Left-wing politics and the decline of sociology

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When retired Harvard professor Nathan Glazer died Jan. 19 at 95, descriptive sociology lost its last great practitioner. Best known for “Beyond the Melting Pot,” his landmark study written with Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Glazer also collaborated with David Riesman on a rare best-seller of 20th-century sociology, “The Lonely Crowd.” Glazer was not a descriptive sociologist in the sense of collecting interview and questionnaire data, though he analyzed such data to draw conclusions. He was a descriptive sociologist in the sense that his books and articles aimed at a truthful depiction of social reality.

As a 93-year-old retired professor of sociology, I can remember the era when sociologists unanimously agreed with Glazer that our primary task was to describe as accurately as possible how societies worked. Sure, as good citizens, we wanted to change societies for the better. But we did not think our primary professional task was improving political institutions or helping people who were suffering. Understanding how and why people interacted with one another was difficult enough.

Descriptive sociology is a fairly new discipline. One of its earliest practitioners was Emile Durkheim, who in 1897 published his famous statistical analysis of the causes of suicide in France. The problem of preventing it was outside his purview. Sociology professors in American universities followed this model for decades. They taught students how to conduct research—namely, how to interview people and design questionnaire surveys to test ideas about what is going on.

Along with Glazer, one of the leaders of the field a half-century ago was the University of Chicago’s James Coleman. In the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Congress mandated a survey to investigate the extent to which racial discrimination was an obstacle to equality of educational opportunity. Coleman was commissioned to lead it. He supervised the collection of questionnaire and interview data from 4,000 American public schools, containing about 400,000 students.
Some of the findings were surprising. One was that predominantly black school districts got roughly the same level of government funding as predominantly white districts, contrary to the widespread belief that white districts were favored. Another was that black students in predominantly white classrooms did better academically than black students with similar characteristics in predominantly black classrooms. The most surprising finding was that the main variables affecting educational outcomes for individual children were not the amount of money spent on educating them or the professional credentials of their teachers. Instead, they were the students’ family backgrounds and the number of days they attended school. At first, Coleman’s findings were considered descriptive conclusions rather than justifications for this or that policy. Soon that changed. Proponents of busing to reduce educational inequality believed his findings about the better educational achievement of black children in predominantly white classrooms justified their preferred policy. Opponents of busing pointed to his finding that family background was the main determinant of educational achievement. Both sides portrayed the report polemically, rather than as descriptive sociology.

Coleman himself believed that racial segregation was morally wrong, but professionally he conducted the educational-inequality survey as objectively as he could—not to support or oppose specific policies. In 1975, however, Coleman’s research found that busing caused families to move out of central-city neighborhoods into the suburbs or transfer their children to private or parochial schools. He inferred that busing programs, meant to reduce educational segregation, increased it by encouraging white flight. Though he still abhorred racial segregation in schools, he could no longer recommend busing as a solution.

Coleman’s change of view was not appreciated by many of his colleagues. The president of the American Sociological Association, Alfred McClung Lee, responded by denouncing him to the organization’s governing council and calling for its ethics committee to take action. Though Lee was not a descriptive sociologist of Coleman’s stature—he had been selected more for his progressive zeal—he implied Coleman was expressing partisan prejudices rather than objectively interpreting data. The council did not censure Coleman, but the ASA would continue to elect presidents because of their social-justice views rather than their research accomplishments.
Like Coleman, who died in 1995, Nathan Glazer changed his mind about an important public-policy issue because new information persuaded him that he had been wrong. He famously argued in the 1997 book, “We Are All Multiculturalists Now,” that a colorblind approach in educational and employment for black Americans would not be sufficient to bring them into the mainstream of society.

Today sociology is a partisan field. It asks “Whose side are we on?” rather than “Is this the most truthful account we can give.” Many sociologists are less devoted to scholarship than to righting wrongs like racism and sex discrimination. There are still descriptive sociologists working to discover truths about our social world, but their numbers are dwindling.

Not surprisingly, the current ASA president chose “Engaging Social Justice for a Better World” as the theme of the organization’s 2019 summer meeting. Nathan Glazer was never president of the ASA, though he deserved to be by virtue of scholarly eminence. If he were, he probably would not have chosen an agenda about “social justice.” Instead, he would have emphasized the scholarly mission Durkheim invented: telling the truth about social reality.

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