

Part Two

Policy Sociology

One is not born a sociologist, one becomes a sociologist. As a local lad from Manchester, I don't know what exactly drew me to the United States. But in 1965 at the impressionable age of seventeen, between high school and university, I secured a berth on a Norwegian cargo boat headed for Philadelphia. At that time, from across the Atlantic, the US appeared as a remote colossus; my school friends regarded the trip as, if not treasonous, then deranged. Ostensibly, with my appealing English accent, I was to be employed as a salesman for a New York publishing firm. But that was a nonstarter, since I could not utter a word in such a bewildering city, let alone promote books I knew nothing about. At a loss to know what to do with me, the firm assigned me the absurd task of evaluating the creditworthiness of bookstores across the country.

This was an especially exciting time – the unfolding civil rights movement, anti-Vietnam War teach-ins on campuses, violent protest in ghettos culminating in the Watts Uprising. I had never witnessed such social energy, and, unbeknownst to me, the taste for sociology was germinated. Most immediately, it spelled the end of my interest in mathematics, which had been my passport to university.

After six months in the US, Cambridge seemed parochial and irrelevant. I stuck to mathematics – since I was fit for

nothing else and barely fit for that – but took off each summer vacation to explore some other continent. At the end of the first year, 1966, I left for South Africa, a very disturbing place. There I found a more institutionalized, regulated racism than I had known in the US – but then I hadn't spent time in the South. Apartheid affected every arena of life – a repressive order that oppressed all, but obviously some more than others. Below the surface was a seething discontent that would burst into the open in the coming decade – the Durban strikes of 1973, followed by the Soweto insurgency in 1976. After six weeks working in an advertising agency, I took off for three months. With a tent on my back, I thumbed my way through Africa, living off the hospitality of local villagers and townspeople. Episodically, I pursued a little project that began in South Africa – the possibilities of development through correspondence education.

As a young idealist, keen to make the world a better place, I thought if only we understood better and knew more, then we would be sure to progress. Power would wilt in the face of knowledge. What better place to begin, then, with education itself, the organized pursuit of knowledge – its expansion and its dissemination? That is, indeed, where I began, thinking that education could save the world, and if not education itself then its rebellious students. I was after all a child of the times, the turbulent 1960s when anything seemed possible.

I began my initiation into sociology with the exploration of a seemingly esoteric issue, far removed from my own life, the language of instruction in Indian universities. I picked a social problem and tried to solve it – policy sociology as *advocacy*. Sociologists do it all the time, proposing solutions to poverty, inequality, racism. What we discover, however, is that solutions are not easily come by, even less easily implemented, and when implemented are invariably followed by unintended consequences. Such were the anti-utopian lessons I learned in India. Policy sociology is more likely to be where one ends rather than

where one begins. So for a more balanced picture I look at William Julius Wilson's (1987) study of the "underclass" and Matthew Desmond's (2016) research on the consequences of eviction. They both aimed to reduce poverty in the US and they both attracted public and political attention.

There is an alternative approach to policy sociology – rather than determining and then tackling the social problem as an autonomous scientist, one can surrender oneself into the captivity of others, solving their problems. It is what I call *sponsored* policy sociology. The solution to a social problem is often already formulated by one's sponsors, so the task is to produce a rationalization and a mode of implementation. We put on their ideological blinkers, turning a blind eye to consequences. I became a servant of power in the employ of multi-national mining companies in Zambia – maintaining the racial status quo while appearing to transform it. The task of the sociologist is to identify with the sponsor and the context they face but to conceal or legitimate assumptions behind the apparent neutrality of expertise. Technical expertise becomes, in the words of James Ferguson (1994), an "anti-politics machine." I will illustrate these processes with an additional example from the sociology of work.

Policy research was too confining, so I did not last long, but I learned so much: first, the importance of the external limits imposed by context on advocacy research; and second, the internal limits set by the (concealed) assumptions of sponsored research. I was well on the way to becoming a sociologist even before I knew it.

