

Reply to Saywell

Canada needs relevant courses before we'll get Canadian profs

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I was very interested in the issue of EXCALIBUR dated Jan. 8, devoted to York as a "branch plant" university. In particular I wanted to comment on the interview with Dean John Saywell.

Firstly, he stated early in the interview that "the first PhD in Canada I think to be credited to sociology was the University of Toronto in '61 or '62." It so happens that I got my PhD in Sociology at the U of T in the early 50s and one other was awarded in 1960.

Of course, Dean Saywell can't be put down for this lack of information because as a member of the history faculty at the U of T he likely had very little to do with the department of sociology during this period.

Indeed most people at Toronto tended to get isolated at that time in their departments and were not too au courant with developments in fairly cognate fields. In my case I would have no idea how many PhDs were graduated in history during the 50s, or when the first one finished up at the U of T.

At Toronto, where I took my BA in 1942 and had some faculty association for years afterward, the anthropologists and the sociologists it seemed were hardly on speaking terms, so one just did not know too much about what was happening in another department, even that close.

No shortage

The impression is given in the interview with Dean Saywell that there haven't been enough competent sociologists to fill up the openings at York or other Canadian universities and therefore hiring simply had to be done in the United States. While this may be true in certain areas of our country, it can be questioned here.

I might point out that at Atkinson College we have, in our eight-person faculty, five Canadians and two Americans and one man who has been in Canada for many years and so can be counted as a Canadian. When I served as chairman of the sociology program at Atkinson I had no difficulty in getting a number of sociologists who were Canadian to teach part-time or full-time and the same situation is true in our hiring for next year; we know we can get Canadians to meet our need and we know where others are available.

This is bound up with the fact that both our present chairman, Stewart Crysdale, and myself were born in Canada, and have travelled across the country numerous times and know something of Canadian graduate departments and of Canadians now studying in the USA who want to return.

When one has an American department chairman, whose contacts are practically all in the USA, he can't be expected to know what is going on in this country without making a very strong effort by travelling and corresponding to discover people. All this takes time and money.

So this man with few Canadian contacts, will hear about new faculty possibilities mainly by his grapevine to the USA, and will likely fill up his department with American-born professors. Things could be improved, it seems to me, if American-born chairmen of departments were to delegate to a committee made up of Canadians and Americans, the search for new faculty and let them use both the grapevine and well-placed advertisements, plus extensive correspondence with chairmen of graduate faculties in Canada. (Incidentally I have not found that well placed ads for faculty are entirely a waste of time.)

Some discussions about this issue of faculty selection seem to imply that the quality of our graduates in Canada is often below that of the best American universities. Having taught sociology off



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and on for the last 25 years I may be allowed a couple of comments about this:

1. While it is true that places like Berkeley and Harvard will produce men of advanced theoretical erudition, or men skilled in survey research methodology, this is no guarantee that they will be able to put across their knowledge so students can really understand and use it or that they have any sociological imagination of the type C. Wright Mills described in his book with that title.

Too often one discovers that going through the U.S. PhD mill in the high pressure cooker universities severely constrains imagination and may actually hamper understanding of current social dynamics or how to teach this to eager undergraduates.

In fact one runs across distressing stories of people who teach sociology with American backgrounds, who, while they are bright men, seem to put off their students from sociology for life. (Of course this unfortunate habit is not confined to American born faculty.)

Experience before PhD

It has been my experience that it is often better — from the standpoint of teaching students what sociology is and can be, as well as gearing it into the mainstream of contemporary life — to hire people who may not have had a PhD but do have a good MA and some further work towards a doctorate, plus, and this is the important thing, some direct experience of life.

To me, and I have a strong bias here admittedly, it is often better to have people who have worked in business or some other part of the society and have good training than to take a person with a PhD who has gone to school all his life, and has nothing to base his theories on but lectures attended and books read.

Some of my colleagues will not agree, but this is an observation based on 15 or 16 years of teaching. In general, I claim that one's definition of a good sociologist is culturally determined (i.e. determined by the sub groups in which one is raised and by one's value perspectives.)

Hence, Dean Saywell's definition of a good sociologist or a good historian is related closely to his personal and professional perspectives and is likely as suspect (of bias) as is mine.

To return to the problem of why we don't have enough Canadian PhDs in sociology in Canada. To answer this question one has to examine the teaching process of sociology at the main universities of the country, for example, in Toronto, McGill and UBC, which have had PhD programs for years.

The question arises — why didn't they arouse interest in enough students to move into the graduate field and become qualified PhDs? Why did some of the most promising students feel they had to get their training in Berkeley or Columbia and not at these major Canadian institutions?

In this connection I would like to simply add some facts from my own experience. In 1942, when I graduated from U of T 11 students received a honors BA in sociology and in the next year or two even more than this number were graduated annually.

Yet at a convocation that I went to in the early sixties, only seven people at Toronto got a BA in honors sociology, and that was a not untypical number for that period.

What happened to the teaching of sociology at U of T during those years that the number of honor course students declined while the university's enrollment at least doubled? What kind of teaching went on? Elsewhere one can ask the same kind of question, namely why didn't the number of honors sociology students rise steadily and with that number of Canadians taking post-graduate degrees?

Wasn't relevant

It seems to me from my biased position that part of the answer to this question — how large a part one would only know after some considerable research — is that the sociology taught in those years was not relevant, to any great extent, to the social dilemmas of the students or to the social problems of the times.

Rather it was probably taught in terms of purely abstract theories, American types of theoretical issues, using American materials and accepting the so-called "value-free" approach.

Likely very little was said about or done with the work of people like Karl Marx or C. Wright Mills. And I suspect there was very little stirring of social conscience or social concern about contemporary Canada, so that the interest of many students flagged. Often the students who got through this process were those having minimal social involvement in our changing world.

In other words it seems to me that the present dilemma we are in (with regard to a lack of Canadian graduates) can be traced in part to social and teaching processes going on within the big Canadian universities and their sociology departments back in the forties and fifties.

Let me conclude by saying that I am happy to welcome to York the sociologists from the States who have come and who are going to make their sociology relevant to the concerns and problems of our Canadian society. I know some of these men very well and respect their ability and integrity. We will need to accept for some years, numbers of American-born teachers and many will make valuable contributions.

I do not criticize them nor do I deplore their presence, but I do believe we ought to make efforts to materially increase the number of Canadian teaching sociology and encourage our American-born colleagues to add to our limited understanding of the sociology of Canadian life by in depth and socially-relevant research.