

UMass Sociology 100 Years Old – Randall Stokes

To the surprise of almost all of its current faculty members, the Department of Sociology at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst (<http://www.umass.edu/sociol>) has a history considerably longer than the sixty or so post-WW II years it has been generally accorded. At its recent Winter banquet, the Department not only boasted and roasted its retiring former Chairman, Jay Demerath, but was apprised of the nearly vanished first forty-years of a full century of UMass sociology by another former Chairman, Randall Stokes, leading to an additional focus of celebration.

The first sociology course at the University of Massachusetts was taught in 1908 by Kenyon Leech Butterfield, President of the University from 1906 through 1924. Butterfield came to the University, then the Massachusetts Agricultural College (MAC), after a brief stint as President of the Rhode Island Agricultural College. He came to MAC with an established commitment to sociology. His undergraduate (BA, Michigan) and graduate degrees (PhD, Michigan Agricultural College) were in rural sociology, and he brought with him a nearly messianic passion to improve the lives of the then widely impoverished small family farmers and rural workers. His first course was titled “The Rural Community”, and its progressive leanings were hinted at in the course description. Among the topics covered were “the present social conditions of farm people”, and “social class and social status of the rural population”. At the time, MAC had a total enrollment of exactly 239 men and 2 women.

Shortly after this initial offering, in 1909, Butterfield instituted a completely new unit he named the Division of Social Science, centered on the departments of rural sociology and agricultural economics. From its inception the Division of Social Science was a self-consciously uplifting and progressive enterprise from its inception. Many of the courses were explicitly dedicated to improving the lot of rural workers and small farmers. By the early 1920s, as many as eight undergraduate courses in rural sociology were being offered each semester, including such staples as “Rural Village and Town Sociology”, “Rural Government”, and “Rural Organization”. Major topics in these three courses included “the forming of class consciousness”, “criticism and evaluation of plans for improvement”, and “political institutions and rural betterment”.

To appreciate Butterfield’s view that sociology had a mission to improve people’s lives, one has only to look a bit south to New Haven, where in 1908, American Sociological Society President and Yale Professor William Graham Sumner was still waging war on the very notion that anyone ought to attempt any sort of social betterment, for fear of disturbing the processes of natural selection that insured societal progress. Sociological loyalties then were largely divided between the progressives, led by Lester F. Ward, and the social Darwinists, led by Sumner. Butterfield’s sympathies were unequivocally with the former. Within ten years of the first sociology course, the Division of Social Science was offering both an MA and a PhD in sociology. The first UMass M.A. degree in sociology was awarded in 1921, to Aaron Smith and the first Ph.D. in 1932 to Ezra Morgan.

In addition to Butterfield, faculty before WWI included professors Newell Sims, James

Cutler, John Phelan, Joseph Novitski and John Skinner. Like Butterfield, all were activists in the progressive movement. Newell Sims, for example, left Massachusetts for the University of Florida where, in 1920, his house was raided by Department of Justice representatives in search of “radical” literature. Various tracts advocating racial and class equality were discovered, and he was forced to resign his faculty position.

The modern era of Sociology at UMass began with Henry Korson’s arrival from Yale in 1944. At this time the University still had fewer than 1000 students. Korson became the head and only member of a new freestanding department of Sociology. Within a few years John Manfredi, Edwin Driver and T.O. Wilkinson joined Korson, and these four formed the core of the Department until the explosive growth of Sociology that began in the early 1960s.

Between 1963 and 1974, faculty size increased from 10 to 31, including a number of people who were already or became distinguished scholars. Among these were Milton Gordon, Lewis Killian, Charles Page, Alice Rossi and Peter Rossi (both to become ASA Presidents), Hans Speier, William J. Wilson, and Jay Demerath, who came from Wisconsin as chairperson. Under the directorship of Doug Anderton, the Department's Social and Demographic Research Institute (SADRI) continues on the path blazed by Pete Rossi, and even earlier by Kenyon Butterfield, with the mandate to carry out empirical and applied policy research on issues of broad public concern (see <http://www.umass.edu/sadri>). The Demerath era of the Department was capped in 1983 when the NRC report on graduate programs ranked UMass sociology 18th in the nation, eleventh among public universities.

Now we are beginning our second hundred years with a burst of new energy and a continued dedication to Kenyon Butterfield’s vision of sociology as a discipline that can and should make a difference. Like many departments that experienced extremely rapid growth during the War on Poverty years, the Department is now in the midst of a generational turnover and reconfiguration, under the guidance of our current Chairperson, Donald Tomaskovic-Devey. Fourteen of our 24 current tenure track faculty received their Ph.D.s after 2000, and the mounting number of recent major publications, grants, and awards suggests that sociology's best days lie just ahead. UMass sociology remains tied to our progressive origins, blending the tools of contemporary sociological research with our historical legacy.