

**Entrevistas / Interviews Section**

**A closer look at the sociological perspective of Alejandro Portes / Una mirada más cercana a la perspectiva sociológica de Alejandro Portes**

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**ABSTRACT**

Alejandro Portes is the Howard Harrison and Gabrielle S. Beck Professor of Sociology (emeritus) at Princeton University, and Professor of Law and Distinguished Scholar of Arts and Sciences at the University of Miami. His recent research focuses on the integration of the second generation, transnational immigrant organizations, and urbanization and development in comparative perspective. In 2019, Professor Portes received the Princess of Asturias Award for Social Sciences. This interview reflects the author's perspective on key issues of sociological research and practice. A brief description of his biographical trajectory is followed by accounts of his main research endeavors and substantive arguments about the role of concepts and theory in sociology, interdisciplinarity, applied sociology and the global purpose of sociology as a discipline.

**Keywords:** economic sociology; migrations; institutions; sociological theory; concepts; interview; Alejandro Portes.

**RESUMEN**

*Alejandro Portes ocupa la cátedra Howard Garrison y Grabiell S. Beck de la Universidad de Princeton (emérito) y es profesor distinguido de la Universidad de Miami. Sus investigaciones más recientes se ocupan de la integración de los inmigrantes de segunda generación, las organizaciones transnacionales de inmigrantes, la urbanización y el desarrollo en perspectiva comparada. En el año 2019 recibió el Premio Princesa de Asturias de Ciencias Sociales. Esta entrevista refleja el punto de vista del autor en asuntos fundamentales de la investigación y la práctica sociológicas. La primera parte comienza con una descripción de la trayectoria biográfica y profesional. La segunda parte realiza un análisis de la perspectiva utilizada en sus trabajos de investigación. La tercera parte se dedica a discutir aspectos centrales en la sociología, entre ellos, el papel de los conceptos y la teoría, la interdisciplinariedad, la sociología aplicada y el propósito general de la sociología como disciplina.*

**Palabras clave:** sociología económica; migraciones; instituciones; teoría sociológica; conceptos; entrevista; Alejandro Portes.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Interviews section of the RES (*Revista Española de Sociología/Spanish Journal of Sociology*) provides readers with a useful tool for understanding the intricacies of sociological work from the perspective of renowned sociologists. The Editorial Team of the RES is particularly keen to take advantage of the hybrid nature of interviews as a specific product of a social science journal, with the complicity of the scholars and professionals who kindly agree to participate.

Because the interviews have an autobiographical component, they can be interpreted, according to the expression coined by C. Wright Mills, as part of the strategy to link “character and social structure”. When describing their trajectories and research experiences, authors interpret both the personal reasons and social factors that shaped their careers. They also provide their own interpretation of their contributions. Written in a more personal style than the usual objectivistic writing of sociologists, the interviews help us get closer to authors, thereby aiding understanding of their work in context.

The Interviews section also focuses on fundamental issues of sociology. Some questions are oriented to function as strategic material through which to examine the dynamics of the discipline. They provide first-hand perspectives based on the accumulated knowledge of participants. The topics discussed in the interviews include discussions about the state of sociology, visions of the future, and advice for young scholars and professionals. In sum, the Interviews section aims to contribute to a diagnosis of the discipline by gathering authoritative perspectives on current key issues of sociology. For this purpose, interviews include extensive narratives in the edited format and style of a social science journal, combined with the more spontaneous manner of expression resulting from questions and answers.

## THE CONTENTS OF THIS INTERVIEW

The current interview with Alejandro Portes perfectly reflects the aims outlined above. Professor

Portes is one of the leading figures in contemporary sociology<sup>1</sup>. From the point of view of the RES, he is a prominent figure, since he has been a long-standing member of the Editorial Board and has always been supportive of our journal model. He works regularly with members of our community in Spain and Latin America and is currently one of the authors most cited by Spanish sociologists.

The sociology of Professor Portes is not only important for the interests and impact of his fields of study. His works on economic sociology, migration, transnational communities and the role of institutions in development, among others, have broad implications for scholars and public policies specializing in such issues, as well as for many members of the sociological community at large. His work is characterized by conceptual precision, a preference for developing middle-range theoretical frameworks and his mastery of the use of important streams of analysis embedded in the history of sociology to shed light on current social problems. A clear and closer look at the toolbox of his approach will reveal a useful research model for a variety of profiles both inside academia and beyond.

The text resulting from the interview, in which the author has made an important effort of synthesis and clarity, includes sound reasoning about the connection between concepts, theories and observations, and about the issues that sociologists face in their daily work. Following the introduction, the text is organized in three sections. Section 2 is dedicated to the biographical trajectory. Section 3 provides an account of the main research topics, including the background research program and the current frontier of knowledge on such topics. Section 4 discusses key issues of sociology, including the nature of concepts in sociology, the collaboration of sociology with other disciplines, and the problems associated with applied work and the

1 For accounts of both the biography and the writings of Alejandro Portes, see Boundesen, L. Q. (2004): Biography of Alejandro Portes, PNAS-Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 101(33): 11917-11919; Zelizer, V. (1998): Alejandro Portes' Sociological Journey, Footnotes, 26(7): 4.

A recent biographical profile can be found at <https://www.fpa.es/en/princess-of-asturias-awards/laureates/2019-alejandro-portes.html?especifica=0>.

public involvement of sociologists. It also includes a discussion about the ultimate purpose of sociology (MFE).

## LIFE AND PERSONAL TRAJECTORY

*Question 1. Why did you decide to study sociology? What circumstances lead you to choose this discipline and the place of study?*

*Answer.*

I left Cuba as a young exile in the 1960s and I did not know exactly why I found myself in a different country after having lived a fairly normal life in my own. I had been a top student in my school in Havana, but circumstances that I did not fully understand forced my family and I to leave Cuba. I thought that sociology might provide some answers to these questions. I wanted to find out what were the forces behind the Cuban Revolution and what were the particular circumstances that accounted for the particular situation that I found myself in.

At age 18 and finding myself in Argentina, I decided to enroll in the sociology program of the Catholic University of Argentina. I spent 1963 in Buenos Aires and completed the first year of the career at the top of my class. More important, I began to acquire an understanding of the social forces that had led to political revolution in my country. I never left sociology thereafter.

*Question 2. How did you decide to dedicate yourself to the academic profession?*

*Answer.*

After Argentina, I returned to the United States and enrolled in a Jesuit institution, Creighton University, where I completed a bachelor's degree in sociology in record time. One thing led to another and finding that I did well in academic studies, I decided to pursue that route by enrolling in the sociology doctoral program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. After that decision, I never explored another career. I completed the doctorate in sociology at age 25 in 1970 and was appointed assistant professor of Sociology at the University of Illinois.

*Question 3. Throughout your career you have worked constantly between the United States and other parts of the world, especially Latin America, and more recently Europe, especially Spain. Has this mobility affected your work? What have been the most important experiences?*

*Answer.*

Choice of research topics is invariably affected by one's life trajectory. In my case, the first topics of investigation that I pursued when I had a choice were the adaptation of Cuban refugees in the United States and the determinants of lower-class leftist radicalism among poor urban dwellers in Santiago, Chile. I pursued the first topic while still a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and it resulted in my first single-authored article in the *American Sociological Review*. The second was the subject of my doctoral dissertation. It yielded a number of articles and provided material for my first books (1) (2).

Having started the study of sociology in Argentina, and not being able to carry out fieldwork in Cuba, I decided to expand the scope of study to the entire continent. Thereafter, I would conduct empirical studies in a number of Caribbean and Latin American countries—including Mexico, Guatemala, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Peru, Chile, and Argentina—. Substantively, topics of research focused on determinants of international migration; on the adaptation of immigrants and their children; on the process of urbanization in Latin America and the Caribbean and the dynamics of the informal economy; and on the nature of national economic development and factors leading to developmental successes and failures. The study of these specific topics provided the basis for future theoretical elaborations.

## TOPICS

*Question 4. The topics that you have worked most intensively on are immigration, transnational immigrant communities, informal economies, urban enclaves, and the role of institutions on national development. What circumstances led you to work on these topics?*

*Answer.*

As mentioned previously, there is a strong biographical element that guided my initial choice of research topics. Then, one thing led to another in a pattern similar to path dependence: the past leads to the present and the present largely determines the future. There is a second element, already adumbrated in Max Weber's famous essay on "Science as a Vocation": those who embrace science as a vocation must be resigned to the fact that ideas are not produced at will. Ideas "choose you", rather than you choosing them.

So, in the course of a given investigation, all of a sudden, things converge in a flash of insight: "So this is how things really work" —you tell yourself—. The insight, that is the idea, is subsequently elaborated into a concept that acquires its own dynamics as a source of new hypotheses and a stimulus for replication elsewhere. For example, reasons why Cuban émigrés converged in Miami and became economically successful in a few years suggested the concept of "ethnic enclave" that, in turn, gave rise to the question: Has this path of economic adaptation been adopted by other immigrant groups in the past and present and in other places of settlement? Similarly, the concept of immigrant transnationalism —developed to make sense of the dense traffic of people, ideas, and among places of origin and destination— immediately suggested the question: Are such practices exclusive to foreign communities in the United States or are they also found in Western Europe? This question led to a new multi-national and comparative study which results, were published in a recent book (3). Many other examples can be cited.

*Question 5. What is the underlying research program to your topics of investigation? Could you state it briefly?*

*Answer.*

I have often been skeptical of the attempts to construct grand theories in sociology because such theories are constructed at a high level of abstraction that defy empirical challenge. In the end, they tend to become grand tautologies. Instead, following Merton, I have favored mid-range theories and

concepts. Such concepts are equivalent to what Max Weber labeled "ideal types" —they arise from empirical investigations of specific social phenomena and can be used subsequently to construct hypotheses and to clarify processes in a variety of settings different from the one in which the concept emerged in the first place—. "Bounded solidarity" and "enforceable trust" as sources of social capital are ideal types that arose out of the investigation of entrepreneurial ethnic minorities and that have been subsequently used to guide our understanding of what takes place in a number of other settings —from stock exchanges to the Sicilian Mafia—, generating useful and testable hypotheses about these and many other phenomena.

*Question 6. In your subjects of recent study, where would the "frontier of knowledge" be? Or what principal challenges do they pose at present?*

*Answer.*

This question can be answered on the basis of frontiers of knowledge in specific areas of study. Concerning the integration of children of immigrants —the second-generation— I believe that the theory of segmented assimilation is still defensible because it is the most comprehensive. Other theories in this area highlight specific outcomes of success or failure (*i. e.* "second generation advantage" or "generations of exclusion"), but do not provide a full account of all the possible results and their determinants. In this area, the frontier of research would consist in conducting longitudinal studies of second-generation youth in different countries of reception to replicate those already carried out in the United States and Spain (CILS and ILSEG) and test the conclusions derived from them.

Similarly, in the area of determinants of national development, we already know that the key lies in the construction of incorruptible and proactive institutions in strategic areas of the state. Without such institutions, no development plan, no matter how well thought out, can be implemented successfully. The frontier of knowledge in this area lies in the identification of those forces in the culture and social structure of specific nation-states that lead to the emergence of such institutions or pre-

vent it. Effective institutions do not arise from thin air; they have to be constructed. The why and how of such social engineering efforts is what we need to understand better.

Similarly, in the area of global urbanization, I believe that a frontier lies in the identification of emerging global cities and in the forces that have led to their rise. With a team of investigators based in different countries, I have been studying Dubai, Miami, and Singapore as such emerging strategic nodes and the specific histories leading to their prominence. Questions in this area are whether similar cities exist elsewhere in the world and, given the desire of most urban places to ascend to such global status, what factors prevent or make possible that outcome.

*Question 7. Some commentators have defined your work as “deeply theoretical”, “grounded empirically”, and “politically relevant”. Would you dare to define more concretely the main features of the sociology that you practice?*

*Answer.*

As already mentioned, I consider myself a sociologist of the middle-range. This is not the same as practicing “mediocre sociology”, it implies instead concentrating in the development of concepts and hypotheses that emerge from the investigation of social reality and that are, in turn, empirically testable. Consider the following hypotheses that stem from grand theory and middle-range theory, respectively:

a) “Societal development emerges from the interplay between differentiation that creates new parts of a social system and integration that brings them together again”.

b) “National development is produced by the activities of non-corrupt, proactive institutions that selectively involve actors in the private economy in long-term investments and technological and entrepreneurial innovations”.

The first hypothesis is vacuously true. It is applicable everywhere but without advancing our understanding of how developmental processes actually occur anywhere. The second hypothesis is, on

the contrary, testable and useful to guide our understanding and knowledge in the field of inquiry. My goal in all the studies that I have undertaken is to produce concepts and hypotheses at this middle-range level of abstraction. I believe that this is the level where theory actually pays.

*Question 8. And what about policy relevance? What are your criteria to consider a research topic as policy relevant?*

*Answer.*

Obviously, policy relevance is a valid criterion to undertake empirical studies, but it is not the only one. Here, one recalls Weber’s remark that what is produced by scientific work is relevant in the sense of “Worth being known”(8). Scientific research can be undertaken for purely theoretical reasons, even in the absence of immediate policy applications or implications. It so happens that such investigations may turn out to have more “practical” consequences in the long run than those targeted on issues of immediate apparent policy relevance.

## ABOUT SOCIOLOGY

*Question 9. In several of your books and articles, you indicate that you use a “nominalist” approach to the problems that you study. Why do you consider concepts so important? How do they affect the work of sociologists?*

*Answer.*

Concepts represent, in my view, the basic toolbox to approach different aspects of reality. As noted before, they arise commonly from historical and empirical studies and then are refined as “ideal types”. A common mistake, however, is to confuse such mental constructions with reality itself. As Weber noted in his essay, “Objectivity in the social sciences”, Marx’ theory of class and class struggles as the source of social change is full of useful ideal types so long as we do not try to impose them on actual reality. This is, unfortunately, what many Marxist theorists have done —seeking to fit contemporary social and economic inequalities into the procrustean bed of the 19<sup>th</sup> century class cat-

egories invented by Marx and his followers—. This is the realist approach.

In opposition to it, “nominalism” sees ideal types for what they really are, *i. e.* mental constructs. They give names to insights developed by scholars and scientists in the past and are then used by comparing their features against other social phenomena of interest. For instance, the ideal type of “bureaucracy”, developed by Weber himself, can be compared with the features of a particular institution of interest —say the American Foreign Service or the Spanish Tax Authority— to see how well or how poorly it corresponds to an ideal bureaucratic organization. Similarly, the concept of “ethnic enclave” can be compared with characteristics of particular ethnic and immigrant communities to highlight correspondences and differences. In the process of “rubbing” ideal types against empirical reality, they can themselves be modified and refined. This is what the dialogue between empirical research and theory consists of.

*Question 10. In some of your writings, you refer to “meta-theories” as different from other concepts that function as “explanatory mechanisms”. What implications does this distinction have for doing sociology?*

*Answer.*

I actually distinguish between three types of concepts: meta-theories, explanatory mechanisms, and strategic research sites. Meta-theories are general assumptions couched at a high level of abstraction that provide the “lenses” through which practitioners of a particular scientific discipline see the world. Explanatory mechanisms and strategic research sites are ideal types at a mid-level of abstraction that serve, respectively, to generate hypotheses about how the social world actually works and to identify specific phenomena or processes worth investigation.

For example, the ideas of “market competition” and “profit maximization” are meta-theories through which economists view social reality. Isolated individuals seeking to maximize their gain are the prime building blocks of that world. In contrast, economic sociologists highlight the “embeddedness of economic action” and the “unexpected consequences of rational activity”, primary as features

of the economy. Meta-theories cannot be tested or falsified, they simply furnish the mental points of departure for scientific investigation.

In contrast, concepts like “social capital” or “institutions” are explanatory mechanisms amenable for inclusion into hypotheses about specific aspects of reality. For example: “elites make use of their social capital as prime instruments of domination over the subordinate classes” or “the emergence of strong state institutions is a necessary condition for national economic development”.

Strategic research sites identify particular phenomena as promising areas for study and for the application of a discipline’s set of explanatory mechanisms. For instance, the concept of “informal economy” is an ideal type referring to the universe of economic activities that avoid state regulation and supervision. It does not assert that such phenomena are true or false but simply points to them as worthy of investigation and clarification as they take place outside of what is generally seen as the “normal” economy.

*Question 11. This is a very useful distinction. But it is not easy to disentangle the substantive nature of concepts if you are not a well-experienced scholar. “Meta-theoretical concepts” are the cognitive point of departure of the discipline. “Strategic research sites” are related to policy relevance regarding its persistence to solve important social problems. “Explanatory mechanisms” are more difficult to foresee. What are the basic requirements of concepts to be used as explanatory mechanisms?*

*Answer.*

The basic requirement for a concept to qualify as an “explanatory mechanism” is that it can be empirically measured and can enter into testable propositions. Examples were given in my answer to the original question. “Social capital” and “developmental institutions” are empirically measurable concepts in ways that “embeddedness” and “market competition” are not. The latter are meta-theoretical assumptions.

*Question 12. After several decades a sociological theory, how should we deal with existing theories. Is it worth selecting among them?*

*Answer.*

General attempts at theoretical synthesis in sociology—from Comte, Pareto, and Durkheim to Spencer and Parsons—are, at present, mainly of historical interest. With the exemption of a few meta-assumptions that, as “lenses”, guide sociological work (*i. e.* “society is more than the sum of its members”), their elaboration in mid-range theories using ideal types is a useful way to proceed. It is worth noticing that the discipline’s classics also produced a number of such theories, useful to our day. Examples:

— Durkheim: the suicide rate of a given society is inversely proportional to its level of integration and directly proportional to its level of anomie.

— Weber: inner-worldly ascetic religion (*i. e.* Puritanism, Shintoism) are more conducive to the development of rational capitalism than other-worldly and mystic religions.

— Marx: revolutionary social change is brought about by the clash between emerging modes of production and pre-existing social relationships of production and distribution of the product.

*Question 13. It is evident that you rely on the classics and also on key theories in the history of sociology. What are the implications of your previous assumptions for teaching sociology? For instance do you think it is better to use “key concepts”, grounded in the classics when necessary, that can be combined to form middle-range theories? (Or to put it another way, how to combine the nominalist assumption with the importance attributed by the discipline to classical and modern sociological theory?)*

*Answer.*

For the most part, courses in sociological theory consist of exposing students to a series of classic and contemporary authors and their different perspectives. It would be useful to systematize such courses by using the three-fold typology discussed above:

— What are the meta-theories *i. e.*, the conceptual “lenses” implicit or explicit in the theories of Durkheim, Marx, or Wallerstein, Tilly, etc.?

— What testable propositions can be derived from their writings?

— Where do we go to test such propositions *i. e.*, what are the “strategic research sites” suggested by them?

*Question 14. What is your position about interdisciplinarity in the social sciences? What role should sociologists adopt in relation to other disciplines?*

*Answer.*

Interdisciplinarity is commonly accepted as a good thing, as when one speaks of inter-disciplinary teams of researchers working on a particular topic. The implication is that the different theoretical perspectives and methodological tools will better contribute to understand or to resolve a particular problem. This is true only when the assembled teams are composed of professionals with a clearly defined disciplinary perspective, that is, with self-awareness of the disciplinary lenses through which they see the world, confidence in the empirical methods employed by the discipline, and knowledge of the advantages and limitations of other disciplines. In other words, to be usefully involved in multidisciplinary pursuits, sociologists must first be resolutely disciplinary. Otherwise, there is no room for the checks and balances and the mutual critique of findings that alone justify multidisciplinary research enterprises. Economists are notable in having a clear and resolute disciplinary perspective; sociologists should do likewise.

*Question 15. From your viewpoint, what is the specific purpose of sociology? What should sociologists be doing?*

*Answer.*

That is probably the most central question. In my opinion, sociologists should not attempt to arrive at a comprehensive, systematic understanding of the whole social world—attempts that inevitably lead to abstract and vacuous truisms—. Instead, they should focus their energies on particular patches of social reality, applying the meta-theoretical assumptions, explanatory mechanisms,

and research techniques of the discipline in order to arrive at persuasive and defensible explanations of causes and effects in that specific field. If successful, the result would be a theory or set of theories of the middle-range and the refinement of existing concepts or invention of new ones. The skeptical stance toward received truths and conventional wisdom is the mark of the true sociologist. Her / his disciplinary point of departure is no better or worse than that of economists or political scientists; it is simply different. In my opinion, if sociology did not exist as a discipline, it would have to be invented.

*Question 16. Let me ask something more specific about the “essential” purpose of sociology. There are some well-known arguments about the ultimate mission of sociology is a science of “rational” institutions. Other’s arguments highlight the potential a focusing on social action, specifically on the unintended consequences. What is your point of view?*

*Answer.*

In his presidential address to the American Sociological Association in 1992, James Coleman argued that sociologists should become engineers for the “rational- construction” of social institutions. I believe that he was wrong and, fortunately, no one has taken up this call, at least no one that I know of. The problem is that Coleman confused his own perspective, rational action, with the entire discipline and, further, he indulged in the belief that rationally-constructed organizations would work as expected. Coleman’s own teacher, Robert Merton, observed that rational action and designs often lead to unintended consequences. That key point did not enter into Coleman’s argument (9). Sociology is better at identifying such unintended consequences than it is at constructing grand organizational designs. I would certainly caution against the latter course of action.

*Question 17. Concerning applied sociology, you have referred to the difficulties of “commissioned sociology”. What would be possible solutions to this problem?*

*Answer.*

There is no intrinsic reason to reject the use of sociological theory and methods to the investigation of specific social problems and issues under government or private auspices. Indeed such applied research can make significant contributions to the core discipline by uncovering features of social life hitherto unknown or neglected. Applied research in industrial sociology in the 1940s and 1950s, under the auspices of private firms, interested in increasing productivity among their workers, discovered that complex organizations seldom operated according to formal blueprints. Instead, they were riddled with alliances, enmities, personal favors and expectations, and unwritten rules.

Informal structures resulted from the interaction of people over extended periods of time and created persuasive constraints on the operation of formally built authority structures. As the evidence from these applied studies mounted, the sociological theory of organizations underwent a profound transformation. Unlike work in other social sciences, which continued to take corporate authority hierarchies at face value, sociology became oriented and trained to see formal structures as problematic. This skeptical stance lasts to our day (4). The flipside of this potential for innovation by the *condottieri* mode of research is its tendency to accept uncritically the definition of the situation imposed by its patrons from above. In such manner, stereotypes become accepted and the “findings” of applied research do little but reinforce the prejudices of its sponsors.

In 1930, the U. S. Census defined “Mexican” as race, but in later censuses Mexicans were re-defined as part of the white population. As late as 1970, the category Hispanic did not exist in most official publications. But in that year’s Census and in subsequent ones, it appeared as a term of convenience to count Mexicans and other Spanish-speaking groups. Dutifully, research on such problems as poverty, mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy, and crime started adding a “Hispanic” column to the prior dichotomous comparisons between whites and blacks. A coefficient for “Hispanic” then was regularly added to regressions seeking to establish the determinants



of a wide array of social pathologies. The research industry adopted the new classification without the slightest question about whether “Hispanics” existed as anything more than a statistical category.

Douglas Massey has summarized cogently the reasons for this complete acceptance:

There is no “Hispanic” population in the sense that there is a black population. Hispanics share no common historical memory and do not comprise a single, coherent community [...]. Saying that someone is “Hispanic” or “Latino” reveals little or nothing about likely attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, race, religion, class, or legal situation in the United States (5).

*Question 18. For several years there has been a concern for the lack of professional opportunities of sociology graduates (at least in Europe). What is your opinion about work possibilities of sociologists? How can their work opportunities be improved?*

*Answer.*

The skeptical stance of proper sociological work, as opposed to the uncritical attitude of much *condottieri* research, is often not popular with the powers-that-be. Sociology is a child of the Enlightenment and, as such, depends on a free society for its development. That is why there is not much sociology, or at least no “real” sociology, under authoritarian regimes. Chances for paid employment in these contexts are nil. In democratic countries, sociologists wishing to improve their chances for non-academic employment should prioritize their statistical and methodological training. Census offices, public opinion polling firms, and social security bureaus are viable potential employers for those with the requisite skills. Public service institutions in areas such as education and health can also make use of well-trained sociologists.

The caution noted previously about applied work should be a priority for sociologists employed by such firms and institutions. It is important in such cases to resist the temptation of accepting *a priori* existing assumptions and definitions of the situation. As sociologists, those in private firms and public institutions can make their most valuable contribution by critically examining and, when

necessary, challenging preconceived assumptions on the basis of solid empirical investigation.

*Question 19. In recent years, there has been a tendency toward greater social involvement among academic sociologists. What is your opinion of that tendency?*

*Answer.*

In his “Science as Vocation”, Max Weber made a trenchant distinction between scientific research and theory and political activism. The lecture, delivered in Munich in the immediate aftermath of World War I, resisted the widespread tendency among scholars of the defeated nation (Germany) to conflate ideological conviction and activism with scientific work. In his view, the proper role of the teacher was to convey factual knowledge, including the “inconvenient facts” for advocates of one or another ideology (6).

Political conviction and activism are legitimate pursuits for sociologists in their role as citizens of a democracy. However, these activities must be clearly separated from their professional pursuits. Just as medical doctors can be members of a political party or social movement without their activism detracting from their medical practice, so other scientists must learn to separate political convictions from the facts on the ground.

This is particularly difficult for sociologists because the phenomena that we study intertwine easily with social concerns and political causes. In another of his essays, Weber recognizes that a value free social science is impossible since values enter into both the selection of subjects for study and in the interpretation of empirical facts (7). But sociologists must at least seek to identify how values enter and affect their professional activities. More important still, science is a collective enterprise where the inter-subjective scrutiny of new theories and alleged discoveries subject them to a discipline that is beyond the reach of the individual scholar. In such manner, the inevitable biases present in the work of even the most professional scholars can be identified and their effects corrected.

*Question 20. And finally, what recommendations would you give to young sociologists who are still studying?*

*Answer.*

Keep it up. Sociology with all its limitations is a valuable intellectual enterprise. As I said before, if it did not exist, it would have to be invented. Our task as professional sociologists is to produce as reliable and valid knowledge about social processes and social problems as we can. For this, young scholars should aim at getting as much command of the theoretical and methodological toolkits of the discipline as they are able. Acting on the basis of such knowledge in the political world is an altogether different pursuit.

## ENDNOTES

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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