IN MEMORIAM

GIDEON A. SJOBERG

Gideon Sjoberg was first appointed to teach at The University of Texas in 1949. He formally retired sixty years later, but stayed active in the Sociology Department as a Professor Emeritus, writing and collaborating right up to his death in December of 2018. Gideon was born and raised in the eastern San Joaquin Valley of California, where the gravity-fed water of the Sierra Nevada Mountains once irrigated a checkerboard of vine and small-tree family farms. His parents, who were Swedish-speaking immigrants from Finland, settled on a peach farm surrounded by immigrants from Sweden—a minority within a minority, he liked to say.

His post-secondary education started at a junior college in nearby Fresno. From there, he graduated to the University of New Mexico where he received his B.A. and M.A. and met his lifelong companion and intellectual partner, Andrée. He did his doctoral work at Washington State University, completing his Ph.D. in Sociology in 1949, the same year he joined the faculty at The University of Texas. Over the next seven decades, his teaching and research left a profound mark on sociology as a discipline and UT as an institution of research and education.

His first major research project on the pre-industrial city occupied much of his work in the 1950s. He worked closely with Andrée on this monumental historical and comparative study of urban development. A widely read 1955 *American Journal of Sociology* article and a 1960 book, *The Pre-Industrial City*, upended key assumptions undergirding urban theory at the time. Translated into half a dozen languages, Gideon’s analysis of preindustrial forms of urban development challenged theoretical assumptions about the city and methodological biases in urban research. His comparative method revealed the distinctive characteristics of scientific, knowledge-
based industrial cities fueled by inanimate energy sources, as well as the highly particular social forms of their ancient pre-industrial counterparts.

In the 1960s, Gideon began formalizing his original thinking about methods of research. He co-authored with Richard Nett an influential textbook on advanced sociological methods. Its enormous literature survey of diverse fields was guided by insights from the sociology of knowledge. The book was ahead of its time with its critical use of reflexive sociology to caution researchers to recognize how their own social positions shaped what they observed and discovered in empirical research. In the 1970s, Gideon worked to bridge methodologies of studying “what is” with theoretical thinking about “what could be.” In a paper co-authored with Leonard Cain on “counter system analysis,” Gideon challenged sociologists to see that it cannot be taken for granted that the future will be an extension of ongoing social arrangements; they argued that today we face a greater contingency between present and future than ever before. The only way to face the uncertain and risky future is with ideas that blend the moral and the empirical. Sjoberg and Cain’s article describes how sociologists can build knowledge about possible futures through counter-perspectives of the present social order. The sociologist of ancient cities opened a social science of the future.

From the 1980s through the 1990s, as Gideon’s work turned more and more to the future, he was guided theoretically by an original mediation of insights from American pragmatism and Max Weber’s sociology of bureaucracy. Over this period, his vast work on large-scale organizations returned repeatedly to the question of how to study hierarchical organizations of authority that seek to hide their practices from public scrutiny. He demonstrated how inadequate the methods of social science research are for studying the “dark side of bureaucracy.” Gideon turned to journalists like I. F. Stone and Seymour Hersh for new ways to study powerful
organizations with a penchant for hiding sensitive information and practices. He taught sociologists to consider how organizational secrecy shapes the flow of information and to rethink their methods accordingly.

Gideon’s work explained why holding large-scale organizations accountable for their actions was both hard to do and imperative. The Western intellectual tradition addresses moral issues through an individualistic framework. This moral thinking is blocked by an analytical chasm between the individual and the structural, the self and the organization. Gideon reworked George Herbert Mead’s theory of the social mind to overcome this limitation. Thinking abstractly, making causal inferences, social memory, the imaginary, typifications—all these and more are cognitive capabilities born of a social mind that enables us to conceptualize the other, take the role of the other, and to look back critically and reflectively on the self. This reflectivity is key to our moral dignity, and it emerges only through interaction with others. In contemporary societies, this interaction is shaped most often within the context of large-scale organizations, but core characteristics of these bureaucracies actively constrain our abilities for social and critical reflectivity. Authorities hide their discretionary power behind rules and a division of labor allowing them to distribute responsibility and blame for damaging events away from themselves and their organizations. These same organizational characteristics authorize directors to exercise triage, assigning sacrifice and “blameability” to the most disadvantaged. Individuals and organizations cannot be reduced to one another, but the moral asymmetry between the two should not work to the benefit of those high in the hierarchy of authority and against those below in the division of labor.

Gideon’s critical reflections on what it means to be moral in these organizational settings led directly to his trailblazing work in the 2000s on human rights and environmental issues. A half
a century after the start of his intellectual journey, these writings brought together many of the strains of his earlier research. Gideon viewed the risks posed by environmental degradation as a moral challenge to organizational planning that must be met by a counter-systems analysis of alternative futures. And he explicitly framed human rights as the means of containing and channeling the “organized power” of states, corporations, and transnational governing bodies. Human rights principles, after all, were first articulated internationally in response to the horrors of the Nazis’ use of organized power for genocide. The Janus-face of large-scale, complex organizations—the bedrock of industrial societies and the potential vehicles of mass destruction—enable and force us to see beyond our particular, community-based moral grounding of societal rights to the wider principles of human and environmental rights. Gideon argued that the grosser violations of these principles by organized powers remind us that moral accountability extends beyond human agents to organizations themselves. They call not just for individual accountability but the restructuring and even dismantling of immoral organizational structures.

Gideon’s scholarship was unmatched in its scope. From his research on ancient cities to possible futures, he used methodological rigor and theory to fire a shared moral imagination of human dignity equal to the large-scale, organizational challenges of tomorrow. He leaves behind generations of former graduate students and colleagues inspired by his imagination and sad that he is no longer with us to face that future.
This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Michael Young (Chair), Karen Douglas, Timothy Dunn, and Nestor Rodriguez.