

THE VIEWPOINT OF THE SOCIOLOGIST

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IN TIMES past I have been made aware of the fact that there is trouble ahead whenever anyone asks: "Well, what is a sociologist?" Since you have graciously invited me to participate in this panel, I had better answer that question and establish my credentials.

As physicians you are familiar with the systematic observation of nature. Similarly, social scientists engage in a systematic observation of society. Some observers feel that conflicts in society are similar to diseases in the body. But the difference is that conflicts in society occur between men, rather than between the host organism and the invader. When you treat patients you do so because you have been asked to diagnose and cure their ills. Society, however, is not a patient in this sense; it is not in a position to "call the doctor." Also, when you treat patients you need their cooperation and their endeavor to get well; the restoration of their health is your supreme value. The sociologist cannot, perhaps, expect as much cooperation, since the participants in any social conflict are naturally interested in the facts which support, not in those which weaken, their side of the case. The sociologist, by his commitment to scholarship, is obliged to view the conflicts between men and their values with impartiality.

On the whole, there is little demand for the observation and analysis of these conflicts in society. It is encouraging, therefore, that your organization has invited a social scientist to participate in this panel so that you can explore whether and how social science may perform a useful service. As academicians social scientists may be criticized as living in an ivory tower, but this criticism neglects the importance of detachment in society. Universities are institutions of detachment, where it is possible for scholars to study nature and society apart from the pressures of economic and political interests. Freedom from these pressures may well enable the sociologist to analyze the social conflicts of his time with a detachment and perspective which are difficult to achieve among those who are immediately involved. Whether such detachment can be made useful, only trial and error will show.

To the sociologist industrial medicine appears as part of the welfare measures in industry, which range from safety devices to music on the job, from retirement provisions to company picnics. Now, modern industry has come to institute these

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