

Ars evalendi, ars evanescendi or Evaluation Studies – From Science to Alchemy?

Four Comments on the Expert Committee for Evaluating the Norwegian Sociology Education¹

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1. Universities are responsible for keeping up tradition, for the continuity and transmission of knowledge, but their true distinction, or *species differentiae*, derives from their duty to continually *revise and renew* their body of knowledge. University staff members are all expected to be creative, to innovate, based on their traditional subjects which they change and expand through their own research, proceeding to teach mainly from this basis. Tradition *and* innovation, then, but the latter is clearly the more

¹"Sakkyndigkomitéen for evaluering av norsk sosiologiutdanning", mimeo, Norw. text, 163 pp., Oslo 1995, authored by Erik Allardt, Rita Liljeström, Natalie Rogoff Ramsøy, and Aage Bødkter Sørensen, with secretary Trygve Gulbrandsen, available from the authors or from the sociology institutes they evaluate, in Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim, Tromsø, Horten, Steinkjer, and Bodø.

important: if completely lacking academic education ceases to be just that; declining or regressing into high-school, not university courses.

It follows that a distinctively university type of education cannot be evaluated without simultaneously evaluating the local research traditions on which it's built. The expert committee has largely evaded that crucial issue. A great pity, since that's the real source of their expertise.

The bulk of their present work, however, is an evaluation of our education viewed as a technical, a *zweckrational* process. This being the issue, it's Education, not really Sociology which holds the real expert position – being knowledgeable about University Didactics in a general way. Thus viewed, the present committee holds a less than full competence for its assigned task. Seniority, duration of tenure, even charisma (cf. 4 below though), won within one academic discipline, cannot supersede familiarity with a distinct subject, *in casu* general University Didactics.

2. The report says that "nobody assumes responsibility for sociology as an integral whole". That sounds nice but it's still flourish rather than fact. We do of course strive for consistence, and we have important roots in the holistic tradition inherited from Romantic age philosophers². But when it comes down to our actual issues of research and teaching it's not at all evident that a science about society should offer more of a holistic or coherent picture *than that offered by their host societies themselves*. If we do, our science will present a sharp picture which nevertheless must be biased, one-sided, flawed – yes, false. Sociology or any other social science should be as diverse, as multi-faceted, as society itself.

"Nobody assumes responsibility for sociology as whole" – well, certainly not excluding this very committee. The evaluators have overlooked, played down, even defamed some promising, original schools while recommending mainly quantitative or rationalistic approaches. Seniority here collapses into tunnel vision if not smallness of mind – *keine*

² Cf. Gouldner: *For sociology*, Østerberg: *Key concepts* (Norw. text).

Experimente! – a more than middle-elderly prolongation of the past into the future.

It's at best a doubtful prediction that "analyses of empirical data" (p. 33) are what most sociologists will end up doing for a living. The demand for interpretations – of processes, systems of meaning (sense, signification), local cultural traits etc. – is liable to be as high if not higher. We should realise that we'll leave these jobs to anthropologists, ethnologists, philosophers and others – if our future sociologists are educated to stick firmly to their abacuses only.

3. Committee member Aage Bødker Sørensen's paper in *Uni-Ped* 2-3/94³ states flatly that "Most of the evaluation studies taking place presently are not only valueless but harmful", and further that they're "a waste of resources including the time of busy persons". He does not, however, as yet sketch an answer to the question why he himself – probably on par with if not above any other colleague – for years has engaged willingly in that very harm and waste. If his insight is very recent we'd expect him to refuse future offers; he's certainly earned his leisure.

But on closer look his paper does not oppose evaluation studies generally – he's only contesting the "pedagogical model of evaluation" of his latter commissions; they're simply *not severe enough*, for they don't provide "effective and consequent sanctions". The butcher deprived of his axe, we might say, paraphrasing Richard Sennett⁴. But then of course axes never were the best thing for steering. *Herrschaft* or legitimate routine is better than *Gewalt*, force or coercion, as suggested by Weber – but alas, less easily established: It takes real implementation, not just reports and studies.

4. The committee comments ironically (pp. 32-34) on "the very famed Golden Age of the 1950s and 60s", including its "heroes", the late Vilhelm

3 Danish text. The journal is published by the Dept of education, University of Oslo.

4 It's "the actor deprived of his art" in the original. The present less gentle version might still be a case of Sennett's "destructive Gemeinschaft".

Aubert alone being actually named⁵. Now first as for the "Golden Age" it's largely myth, or more precisely eulogy produced by the pretenders of following generations – the career colleagues of the 80s and 90s (cf. p. 213). Viewed soberly the 50s and 60s were certainly a *Pioneer Age*; the founders are certainly worth that much. But "gold" or lasting value – it's rather a bit early to state with confidence. Did our pioneers really produce concepts, papers, theses, monographs, still in use so as to survive at least another decade or two? There is, lamentably, some room for doubt here regarding heroes' feats, large or less so. A charisma the size of an Abel, no; and Sophus Bugge, Thoralf Skolem, hardly. *Qui vivit, videbit*.

One last thing, however, is not too early but overdue for stating clearly right away: Our four experts are all – excepting only the Norwegian-Russian-North American Rogoff Ramsøy – from neighbouring Nordic countries. Now, did sociology in any of these countries ever have their "Golden Age" – in earnest, ironically, or epically speaking? Where are the "Sociology-Heroes", old or new, from Denmark, Finland, and Sweden? And if they don't exist, the reason can hardly be that sociology is more firmly institutionalised⁶ – the committee's counterpart to hero worshipping – there. Why, even the committee's own ranks might not provide obvious cases.

So, doubting or ironising, it is – if not exactly "hard fact" still neither studied nor far-fetched to hold that Norwegian sociology did indeed have its "Golden Age" including some "heroes" three or four decades ago. No neighbouring Nordic country can claim as much.

And finally, with an evaluation study like this – if done in the 50s and duly implemented – *Norway would't have had one either*.

5. In conclusion: The expert committee offers us its collegial advice – some of it wise, some less so, and some frankly narrow-minded – in essence, it seems, a proposal to substitute for our old motto "problem-oriented

5 Cf. p. 138 - "Norway's greatest Sociology-Hero".

6 Insulated might even be a more apt term.

empiricism" a *method*-oriented version⁷. We may or may not listen to or adopt their proposals, remembering always, however, that their advice isn't really based on the most relevant professional expertise, nor carrying the weight of a scientific study in the present report. The evaluation dissolves, in the end, into alchemy, the ancient "art" of finding self-proclaimed golds.

It looks as if someone has been trying to spring the old Parkinson trap on us, that of externalising responsibility for unpopular decisions. Then later, one may chime in "I don't like it any more than you do, but we just *have* to adopt such expert advice". Well no, we don't have to – not generally and certainly not with expertise out of character.

⁷ "Hero" Aubert spoke jokingly about the "EDP-m-1" (for "marxist-leninist") school of the turbulent early 70ies. The variant EDP-m-s (for "main-stream") is perhaps too central to bear jokes?

