists to disavow the doctrine of social progress and meliorism. The promotion of human welfare and discovery of sociological laws had become separate

The State of the Discipline

As sociologists began to justify their research on more pragmatic bases and became more sensitive to the part values play in prompting research, questions concerning the nature of theory and its relation to research became salient. Hence, one sees an interest in developing non-quantitative theory and with integrating theory and method. There is a trend toward employing sociological theory to organize a variety of discrete studies, and sociologists view the increasing use of theory to order and generalize research as a major advance to scientific sociology. It has also been suggested, however, that much of what is considered as theory in empirical studies is actually conceptual "padding-cumming" designed to legitimize the research. Critics within sociology have also noted that much of what is considered "formulation" in empirical research actually amounts to some judicious footnoting. The fourth period is also characterized by much tinkering with research techniques and an interest in the philosophy of science, especially in the area of theory building.

The Presidential Addresses

Table One shows a marked tapering off in the fourth period of addresses concerning the role of the sociologist. The table indicates an increase in addresses on the state of the discipline and on specific topics, especially concerning theory and methodology. These latter addresses are discussions of theory and method as such, as compared to earlier addresses which tended to discuss the theory or method of a given substantive area.

In his 1949 address entitled "The Prospects of Sociological Theory," Parsons pointed out that the most disappointing fact about sociological research has been the lack of cumulation:

The limitations of empirical research methods. . . are in part responsible for this fact. But probably the most serious factor

has been precisely this lack of an adequate working theoretical tradition which is bred into the "habitus" of empirical researchers themselves, so that "instinctively" the problems they work on, the hypotheses they frame and test, are such that the results, positive or negative, will have significance for a sufficiently generalized and integrated body of knowledge so that the actual implications of many empirical studies will play directly into each other. There are, as I have noted, hopeful signs which point in this direction, but the responsibility of theory to promote this process is heavy indeed. (p. 4)

Giddens's 1960 address also highlighted the gap between theory and research:

It is one thing to claim a notable advance in general orientation and theory; it is another to say that a desirable level of precision and articulation in theoretical formulation and its method has been achieved. This latter we cannot claim. Notwithstanding some rather reckless promises made by some in the field of seeking conceptual and paradigm research contrasts, a credit appraisal must find much of our terminology unhelpfully fuzzy, our hypotheses lacking in rigorous coding, and our methods as yet not well adapted for operationally testing our hypotheses or for yielding that conventional validation of observation upon which any economy of scientists must rely. . . . (p. 706)

In his 1973 address entitled "Disorientation in Sociology," Stouffer argued for a marriage between theory and method:

Who will put these ingredients together in sociology? Not the philosopher, speculating in his draftair. Not the sensitive artist, patching human activity with a dramatist's eye. Not the statistician who is solely concerned with making a better probability model or measuring deviance. Rather, the sociologist who combines several of these skills in his own head, or the well sociological team which brings a few specialists together in a concerted enterprise. Then theory will beget research and research will beget theory, and the relationship speaking of sociology will be on its way. . . . (p. 557)

Lazarsfeld in 1961 pointed out the contradictions of empirical research to theory construction:

Stouffer's notion of relative deprivation was similarly developed from a variety of seemingly unconnected statistical surveys. Many other examples could be given to show the possible contributions of empirical studies, however narrow, to theories of the middle range. As a matter of fact, this is almost implied in the very ideal of mediating between descriptive data and higher order generalizations. Inversely, there probably would not be such theory of the middle range without the steady supply of specific studies. . . . (p. 706)

George Rosen's contemporary 1968 address is indicative of interest in the philosophy of science, especially regarding theory development:

If sociology is a science, it must take seriously one of the jobs of any science, which is that of providing explanations for the empirical relations it discovers. An explanation is a theory, and it takes the form of a deductive system. With all its talk about theory, the functionalist school did not take the job of theory seriously enough. It did not see itself what a theory was, and it never produced a functional theory that was in fact an explanation. (p. 338)

With characteristic grace, Inkeles, in his 1967 address presented a summary judgment of contemporary sociology. One wonders how many of us would basically agree with the following assessment:

In spite of an enormous amount of sociological research done in this period, with few exceptions it has been a "production," "epigonic," and "imitation" rather than a truly creative period. No new Platos and Aristotiles, Durkheim and Cooley of sociology have emerged during the period, nor even many leaders of the caliber of the eminent sociologists of the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. . . . (p. 83h)

Conclusion and Summary

In this paper we have attempted to show that a meaningful relationship exists between the content of the presidential addresses and the changing concerns of sociology. It was suggested that the presidential address is a reflective document in two ways. The address can echo the facts and fancies of the day or it can serve as a vanguard to dominant trends within the discipline. Judging from the explicit comments by most of the presidents and by the overall content of the addresses, it appears that as a discipline develops, the latter type of address comes to be expected. The latitude granted to the president in preparing his address enables him to serve as a watchdog and ruling edge in the discipline. In this situation we can say that although it is true that conformity is rewarded with status, it is also true that the higher status person is more secure and, therefore, able to deviate from the conventional wisdom.

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TABLE I.

CLASSIFICATION OF THE BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ARTICLES ACCORDING TO THE BASIC AXIOM

Legend: X = Bibliography; XX = Bibliography and specific topics; XXX = Bibliography and polemical topics; X+ = Bibliography and specific topics and polemical topics.

Name of Author and Year Article Was Published	State of Discipline ^a	Role of Sociology ^b	Specific Topics ^c	Polemical ^d
PROBABLY THE MOST IMPORTANT BIBLIOGRAPHIC PERIODS: 1905-20				
Ward (1905)	XX			
Ward (1907)			XX	
Sumner (1905)			XX	
Sumner (1906)			XX	
Gladden (1910)		XX		
Gladden (1913)			XX	
Smith (1914)	XX			
Smith (1915)				XX
Ross (1914)				XX
Ross (1915)				XX
Vincent (1916)				XX
Howard (1917)				XX
Coolidge (1918)				XX
Blackburn (1919)				XX
Boyd (1920)			XX	
THE QUEST FOR AN INTELLECTUAL RESPONSIBILITY: 1921-34				
Boyd (1921)	XX			
Machuga (1922)		XX		
Weatherly (1923)				XX
Edmond (1924)				XX
Park (1925)			XX	
Giddins (1926)	XX			
Thomas (1927)			XX	
Giddins (1928)			XX	
Ogburn (1929)	XX			
Ogden (1930)			XX	
Logsdon (1931)			XX	
Bernard (1932)	XX			
Reuber (1933)			XX	
Burgess (1934)		XX		
FROM THE GOVERNMENT TO THE OTHER POLICE: 1935-45				
Shapiro (1935)		XX		
Palumbo (1936)			XX	
Perls (1937)	XX			
Romkovic (1938)		XX		
Goldman (1939)			XX	
McClure (1940)		XX		
Quinn (1941)		XX		
Sunderland (1942)		XX		
Tomlinson (1943)		XX		
Vance (1944)			XX	
Young (1945)		XX		

TABLE 1 -- Continued

Kind of Presentation and Year Address Was Presented	State of Mindfulness ¹	Role of Sociologist ²	Specific Topics ³	Palawian ⁴
THE DOLLAR-NATION: HOW DOES IT LIVE FOREVER?				
Taylor (1946)	XX			
Wirth (1947)	XX			
Parsons (1948)			XX	
Parsons (1949)	XX			
Getzko (1950)			XX	
Angell (1951)		XX		
Thomas (1952)	XX			
Stouffer (1953)	XX			
Swenlow (1954)	XX			
Young (1955)		XX		
Meyer (1956)	XX			
Meritt (1957)			XX	
Wallace (1958)	XX			
Beale (1959)	XX			
Kasler (1960)			XX	
Paris (1961)			XX	
Lumsford (1962)	XX			
Hagler (1963)			XX	
Hosmer (1964)	XX			
Scratch (1965)	XX			
Moore (1966)			XX	
Lewis (1967)			XX	

¹This type address focuses on the history, future and/or problems facing sociology as a science.

²This type address focuses on the sociologist's role with reference to societal problems. It concerns itself with the extent to which the sociologist should become involved in social action and thus focuses on sociology as a profession.

³This type address focuses on a specific sociological topic such as urbanization crisis, social problems on the Pacific Coast, etc.

⁴This type address is a plea for a particular social position.