William Fielding Ogburn, Social Scientist

Although officially classified as a sociologist, William Fielding Ogburn had far-ranging interests which carried him through all the social sciences for almost 50 years of research and teaching. Ogburn wrote in 1932, "When Wilhelm Wundt died in 1920 it was remarked that the last of the great men who knew it all had passed away. Seventeen years earlier when Herbert Spencer died he took with him a greater range of knowledge than Wundt had possessed. . . . Previous to Spencer there were many great intellects that covered the whole field of human knowledge. . . . Wundt was the last of the old men of our modern civilized tribes" [*J. Adult Educ.* (Jan. 1932)]. Ogburn, in his interests and works, must be called the last of the great social scientists who wished to know it all. It is a tribute both to the man who was able to foresee events and to the social sciences that the field has become so diversified and the total volume of knowledge so large that no one man can any longer expect to know all the social sciences.

Because of the tremendous range of his interests and the vast amount of published materials which he produced during the years 1912 (when his Ph.D. dissertation appeared) to 1959, no adequate summary or appraisal of his work is possible at this moment. As a former student and admirer of Professor Ogburn I can only hope to highlight those aspects with which I am most familiar.

He was born in Butler, Georgia, in 1886, took his B.A. at Mercer, and received his Ph.D. in 1912 from Columbia University. Between 1911 and 1918 he taught economics, political science, history, and sociology, first at Princeton University, then at Reed College and the University of Washington. He was professor of sociology at Columbia University from 1919 to 1927 and then became Sewell L. Avery distinguished service professor of sociology at the University of Chicago. He retired in 1951, at which time he began traveling about the world following his ever-broadening interests and desire to see and learn more. He lectured at the universities of Delhi and Calcutta in India and at Nuffield College, Oxford University, in England and traveled extensively through Asia, the southwest Pacific, Europe, and Latin America. Not content with a life of complete retirement, he was also visiting professor of sociology at Florida State University. Until the time of his sudden death on 27 April 1959, he was in vigorous health and continued to play tennis with anyone rash enough to face him across the net.

His research career led to his writing a number of books and hundreds of articles, most of which appeared in professional journals. No complete bibliography of his writings, which included articles in the *New York Times* and other nonprofessional journals, is available. The publication which probably attracted the most attention, both in professional and lay circles, was *Recent Social Trends* (1933), which he masterminded and directed, and of which he wrote a large portion.

Paralleling his careers as teacher and researcher was his career with the federal government. During World War I he was head of the cost-of-living section of the National War Labor Board. Subsequently he was a special agent for the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, where he continued working on retail price studies for a number of years. He was a member of the Consumers Advisory Board of the National Recovery Administration in the 1930's and held posts with the Resettlement Administration and the National Resources Commission. For a number of years he was also chairman of the Census Advisory Committee.

His participation in professional societies led to his becoming president of the American Sociological Society, president of the American Statistical Association, a vice president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and chairman of the Social Science Research Council. None of these posts was honorary; his students can testify that he worked hard at all of these, plus many others.

Just after the turn of the century, when Ogburn began his professional career, many if not most of the leaders of the social-science disciplines were social reformers and philosophers. Against this background Ogburn brought a conviction, which was almost an obsession, that the social sciences must become scientific; they must produce verifiable knowledge. As he saw it, the use of statistical methods was one sure way of leading to scientific knowledge. In his Ph.D. dissertation he had already written, "Until it has been measured, knowledge of it must remain vague." He was greatly influenced by the anthropologist Franz Boas, the economist Wesley C. Mitchell, and the sociologist Franklin H. Giddings.

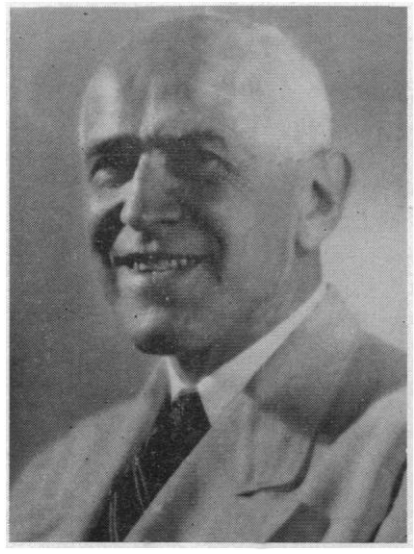
Ogburn carried this preoccupation with him during his entire life. In the textbook *Sociology* (written by him and M. F. Nimkoff) he emphasizes that a science is to be judged by three criteria —the reliability of its body of knowledge, its organization, and its method. Reliable knowledge in the social sciences can be obtained via statistical methods; statistics are the social scientsts' equivalent of the biologists' and physical scientists' laboratories. This idea was passed on to, and firmly embedded in the minds and works of, a very large number of his students in the course of a half-century of teaching. In addition to his own students, Ogburn must have influenced untold thousands of students who received their introduction to the subject of sociology through the text *Sociology*; for over a decade this was the most widely used introductory text.

His emphasis on obtaining scientific—that is, verifiable—knowledge, led to the writing of an admirable paper [*Social Forces* **8**, No. 3] in 1930, which is as fresh and illuminating today as it was a generation ago. The first obstacle to the development of a scientific sociology, he argued, is intellectualism. "Scholarship and science are different . . . The scientific process of discovering new knowledge usually consists of two steps, getting an idea or hunch and proving it after having formulated it into an hypothesis. Intellectualism encourages greatly the first step in this process. . . . But it greatly hinders the second step in the process. And it must be remembered that ideas are not knowledge, and they can be

proven to be knowledge or not only by laborious effort. Until that is done we do not have a science."

This emphasis, also, prevented him from ever attempting to set forth a cosmic scheme that would explain all human behavior, and he had little use for all the writers (including those of today) who developed broad theories in the absence of (or in disregard for) verifiable knowledge. Having some of these cosmic writers in mind, Ogburn (and Nimkoff) wrote: "Some of the organizations make very beautiful systems . . . These systematizers think they are setting up guides which the younger scientists, those who follow them, will use. But often these systems are futile, as was the organization of medicine around the theory of convulsive action advanced by Benjamin Rush, a century ago" [*Sociology* (Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1950), p. 18].

The maximum amount of theorizing that Ogburn permitted himself was the idea that culture is an interrelated matrix of events. Virtually every element affects every other element. The interrelationships are all highly complex, and the various elements are related to each other in different degrees. Thus, a large change in one element might lead through a highly complex matrix of interrelationships to only a small change in another element. For example, a very large change in the extent to which a population is urbanized may lead, eventually, to only a small change in the proportion of the population which is married. Furthermore, these interrelationships do not all work as automatically as the gears in a watch. Opposing interrelationships come into play; for example, people driving motor vehicles are the cause of around 40,000 deaths a year in the United States, but when used as ambulances, motor vehicles also save lives. Since so many of these interrelationships are unknown, however, he believed that the time was not yet ripe to try to weave them all together into an over-all theory of human behavior.



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The nearest he came to formulating such an over-all theory was in his volume *Social Change* (1922). Here he attempted to weave together information from biology, anthropology, psychology, economics, and sociology. Full discussion of this book is beyond the scope of this article. It can only be said that he emphasized that changes in the social heritage of mankind are due to factors in human society rather than to any biological changes in man himself.

In trying to account for social change, Ogburn selected technology and invention as a prime mover. He recognized that other factors, including ideas, could effect changes, but he chose to study inventions. As much as he would have liked to study everything, he realized that he could not do so, and hoped to obtain some scientific knowledge about social change by limiting his research to the factor of technology and inventions. He wrote: "Invention is a great disturber and it is fair to say that the greatest general cause of change in our modern civilization is invention; although it is recognized that social forces in turn encourage or discourage inventions. Certainly developments in technology cause a vast number of changes in a great variety of fields" [*Technological Trends and National Policy* (National Resources Committee, June 1937), p. viii]. Altogether he wrote several books and many journal articles on technology as a factor in social change.

Professor Ogburn was always the gracious southern gentleman, courteous, even-tempered, and judicious. These personal qualities not only endeared him to all who knew him but led to his becoming the statesman of the social sciences—the scholar who could best present the case of the social scientist to the world of nonscientists.

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