SOCIOLOGY AND FREEDOM

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Sociology, greatly to the surprise of most of its older practitioners, has acquired the reputation of a liberating discipline. Sociology courses are crowded with students in search of the intellectual tools with which to demolish the hypocritical world of their elders and fashion for themselves, if not for society at large, a new authenticity and a new freedom. Even more astonishing expectations are directed toward sociology by students who adhere to the radical left. For them, sociology is nothing less than the theoretical arm of revolutionary praxis, that is, a liberating discipline in the literal sense of a radical transformation of the social order. It is sociology in this latter understanding that has been associated with the remarkable proportion of students of the field who are among leading activists of the New Left, both in America and in western Europe—to the point where there now are firms in Germany and in France screening job applicants in order to bar those who have taken sociology courses. Even in this country, where sociology is established more firmly in academia, there are places where the field has taken on a slightly disreputable flavor.

All this is very recent indeed. Only a few years ago most outsiders, if they thought of a sociologist at all, thought of him as a dry character, with an insatiable lust for statistics who at best might dig up some data of use to policy makers and at worst (in the words of one malevolent commentator) might spend ten thousand dollars to discover the local house of ill repute. It would have required a wild imagination to conceive of this unexciting type as an object of interest either for young seekers after salvation or for the FBI. It has happened all the same. Especially among younger members of the profession there are now serious aspirants to drastically different images of the sociologist. There is the image of the sociologist as one of several guru types within the youth culture, in close proximity to the evangelists of psychedelia, T-group mysticism, and other fashionable gospels. There is also the image of the sociologist as a carrier of revolutionary doctrine and, potentially at least, as a character throwing Molotov cocktails through the windows of the faculty club (in either direction, depending on circumstances). Both images have provoked dismay as well as enthusiasm. The former image is especially galling for psychologists, who suddenly find themselves challenged in what so recently was a monopoly in the treatment of the metaphysical afflictions of intellectuals. The latter image is a source of alarm not only to university administrators and law enforcement officers, but to orthodox Marxists, who describe the new radical sociologists in terms that could have been borrowed from Spiro Agnew.

The greatest dismay, naturally, comes from sociologists. Placid purveyors of Parsonian theory are suddenly confronted with demands to be "relevant" to the turbulent and constantly shifting commitments of the young. Graduates of the Bureau of Applied Social Research, collectors and producers of multiple correlations with impeccable margins of error, suddenly hear themselves denounced as academic hirelings of the military-industrial complex. This confrontation between the old and the new sociology, a yawning generation gap if there ever was one, could be fully observed at the 1969 meetings of the American Sociological Association in San Francisco. There were the various caucuses of radical leftists, black militants, and (perhaps most frightening of all) liberated or wanting-to-be liberated women sociologists, each group doing its thing in the antiseptic corridors of the San Francisco Hilton. Amid this novel furor, the majority, almost furtively, went about its usual business of interviewing job candidates, drinking publishers' liquor, and reading papers in atrocious English.

Sociology should be an instrument for the existential liberation of the individual; it should be a weapon in the revolutionary struggle to liberate society. To anyone familiar with the history of the discipline, these notions are startling, if not ironic. In the origins of sociology, there was indeed a quasi-religious conception of it—the conception of Auguste Comte and his followers. Comte, however, envisaged sociology as an *anti*revolutionary doctrine, as the new church that was to restore order and progress in the wake of the havoc caused by the French Revolution. With few exceptions, however, the Comtian view of sociology as *Heilswissen* (to use Max Scheler's term) did not survive into the classic age of the discipline, the period roughly between 1890 and 1930. None of the classic sociologists would have been able to make much sense of the current notion of sociology as a vehicle of personal liberation.

As to understanding sociology to be a doctrine of revolutionary praxis, it is noteworthy that some of the greatest classic figures (such as Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and Vilfredo Pareto) invested a good deal of effort in what they considered to be refutations of Marxism. Most classic sociology in Europe was a counterrevolutionary and (at least implicitly) conservative doctrine. Early

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American sociology had a strong reformist animus, but this was more congenial to YMCA secretaries than to revolutionaries or preachers of spiritual salvation. Even this mild reformism became, at most, a submerged motif as "value-freedom" and technical proficiency became established as binding norms within the profession.

I have no satisfying explanation for the recent dramatic changes in the conception of sociology. One can point, of course, to certain intellectual sources—C. Wright Mills in this country, the so-called Frankfurt School in Germany, and Marxists-turned-sociologists, such as Henri Lefebvre, in France. This, though, does not explain why these individuals and their ideas have suddenly come to exert such a powerful influence. I strongly suspect that, as is often the case in the history of ideas, there is a strong element of chance in the new affinity between sociology and political radicalism. In any case, I don't intend to devote myself here to speculation about the reasons for this slightly bizarre marriage (not the least reason being that I doubt whether it will last long). Rather than to explore historical causes, I wish to look at the theoretical question at issue, to wit: *In what sense, if at all, can sociology be called a liberating discipline?*

"The relationship between sociology and freedom is not as simple, or as cheerful, as the radicals in the profession would have us believe."

I shall approach the question by way of two seemingly contradictory propositions: (1) sociology is subversive of established patterns of thought, and (2) sociology is conservative in its implications for the institutional order. I suggest that *both* propositions are correct, and that understanding this entails also grasping the relationship between sociology and freedom, at least on the level of politics. (I should add here that the epistemological problem of how an empirical science can or cannot deal with man's freedom is clearly outside the scope of this paper.)

Sociology is subversive of established patterns of thought. This, of course, is today a favorite notion of those who would marry sociology to radical politics. A few years ago most sociologists would have been shocked or honestly bewildered by the proposition. Then, it was those with a vested interest in established patterns of thought who (if the inelegant simile may be forgiven) smelled the rat before those who put it there. I recall a remark made to me in 1956 by a barber in the southern town where I had just started my first teaching job. After I told him what I was teaching, he paused (more pensively than hostilely) and remarked, "Oh, I know about sociologists. You're the guys who wrote all those footnotes in the Supreme Court decision on getting the colored into the schools." He was right, of course, in an extended sense, if not literally. I wonder how many of the sociologists who busily gathered all those data on the place of the Negro in America (some of them Southerners living quite comfortably in a segregated society) imagined that they were providing the legitimations for one of the great social transformations of our time. Put differently, I suggest that there is in sociology a subversive impulse that strives for expression regardless of the intentions of individual sociologists.

Every human society has assumptions that, most of the time, are neither challenged nor reflected upon. In other words, in every society there are patterns of thought that most people accept without question as being of the very nature of things. Alfred Schutz called the sum of these "the world-taken-for-granted," which provides the parameters and the basic programs for our everyday lives. Robert and Helen Lynd, in their classic studies of *Middletown*, pointed to the same phenomenon with their concept of "of course statements"—statements that people take for granted to such a degree that, if questioned about them, they preface their answers with "of course." These socially established patterns of thought provide the individual with what we may call his basic reality kit (paraphrasing Erving Goffman), that is, with the cognitive and normative tools to build a coherent universe to live in. It is difficult to see how social life would be possible without this. But specific institutions and specific vested interests are also legitimated by such taken-for-granted patterns of thought. Thus, a threat to the taken-for-granted quality of legitimating thought patterns can very quickly become a threat to the institutions being legitimated and to the individuals who have a stake in the institutional status quo.

Sociology, willy-nilly and by its own intrinsic logic, keeps generating such threats. Simply by doing its cognitive job, sociology puts the institutional order *and* its legitimating thought patterns under critical scrutiny. Sociology has a built-in debunking effect. It shows up the fallaciousness of socially established interpretations of reality by demonstrating that the facts do not gibe with the "official" view or, even more simply by relativizing the latter, that is, by showing that it is only one of several possible views of society. *That* is already dangerous enough and would provide sufficient grounds for sociologists to become what the Prussian authorities used to call *polizeibekannt*—of interest to the cognitive if not to the actual police—and, let me add, every society has its cognitive policemen who administer the "official" definitions of reality. But sociology, at least in certain situations, is more directly subversive. It unmasks vested interests and makes visible the manner in which the latter are served by social fictions. At least in certain situations, then, sociology can be political dynamite.

A favorite term of the New Left in Europe and Latin America is derived from the vocabulary of psychoanalysis—*Bewusstmachung* in German, *concientización* in Spanish—perhaps best translated as "bringing to consciousness." This is the process of social critique by which the mystifications of "false consciousness" are demolished and the way is prepared for the demystified consciousness necessary for revolutionary praxis. I shall return shortly to the question of revolutionary praxis. As to the first aspect of the term, the subversive effects of critical social analysis on consciousness, it must be admitted that it pertains to sociology in a very basic way. Anyone who

pursues the sociological perspective to its logical consequences will find himself undergoing a transformation of his consciousness of society. At least potentially, this makes him unsafe in the eyes of the guardians of law and order. It also produces unsafety, sometimes with catastrophic effects, for his own peace of mind.

"Bringing to consciousness," in this sense, does indeed have a liberating quality. But the freedom to which it leads, quite apart from its possible political effects, can be a rather terrible thing. It is the freedom of ecstasy, in the literal sense of *ek-stasis*—stepping or standing outside the routine ways and assumptions of everyday life—and this, let us recall, also includes standing apart from routine comforts and routine security. Thus, if there is a relationship between "bringing to consciousness" and the ecstasy of liberation, there is also a relationship between that ecstasy and the possibility of desperation. Toward the end of his life Max Weber was asked by a friend to whom he had been explaining the very pessimistic conclusions of his sociological analysis, "But, if you think this way, why do you continue doing sociology?" Weber's reply is one of the most chilling statements I know in the history of western thought: "Because I want to know how much I can stand." Alfred Seidel, a student of Weber's who was also greatly influenced by Freud, came to an even more pessimistic conclusion in his little book appropriately entitled *Bewusstsein als Verhaengnis—Consciousness as Doom*. Seidel concluded that the combined critical consciousness of sociology and psychoanalysis was not only politically subversive but inimical to life itself. Whatever other motives there may have been, Seidel's suicide, as a young man in the 1920s, was an existential ratification of this view of the "bringing to consciousness" of sociology.

My purpose is not to suggest that sociologists, to be consistent, should all commit suicide. I have a somewhat more benign view of the existential possibilities of sociological consciousness. Rather, I want to point out that the relationship between sociology and freedom is not as simple, or as cheerful, as the radicals in the profession would have us believe. Yes, there is a liberating quality to the discipline of sociology. Yes, there are situations where sociological understanding can be liberating in a political and (at least in terms of my own values) morally significant sense—as in the service that sociology can render to the liberation of American blacks from racial oppression. But for individual sociologists, the discipline can bring to consciousness aspects of the world that are profoundly disturbing and a freedom that, in the extreme instance, evokes truly Kierkegaardian terrors.

Sociology is conservative in its implications for the institutional order. This second proposition, put differently, means that sociology, far from leading inevitably to revolutionary praxis, actually inhibits the latter in most cases. Put differently once more, fomenters of revolution have *as* good reason to be suspicious of sociology as policemen have. This point can be made economically by way of three imperatives which, in my opinion, sociological understanding can show to be present in every human community: the imperatives of order, of continuity, and of triviality. Each of these flies in the face of some of the fondest beliefs of the contemporary left.

After a recent lecture of mine on sociological theory, a perceptive student remarked to me, "You sure have a hangup on order, don't you?" I conceded the description, but I added that my "hangup" was not arbitrary or inadvertent. Behind it is the conviction that sociology leads to the understanding that order is *the* primary imperative of social life. There is the additional conviction (which I cannot develop here) that this fact is rooted in the fundamental constitution of man, that is, that not only sociology but philosophical anthropology must lead to a "hangup on order."

Society, in essence, is the imposition of order upon the flux of human experience. Most people will first think here of what American sociologists call "social control"—the imposition of coercive power upon deviant individuals or groups—and, of course, it is in this sense that radicals will understand, and disagree with, my "hangup on order." Coercion and external controls, however, are only incidental aspects of society's imposition of order. Beginning with language, *every* social institution, no matter how "nonrepressive" or "consensual," is an imposition of order. If this is understood, it will be clear that social life abhors disorder as nature abhors a vacuum. This has the directly political implication that, except for rare and invariably brief periods, the forces of order are always stronger than those of disorder and, further, there are fairly narrow limits to the toleration of disorder in any human society.

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The left, by and large, understands that all social order is precarious. It generally fails to understand that *just because of this precariousness* societies will react with almost instinctive violence to any fundamental or long-lasting threat to their order. The idea of "permanent revolution" is an anthropologically absurd fantasy. Indeed, revolutionary movements can be successful only if they succeed, and succeed fairly rapidly, in establishing new structures of order within which people can settle down with some semblance of social *and* psychic safety. Mao Tse Tung's cultural revolution can serve as a textbook example of the grotesque failure in store for any revolutionary praxis that fails to grasp this point.

The imperative of continuity is closely related to, but not identical with, the imperative of order. I suppose that, finally, it is rooted in the simple fact that people have children. If one has children, one feels a necessity to explain the past to them and to relate the present to the past. If one loves one's children (and I take it that this is the case with most people who have them), one will want to project into the future whatever good things one has possessed in one's own life—and there are very few people, even among the most oppressed, who have pos-

sessed nothing good at all. Conversely, if one loves one's parents (the current "generation crisis" notwithstanding, I am inclined to think that this, too, is something of an anthropological constant), one will not finally want to disparage *everything* that constituted the parents' world—especially not if one comes to have children of one's own, who not only ask what will become of them but from where they come. *Children are our hostages to history.* Consequently, to be a parent means (however dimly and on whatever level of intellectual sophistication) to have a stake in the continuity of the social order. As a result, there are limits not only to social disorder but to social discontinuity. Enthusiasts for violent change (most of whom, I have noticed, don't have children) fail to recognize this. Successful revolutionaries find out about the limits of disorder, usually to their dismay, as they must settle down to govern the society over which they have gained control. The experiences of the Soviet regime with the institutions of the family and of religion are instructive in this regard.

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The imperative of triviality is also, I suspect, rooted in some basic facts of the human condition—namely, the facts that man's attention span is limited and that man can tolerate only a limited amount of excitement. Perhaps the physiological foundation of this is the need for sleep. Be this as it may, social life would be psychologically intolerable if each of its moments required from us full attention, deliberate decision, and high emotional involvement. I would thus give the status of a sociological axiom to this proposition: *Triviality is one of the fundamental requirements of social life.* It is sociologically, anthropologically, and perhaps even biologically *necessary* that a goodly portion of social life take place in a state of dim awareness or semisleep. Precisely for this reason the institutional order "programs" the individual's activity. Put simply, society protects our sanity by preempting a large number of choices—not only choices of action but choices of thought. If we understand this (the understanding has been worked out systematically, by the way, in the theory of institutions by the contemporary German sociologist Arnold Gehlen), we shall see that there are limits not only to disorder and discontinuity but to the frequency of "significant events." We shall then take more seriously "meaningless rituals," "empty forms," or "mere routines" in social life—simply through recognizing that were social life in its entirety to be charged with profound meaning, we would all go out of our minds. The "meaninglessness" of so much of social life, currently decried as the source of so-called "alienation," is in fact a necessary condition for both individual and collective sanity. The currently fashionable left ideal of full participation in the sense that everybody will participate in every decision affecting his life, would, if realized, constitute a nightmare comparable to unending sleeplessness. Fortunately, it is anthropologically unrealizable, though the endless "discussion" that goes on in radical groups gives a certain approximation of the horror that its realization would signify. It is one of the mercies of human nature that, finally, all participants and all discussants must fall asleep.

I have tried to explicate the conservative bent of sociology by pointing to some basic imperatives of social life that should make the sociologist skeptical of notions of violent change and hesitant to commit himself to revolutionary praxis. I think that similar conclusions can be arrived at, by way of sociological or historical empirical analysis, for the actual processes of revolution. If all this adds up to a conservative propensity, it should be emphasized that the conservatism in question is of a peculiar kind. It is *not* a conservatism based on the conviction that the institutions of the status quo are sacred, inexorably right, or empirically inevitable. The aforementioned subversive impulse of sociology precludes this type of conservatism. Rather, it is a conservatism based on skepticism about the status quo in society *as well as* about various programs for new social orders. It is, if you wish, the conservatism of the pessimist. The seeming contradiction between our two propositions about the subversiveness and the conservatism of sociology thus resolves itself into a paradoxical but by no means irrational stance: *the stance of a man who thinks daringly but acts carefully.* This, of course, is exactly the kind of man whom our young revolutionaries will call a fink. So be it. It is probably one of the unavoidable blindnesses of youth to fail to see that acting carefully in society may, for some, be the simple result of wanting to preserve their little apple-carts, but for others, motivated quite differently, it may reflect a carefully thought-through concern to avoid senseless pain and to protect the good things of ordinary life. There is some irony, though, in the fact that a generation that has made a culture hero out of Albert Camus should extol his *Rebel* at the expense of his hymns of praise to the ordinary pleasures of ordinary men on sun-drenched beaches.

Sociology, therefore, is a liberating discipline in a very specific way. There can be no doubt about its liberating effects on consciousness. At least potentially, sociology may be a prelude to liberation not only of thought but of action. At the same time, however, sociology points up the social limits of freedom—the very limits that, in turn, provide the social space for any empirically viable expression of freedom. This perspective, alas, is not simple. It requires intellectual effort and is not easily harnessed to political passions. I contend that the effort is worth it and that it will serve well precisely those political purposes that come from a concern for living men rather than for abstract doctrines of liberation.

So much for sociology as a discipline. What about the sociologist? A good case can be made that there is a crisis of freedom in the world today. What is to be the place of the sociologist in this crisis?

While the place of sociology and the place of the sociologist are not identical, they are interrelated. Perhaps the easiest way to explain the difference is in terms of

so-called "value-freedom," that Weberian term that has become a sort of middle-echelon devil in the conceptual hell of the sociological left. The *discipline of sociology*, I insist as emphatically as I can, must be value-free—however difficult this may be in some situations. The moment the discipline ceases to be value-free in principle, it ceases to be a science and becomes nothing but ideology, propaganda, and a part of the instrumentarium of political manipulation. The *practitioner of the discipline*, the sociologist—a living human being,—must *not* be value-free. The moment he is, he betrays his humanity and (in an operation that can simultaneously be called "false consciousness" and "bad faith") transforms himself into a ghostly embodiment of abstract science. These two statements about value-freedom are made, of course, in discrete frames of reference. The statement about the value-freedom of sociology is a methodological one; the statement about the value-freedom of the sociologist is ethical. But perhaps it is appropriate to conclude these observations with a little homily.

We may return here to the two images of the sociologist that were conjured up earlier—that of the sociologist as the antiseptically neutral technician and that of the sociologist as the fiercely committed partisan. I think that the sociological left has been very largely right, ethically speaking, in its denunciations of the former type (even if it has been unfair in individual instances). In an age in which not only freedom but the very survival of man is in jeopardy, there is something obscene about the scientist who claims that he is not responsible for the uses to which his science is put. This is not to deny in any way the right of individuals to live the theoretical life or to abstain from political engagement. This right, however, can be exercised more acceptably by Byzantinologists than by most sociologists. Sociology is too much linked to the agonizing dilemmas of our time to permit most of its practitioners to pursue their theoretical interests in detachment from the struggles of their fellow-men. It is clear, beyond that, that the sociologist in the employ of politically relevant organizations cannot disclaim political responsibility for his work—a point that has been impressed on us very forcefully by the debate that followed the revelations about Project Camelot.

Because of these considerations, I emphasize my belief in the political partisanship of sociologists and concede that at times this partisanship may be quite fierce. For example, when it comes to the Pentagon's view of Latin America, my own political reactions tend to be of considerable ferociousness. It is equally important to stress, however, that the sociologist has no doctrine of redemption to bring into the political arena. What he has to contribute is the critical intelligence that is, or should be, the foundation of his discipline. This is a *political as well as* a methodological mandate. There are plenty of passions available, and the sociologist may well participate in some of them. His distinctive contribution to politics should be his consistent, unswerving application of critical intelligence—to the status quo, yes, and to any challengers of the status quo. Indeed, when a sociologist joins a revolutionary movement (an option I have indicated I would not normally prescribe), his most important political contribution to it will be his ongoing critique *of it*. Put differently, my principal objection to most of my radicalized colleagues is not that they are engaged in the business of "bringing to consciousness" but that they are not doing enough of it.

To whom will such a conception of the sociologist's role appeal? Evidently not to those who simply want a career in any kind of establishment—and not to those who see themselves as Messianic figures. It is all too clear that both such types are strongly represented in American sociology today. I have found, however, and not least among my students, that there are others—those who are still willing to commit themselves militantly to reason. And reason has its own seductiveness.