

# William Foote Whyte

*June 27, 1914 — July 16, 2000*

William Foote Whyte began his academic career at Swarthmore College. After graduating in 1936, he went on to four years at Harvard as a member of the Society of Fellows, followed by three years at the University of Chicago where he received a Ph.D. in Sociology with a minor in Social Anthropology. With that degree in hand, Bill went to the University of Oklahoma where in one year he was both Assistant Professor of Sociology and Acting Chairman of the Department of Anthropology. He returned to Chicago as Assistant and then Associate Professor of Sociology. This appointment lasted from 1944-48, when Bill accepted an offer to teach at the then three-year old New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR) at Cornell.

The appointment at ILR gave Bill a chance to teach and research in the field then called “human relations,” but throughout his career, he continued to write and edit in sociology and anthropology. Bill often remarked that in the early days, the distances between the disciplines were not nearly so clear. He vacillated between sociology and anthropology but always felt comfortable in both camps. It is indicative of both his scholarship and his dedication to ideas rather than camps that during his life, he was elected to and served as President of the Industrial Relations Research Association, the Society for Applied Anthropology, and the American Sociological Association.

What stands out more prominently than any disciplinary affiliation was Bill’s choice to link his social research to liberal social reform. In later years, he spoke nostalgically of the “triple-threat professor” expectation at the ILR School—a professor engaged in teaching, research, and extension work.

From the beginning as a triple-threat professor, Bill engaged in industrial projects in New York cities such as Corning and Rochester, always bringing along graduate students for the research and experience. In the mid-1950s, his interest in discovering whether “good human relations” practices were universal had led him to take a sabbatical in Venezuela. The experience in Latin America led eventually to an extensive period of time in Peru and a role in the development of the Institute of Peruvian Studies at Cornell. The Institute reflected his ambition to provide field training for both Peruvian and American students. His concern over academic imperialism was evident in his insistence that all publications from the work of the Institute be published first in Spanish.

From 1956-61, Bill served as Director of the Cornell Social Science Research Center. In 1969, in response to the social unrest on campus, Bill joined faculty from other colleges and formed the Human Affairs Program, designed specifically to link the university and the community. The program remained viable for four years; with its final

claim to success an alternative secondary school in Ithaca that by the time of Bill's death had reached national acclaim.

The last chapter in Bill's relationship to Cornell ILR was, upon retirement in 1980, to move physically into the ILR Extension complex, where he soon established an action and research group, Programs for Employment and Workplace Systems (PEWS), dedicated to providing technical assistance to labor and management collaborative work. While he continued for several years to teach one graduate seminar in strategies for labor-management cooperation, his real contribution to PEWS was his intellectual interest in the role of labor-management in organizational improvement. His writing (see below) and leadership in PEWS provided early footing for the Cornell Participatory Action Research Network, an on-campus group of faculty and students who are known world-wide via the Web and the connection to William Foote Whyte's name.

*Street Corner Society* was his best-known book. Published in 1943, it was still in print at his death and had been translated into many different languages. The book was as vital in 2000 as when it first appeared; it influenced countless social researchers and community leaders over the generations. It is as close to a bestseller as social science writing gets. Key to that book is the linking of rich urban ethnography of a particular community with the study of organizational behavior among the street corner boys. Bill's ability to focus on processes in context, particularly leadership in organizations, was already fully visible in 1943, marking a major difference between his writing and other urban community studies of that period.

Taking *Street Corner Society* as the pivot, we see a wide variety of threads moving outward from it. His work on the restaurant industry and other industrial settings and his studies of organizational dynamics became both influential and his trademark in industrial and labor relations. (See *Human Relations in the Restaurant Industry* (1948); *Pattern for Industrial Peace* (1950); *Man and Organization* (1959); *Money and Motivation* (1955); *Men at Work* (1965); *Action Research for Management* (1965); *Organizational Behavior: Theory and Application* (1969); *Worker Participation and Ownership* (1983); and *Social Theory of Action* (1991)).

At the same time, he pursued a continuing interest in larger-scale issues of community development, both domestically and internationally, leading to both highly contextualized ethnographic/historical studies of communities in the Andes and breakthrough work on unlocking human potential in development work. (See *Toward an Integrated Theory of Development* (1969); *Dominación y cambios en el Perú rural* (1969); *Power, Politics and Progress: Social Change in Rural Peru* (1976); and *Higher Yielding Human Systems for Agriculture* (1983)). This double focus on the human factor and the potency of history was a theme throughout his whole career.

Long after other people have rested on their laurels, Bill moved into a new arena which he called “participatory action research,” leading to major collections of essays on the topic of collaborative research with local stakeholders (*Participatory Action Research* (1990) and *Industrial Democracy* (1985)) and one of the most important historical, ethnographic, and organizational studies of the famous Mondragón cooperatives ever done (*Making Mondragón: the Growth and Dynamics of the Worker Cooperative Complex* (1988, with Kathleen King Whyte)). This work caused a great many people to encounter Bill for the first time and begin to learn from his concept of “social inventions.” He focused attention on socially desirable innovations made in one context that could be learned from and applied elsewhere.

In the final phase of his career, he turned back to reflect on his own learning and developed a uniquely effective way to share his learning, first in a book on the role of the field experience in learning about social inventions and the promise of fieldwork for future generations (*Learning from the Field* (1984)); and finally in much more personal reflections on his itinerary, choices, and reasons for doing what he did (*Participant Observer, An Autobiography* (1994), and *Creative Solutions to Field Problems: Reflections on a Career* (1997)).

Few people have been more intellectually ambitious, more diverse in the topics and methods of their work, or more consistently committed to linking the academy to societal improvement than Bill Whyte. We scan the horizon in fear that there will never be another to replace him.

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