

## How Will You Spend the 21st Century?

*This is the June 16, 2001 commencement address to the Department of Sociology graduates at the University of Oregon, slightly edited for Footnotes.*

*by Peter Dreier, Occidental College*

...I assume some of the parents in the audience today are like my parents were, 30 years ago, when I told them I was going to major in sociology. They weren't quite sure what sociology was, or whether you could get a job with a degree in sociology.

My father was worried that I might become a *social worker*. My mother was worried that I might become a *socialist*.

Well, let me assure you that your sons and daughters will be able to put their sociology degrees to good use. Some of our nation's most outstanding leaders, today and in the past, majored in sociology.

I'm a sports fan, so I've created a Sociology All-Star Team.

The team captain is *Regis Philbin*, who majored in sociology at Notre Dame. He's so successful he gives money away several times a week!

Other sociology majors in the world of entertainment include comedian *Robin Williams*, actor *Dan Aykroyd* (one of the Blues Brothers), *Paul Shaffer* (the band leader on the David Letterman show), and Oscar-nominated actress *Deborah Winger*.

And those of you who grew up in the 50s will remember the singer and TV star *Dinah Shore*, who studied sociology at Vanderbilt. She did most of her sociological research in her car, by "seeing the USA in her Chevrolet."

Another sociology major from the world of arts and culture is novelist *Saul Bellow*, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature.

From the world of sports, there are dozens of NBA, NFL, and major league baseball players with sociology degrees. They include *Alonzo Mourning* (the Miami Heat's All-Star center); *Joe Theissman* (the NFL Hall of Fame quarterback); *Brian Jordan*, the Atlanta Braves' star outfielder; and, from the University of Oregon, *Ahmad Rashad*, the sportscaster and former football star.

Sociology has been a launching pad for people into the world of politics and law. A good example is *Richard Barajas*, chief justice of the Texas Supreme Court, who majored in sociology at Baylor University.

Over the years, quite a few sociology majors have been elected to political office. For example, *Shirley Chisholm*, the first black woman elected to Congress, in 1968, majored in sociology at Brooklyn College. The current Congress includes *Maxine Waters* (the Congresswoman from Los Angeles) and U.S. Senator *Barbara Mikulski* of Maryland, both sociology majors.

Quite a few urban mayors are on our sociology All-Star team, including *Wellington Webb*, the Democratic mayor of Denver; *Brett Schundler*, the Republican mayor of Jersey City, NJ; and *Annette Strauss*, the former mayor of Dallas.

Who can name a President of the United States who majored in sociology?

The answer is *Ronald Reagan*, who has a sociology degree from Eureka College in Illinois.

Sociology is perhaps most well-known as a training ground for social reformers. Whether they go into politics, law, teaching, business, journalism, the arts, urban planning, the clergy, or any other field, they see their professional careers as a means to improve society and help others.

Most sociologists, in other words, are *practical idealists*.

I think playwright George Bernard Shaw had the best understanding of sociology. He said:

"Some men see things the way they are and ask: why? Others dream things that never were and ask: why not?"

One of those practical idealists was *Saul Alinsky*, the founder of community organizing, who studied sociology at the University of Chicago.

Another was *Martin Luther King*, who majored in sociology at Morehouse College in Atlanta.

On the list of great Americans who studied sociology, one of my favorites is *Frances Perkins*. She may not be a well-known name to many of you, but she was one of the most influential social reformers in American history.

Frances Perkins was born to a wealthy family in Massachusetts in 1880. She was part of the first generation of women to attend college, entering Mt. Holyoke College in 1898. In one of her courses, students were required to visit a factory and do a survey of its working conditions. Perkins visited several textile mills and paper mills. There she saw the dangerous conditions and low pay that workers endured every day. This project opened her eyes to how "the other half" lived.

After graduating in 1903, Perkins got involved in social work among poor immigrants and did extensive sociological research about slum housing and unsafe working conditions in laundries, textile mills, and other industries. She was soon recognized as a national expert in the new field of industrial sociology.

On March 25, 1911, Perkins witnessed a tragic example of why new legislation was needed. She was having Saturday tea, she saw that the upper floors of a building, occupied by the Triangle Shirtwaist Company were engulfed in flames. In less than an hour, 146 people – most of them young girls – had died. Perkins saw them leap to their deaths from the 9th-story windows, because the doors were locked and the stairways were too narrow.

She vowed that she'd fight to make sure that horrors like this never happened again.

The tragedy of the Triangle Fire galvanized New York City's social reform groups. Perkins became the head of a citizens group called the Committee on

Safety. Thanks to this group, within a few years, New York State had enacted 36 new laws protecting workers on the job, limiting the hours of women and children, and compensating victims of on-the-job injuries. Perkins continued this kind of social reform work for the rest of her life. In 1932, President Franklin Roosevelt asked her to become the nation's Secretary of Labor, the first woman ever to hold a Cabinet position, where she became the central figure in the New Deal's efforts to improve the lives of America's poor, unemployed, and elderly. These included the passage of the Social Security Act and of the Fair Labor Standards Act, which established the minimum wage and the eight-hour day. This social legislation forever changed the living and working conditions of most Americans.

Frances Perkins was in college 100 years ago. Try to imagine yourselves sitting in a commencement ceremony in 1901.

It is the beginning of a new century. What was America like back then? What kind of society were sociology majors like Frances Perkins about to inherit?

In 1901, women didn't have the right to vote. Suffragists, who fought to give women that right, were considered radicals and utopians. Few people could look forward to retirement. Most people worked until they were no longer physically able to do so. And when they could no longer work, they often fell into poverty. A hundred years ago, reformers were calling for "social insurance" for the elderly.

In 1901, lynching was a regular occurrence in the South. Lynching kept black people terrorized. The NAACP was founded back then to fight to outlaw lynching and to abolish laws that denied black people the right to vote.

One hundred years ago, conditions in our factories and our urban housing were incredibly dangerous. Many people were regularly killed or seriously injured on the job.

Many apartments were constructed so poorly that they were often fire traps, lacking ventilation. Epidemic diseases like TB were widespread because there were no laws dealing with basic sanitation.

Back then, sociologists documented these conditions and worked with reformers for basic changes: like government regulations regarding minimal safety standards for factories, schools, and apartment buildings as well as for laws outlawing the exploitation of child labor.

One hundred years ago, these and many other ideas, that today we take for granted—laws protecting consumers from unhealthy and unsafe food; laws regulating air pollution from factories and cars; Pell grants to help students pay college tuition; a minimum wage; government health insurance for the elderly and the poor—were considered dangerous, or impractical, or even socialistic.

Each of these ideas has improved the day-to-day lives of Americans. Today, Americans enjoy more rights, better working conditions, better living conditions, and more protection from disease in childhood and in old age than anyone could have imagined 100 years ago.

Thanks to Frances Perkins and people like her, America is a much better society than it was 100 years ago.

But that doesn't let you off the hook!

There are still many problems and much work to do.

Like all agents for social change, whether or not they studied sociology in college, Frances Perkins, and Martin Luther King understood the basic point of sociology, that is, to look for the connections between people's everyday personal problems and the larger trends in society. Things that we experience as personal matters—a woman facing domestic violence, or a low-wage worker who cannot afford housing, or middle-class people stuck in daily traffic jams—are really about how our institutions function. Sociologists hold a mirror up to our society and help us see our society *objectively*. One way to do this is by comparing our own society to others. This sometimes makes us uncomfortable—because we take so much about our society for granted. Conditions that we may consider “normal,” other societies may consider serious problems.

For example, if we compare the U.S. to other advanced industrial countries like Canada, Germany, France, Sweden, Australia, Holland, and Belgium, we find some troubling things:

- The U.S. has the highest per capita income among those countries. At the same time, the U.S. has, by far, the widest gap between the rich and the poor.
- Almost 30 percent of American workers work full-time, year-round, for poverty level wages. Like the man in Oakland I read about recently, who has a full-time job but who spends his nights riding the buses because he has no other place to sleep.
- The U.S. has the highest overall rate of poverty. More than 33 million Americans live in poverty.
- Over 12 million of these Americans are children. In fact, one out of six American children is poor. They live in slums and trailer parks, eat cold cereal for dinner, share a bed or a cot with their siblings and sometimes with their parents, and are often one disaster away from becoming homeless.
- Approximately 4 million American children under age 12 go hungry.
- Only three out of five children eligible for the Head Start program are enrolled because of the lack of funding.
- About 7 million students attend school with life-threatening safety code violations.
- The U.S. has the highest infant mortality rate among major industrial nations.
- One fifth of all children under two are *not immunized* against serious diseases.
- The U.S. is the only one of these nations without universal health insurance. More than 43 million Americans—including 11 million children—have no health insurance.
- Americans spend more hours stuck in traffic jams than people in any of these other countries. This leads to more pollution, more auto accidents, and less time spent with families.
- Finally, the U.S. has a much higher proportion of our citizens in prison than any of these societies.

One hundred years from now—in the year 2101—someone else will be standing in this spot. He or she will look back at the previous century and compare what America was and what it had become.

He or she will, in other words, assess whether your generation made significant progress in addressing and solving these problems. What would

you like your grandchildren to think about how you spent the 21st century?

Like Frances Perkins, you have some choices to make about how you want to spend your lives. She had no roadmap. She was a pioneer. She worked with others to study society, figure out what was wrong, and then build a movement to fix it.

No matter what career you pursue, you have choices about how you will live your lives. As citizens, you can sit on the sidelines and merely be involved in your society. Or you can decide to become really *committed* to making this a better world.

What's the difference between just being *involved* and really being *committed*?

Think about the eggs and bacon that you had for breakfast this morning.

The hen was *involved*. But the pig was really *committed*!

Today, there are hundreds of thousands of patriotic Americans committed to making our country live up to its ideals. Some focus on the *environment*, others focus on education, and still others focus on housing, or working conditions, or *human rights*, or *global trade*, or *discrimination against women, minorities, and gays and the physically disabled*.

They are asking the same questions that earlier generations of active citizens asked: Why can't our society do a better job of providing equal opportunity, a clean environment, and a decent education for all?

They know there are many barriers and obstacles to change, but they want to figure out how to overcome these barriers, and to help build a better society.

As the life of Frances Perkins illustrates, the outrageous ideas of one generation are often the common sense ideas of the next generation. So ask yourselves: What are some of the things that we take for granted today that need to be changed? What are some ideas for changing things that today might seem "outrageous," but that — 25, or 50, or 100 years from now — will be considered common sense?

In fact, your generation has done quite well already. The media stereotypes your generation as being apathetic—but the reality is that a record number of college students today are involved in a wide variety of "community service" activities—such as mentoring young kids in school, volunteering in a homeless shelter, or working in an AIDS hospice.

And, like Frances Perkins, students on college campuses across the country, outraged by the inhumane conditions in many workplaces, have mobilized to draw public attention to the new wave of "sweatshops" overseas *and* here in the U.S.

As a result of this student activism, more than 100 colleges and universities have adopted "anti-sweatshop" codes of conduct for the manufacturers of clothing that bear the names and logos of their institutions.

Positive change is possible, but it is *not* inevitable.

For about the last decade, America has been holding its breath, trying to decide what kind of country we want to be.

I am optimistic that your generation will follow in the footsteps of Frances Perkins and Martin Luther King — not only when you're young, but as a life-long commitment to positive change.

I know you will *not* be among those who simply "see things the way they are and ask: why?"

Instead, you will "dream things that never were and ask: why not?"