

Sociology's conflicting tradition

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Has the 'native tradition' of Booth, Rowntree and the Webbs totally gone? It remains sociology's task always to question—and that includes self-questioning.

When T. H. Marshall was acting as a friendly advocate for sociology in the 1950s, in an attempt to persuade Cambridge University that the subject was worth teaching, he talked of sociology's success in providing stepping stones into the middle distance. Eschewing "grand theory" at the one extreme, and "mindless empiricism" at the other, the confident hope of the 1950s was to develop theories of the middle range, which would enable the subject to advance.

Sociology, like most other social sciences, has developed in a distinctive way within each specific tradition, and "what's new" in sociology in Japan or Poland or West Germany over the past 20 years is likely to vary between them. In Britain we have had a rapid expansion of teaching and research in the subject: the number of professors of sociology grew from under five to over 40 during the 1960s, and the Social Science Research Council began to distribute research grants and studentships on an increasing scale over the period. This physical expansion was a mixed blessing: it is hard to consolidate when growing so rapidly.

A sympathetic historian of social science might now find sociology a bewildering battleground of competing vocabularies. Anyone, graduating in sociology in 1953 at the London School of Economics, say, who returned to do postgraduate work at one of our flourishing new departments, might not have a very happy time. He might find himself attacked for being a "positivist" or a "functionalist" and he might wonder why all those doing what he understands to be respectable sociology should be criticised, if not actually scorned. This word "positivist" frequently appears in sociological discussions now, and it is worth enlarging on its meaning. Following Anthony Giddens, we may take "the positivistic attitude" in sociology to comprise three main suppositions:

First, that the methodological procedures of natural science may be transferred to sociology without difficulty, and that problems of subjectivity, volition and will do not present one with any special difficulties.

Secondly, that certain laws, or law-like generalisations, may emerge from sociological analysis.

And, finally, that the knowledge thus gained is available for practical application and that this "value-free" discipline is a tool which the sociologist should be happy to use in the interests of making the world "better."

This notion of a science of society can, of course, be attacked by philosophers as well. Peter Winch, in his essay on *The Idea of a Social Science*, published in 1958, argued that "the central problem of sociology, that of giving an account of the nature of social phenomena in general, itself belongs to philosophy." Despite this, the most vigorous critics of positivism today are within sociology itself.

The answer now to the question, "What's new in

sociology?" would appear to be: "There's more talk about what sociology ought to do and how it ought to set about it." In short, many of the most able postgraduate students spend their time discussing methodology. Anyone coming to do research within the British empirical tradition might be forgiven for wondering where that tradition is. The talk about talk in postgraduate seminars is based on the sayings of gurus in California, Paris or Frankfurt. How many now dare own up to being an empiricist in the tradition of Booth, Rowntree and the Webbs? In general, sociologists today believe that gathering information, in the hope that this will make the world a better place, is an activity more appropriately performed by civil servants and social administrators. Unhappily, gathering data does not necessarily lead to the "right" action or indeed any action: for example, homelessness appears to have increased in direct proportion to the amount of data gathered on homelessness.

What is happening in sociology is occurring, or may soon occur, in other social sciences. It would be a mistake to dismiss all the inner contortions of the subject as products of intellectual immaturity or parochialism. Indeed, I would argue that the current doubts, controversies and clashes of intellectual traditions may be seen as the essential seedbed from which we may get new growth in social theory. We have lived off the fruit of the 19th century giants for too long. One intellectual tradition, which is providing an internal challenge, comes from a line of phenomenological philosophers. Basically, those in this tradition are asking how we know what we know and how the social world we take for granted is constructed. For them, the books on the shelves that we call sociology are themselves a source of data. What do sociologists take for granted? When researchers are "doing sociology" in some field or other, they must draw on a whole range of commonsense meanings and assumptions; it is claimed that these, too, should be treated as raw data for further analysis.

When people come together in various forms of social relationships certain meanings are shared, or are assumed to be shared. Social interactions are governed by background expectancies and what researchers label as data or findings can only be understood in relation to these background expectancies. Thus, some sociologists, who may nowadays call themselves "ethnomethodologists," have taken up a kind of intellectual nomadism, following the talk as it ebbs and flows, watching for the background expectancies and unstated assumptions, which together make the social construction of reality. And whilst they follow the talk, others watch them following the talk—seeing, in their turn, the sociologists' commonsense taken-for-granted assumptions.

So far there have been very few research reports in this tradition published in Britain, and its chief use appears to be in criticising "positivism." In

practice, ethnomethodologists adopt similar canons and procedures in doing their own empirical work to those they criticise. The phenomenologists, on the other hand, would attack the very objectivity of the object of empirical research.

It could be said that some sociologists are too cautious, if not nervous, in their approach to their data. While new insights into social processes can emerge from an ethnomethodological stance, there are still no clear answers to such questions as "Where do the interpretive rules of everyday life come from?", "Why does the reality that is negotiated come out one way and not another?", "Why are certain people in the situations that they are in in the first place?" As John Goldthorpe has pointed out, such questions raise matters of power and advantage: "situations may also be structured by the differential control over resources, economic, political and symbolic, which participants bring to their interaction."

There is another intellectual tradition which also criticises the old empirical tradition in sociology, but from an altogether different standpoint. For those who believe that the problem is not simply to understand the world but to change it, a revolutionary theory is needed and most empirical studies are said to lack any theory apart from an implicit acceptance of the status quo.

Detailed analyses of social relationships in specific contexts divert attention, it is argued, from the "real" structures, and are hence mystifications. Abstract concepts—relations of production, productive forces, exchange value, surplus value—are the central concepts, linked together in a global structure. Sociologists under the influence of the French marxist, Louis Althusser, have a rhetoric which, they claim, is concerned with a scientific, structural description of economic reality. The social functions of individuals are defined by the relations of production; and these relations of production are not reducible to inter-subjective relationships: such relationships are mere epiphenomena.

Similar criticisms are applied to the census or any sample survey. As Barry Hindess put it, in *On the Use of Official Statistics in Sociology*: "There is no correct and unique distribution that exists independently of its means of production." He cites the 1951 census of India as an example, claiming that "the agrarian classification . . . is of little scientific value. It can give no indication of either the extent or the forms of penetration of commodity relation into the countryside." He says: "All such statistics are the product of a determinate process of production of knowledge governed by a determinate system of concepts (it is by no means necessary that this system be coherent)."

Those sociologists who adopt this position tend to talk at a high level of abstraction, claiming that what they are interested in is the study of political economy. Concepts like "the state," "the ruling class," and "exchange value" are more appropriately discussed in abstract than empirical terms. A new journal, *Economy and Society*, has been established, and intellectual links are being forged with radical economists and radical philosophers.

Both these two intellectual traditions—both the phenomenological / ethnomethodological and the radical/revolutionary—are, in effect, questioning the ground rules of sociology—and, by implication, those of all the social sciences. For the ethnomethodologists, Americans working in California, like Cicourel, Garfinkel and Sacks, are more influential than any British sociologist; similarly, for the structural marxists, people like Althusser and



Castells in Paris have no equally vigorous counterpart here. The pattern in the whole English-speaking world is probably much the same as in Britain, with the new influences coming from the same sources.

However, many sociologists, who are still attempting to set out those stepping stones into the middle distance, do get on with empirical studies, despite all the talk about methods. The situation can be illustrated by the British Sociological Association's *Register of Current Theses*, which lists 1,000 topics and is still by no means complete—institutions with large postgraduate schools, like Manchester and Kent, do not appear. From this register it is clear that the sociology of deviance, of education, of work and industry, and of developing societies, is flourishing; and that new topics, such as the sociology of sex and gender, are growing rapidly. There is every sign that the British empirical tradition is stronger than ever before. However scornful of "number-crunching" many young sociologists may be, most of them are probably very eager to hear, for example, the detailed results of the social mobility study directed by Goldthorpe at Nuffield College, Oxford. Sociologists are more aware than most how little we know about recent changes in national social structures in the economically advanced societies. In university departments all over Britain empirical studies on aspects of our social structure are under way—small shopkeepers and landlords at Edinburgh, elites at Cambridge, capitalist farmers at Essex, company directors at

Who is, for British sociologists rather than students of social administration, the indigenous guru to set alongside Booth, Rowntree and the Webbs?

V. Cicourel, *Method and Measurement in Sociology* (New York: The Free Press, 1964)

Douglas (ed), *Understanding Everyday Life: toward the reconstruction of sociological knowledge* (Routledge & Paul, 1971)

D. Young, *Knowledge and Control: new directions in the sociology of education* (Collier-Millan, 1971)

Giddens (ed), *Class and Social Structure* (Heinemann, 1973); *The Class Structure of Advanced Societies* (Chilton, 1973)

Goldthorpe, *Evolution in Sociology* (Sociology, No. 3, 1973)

Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis in Western Sociology* (Doubleday, 1971)

Goldthorpe, *The Use of Official Statistics in Sociology* (Macmillan, 1973)

Kanter, *Commitment and Community* (Harvard University Press, 1971)

Slavovick, *Marx's Theory of Social Change* (Merlin Press, 1971)

Singleton, *From Slavery to Crisis* (New York, 23 November 1972)

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Kent, and manual workers—particularly traditional workers, a new book on whom is due out soon—almost everywhere.

Underlying most of these studies is a set of general questions which seek to clarify the economic and political relationships and structures in a specifically capitalist society. There is no need for sociologists to apologise for being interested in class structures and the tensions, changes and conflicts in the advanced societies. Anyone who claims that an interest in capitalism and class conflict is an anachronistic carry-over from the 19th century must have spent last winter on some very isolated tropical isle. For those who would seek a clear summary of the arguments and issues to which those doing the empirical studies relate their work, Giddens has written an admirable textbook on *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies*. This is so much better than anything we had to work on in the 1950s and 1960s that one must acknowledge that sustained attention (like Giddens's) to European social thought in the 19th century does produce its intellectual rewards. There is little of similar quality produced by American sociologists on this theme.

Yet it would be wrong to imply that we are dully stuck in a textbook-writing stage. Monographs in, for example, the sociology of deviance from America, in urban sociology from France, and in the sociology of the school from Britain, come out fast. In imagination and method, these studies are generally very much better than the "do-a-survey-and-pick-out-the-plum-quotes" school of social storytellers. To illustrate my point, I will take a monograph which I use in my own teaching. I consider it to be excellent, yet it is hard to fit neatly into any obvious research frontier of the subject. This is R. M. Kanter's *Commitment and Community*, an analysis of both 19th century utopian communities in the United States and also of contemporary communes.

"Successful" communes are shown to depend on the level of commitment of their members, and Kanter's analysis of the commitment-engendering mechanisms, the nature and necessity of leadership and organisation, and the dilemmas created by the apparent inevitability of the division of labour and the couple bond, is outstanding. This is a work of scholarship, based on both careful historical analysis and a knowledge of the issues and problems posed by Marx and Weber on alienation, exploitation, legitimation and authority, and by Simmel on the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. It raises, as all such works should, as many questions as it answers. Indeed, the implications of the universality of forms of domination and subordination, the necessity of leadership and authority to maintain commitment, and so forth, are relevant in many fields.

Sound works of synthesis, challenging monographs—is this as much as one should demand from an intellectual discipline? Clearly, there is still some expectation that it ought to move in some definite direction: our knowledge and understanding should "improve"; we should be able to interpret the world "better." These are debatable assumptions, as I have indicated. Some self-appointed Friends of Sociology make claims for its usefulness and for its capacity to influence others outside the discipline. Certainly, sociology has helped to raise the consciousness of certain geographers and historians about issues and problems which they might otherwise have ignored. However, in Britain the best of the popularisers of the

subject are rarely sociologists. If one thinks of David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, or Peter Berger's *Invitation to Sociology*, one is hard-pressed to find indigenous equivalents. Michael Young's *The Rise of the Meritocracy* or Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*—both outstanding contributions—were written some time ago and not by academic sociologists.

Not, of course, that that matters. My point is that British sociology appears to lack a wider intellectual commitment and a concern to communicate outside its boundaries. I consider that this curious shyness is a weakness. A reluctance to pontificate and to produce instant wisdom, is a reflection of a proper modesty; a reluctance to engage in discourse with those in other intellectual traditions, and on matters of general interest, may reflect a certain narrowness and a limitation of intellectual horizons, which I hope will not become a permanent aspect of the British tradition.

Sociology is an intellectual tradition, and part of that tradition is to mature through a dialectical process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Sociology needed the "structural functionalism" of the 1950s (associated with the name of Talcott Parsons) as much as it needs the ethnomethodology of the 1970s. One should not be perturbed by curious vocabularies. Nor should one be alarmed by permanent talk of crisis. Part of the sociological tradition is to be concerned with "paradigmatic shifts," and "revolutions." As Marx battled with Hegel, and Weber struggled with Marx's ghost, so too do lesser sociologists go through their battles in order to get into the intellectual tradition. A previous generation battled with Parsons: today the battle is with Garfinkel, Althusser or Habermas. Such activity can give the impression of a discipline without a centre, as each putative holder of the ring gets slain in turn. This would be to misunderstand the nature of the enterprise.

Basically, sociology is concerned with different kinds of knowledge about different levels of reality in society. Its basically critical stance makes it unpopular both to those who seek change and to those who wish to prevent change. One could argue that sociology can create an intellectual paralysis, which follows from seeing the difficulties and unintended consequences of all proposals for change. For example, an analysis of workers' self-management and social inequality in Yugoslavia shows a conflict between two incompatible principles: centralisation is necessary in order to achieve economic equality but makes it impossible to maintain local self-management; decentralisation is necessary for successful self-management but creates dramatic regional inequalities. Both those who believe in centralisation, and those who believe in decentralisation, are unlikely to enjoy the sociologist's determination to present the undesirable or unintended consequences of each course of action.

Sociology is in the process of creating a new social theory to cope with the economic and political events of recent years, which the old, "established" theories of traditional marxism or traditional American-style structural functionalism so lamentably fail to explain. We may see some of the strands out of which the new theory will be formed—and these include empirical studies grounded in, but not limited by, the theories of Marx and Weber. But developing that theory involves something more. We have got more stepping stones than some of our internal critics acknowledge. They are firm, well-placed and a convenient distance apart. It is now time for a bridge.

The moral achievement of the RSPCA

Diana Spearman

The RSPCA, now approaching its 150th anniversary, shows how a minority ethical view can gradually affect the majority.

On 16 June 1824 the Society (not yet the Royal Society) for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was founded. Two years before (in 1822), Richard Martin, one of its original members, had succeeded at his third attempt in getting the first act for the protection of animals through the House of Commons. These events brought in a new element to both the ethical and the legal code of this country.

The emergence of new attitudes is a central problem of sociology, and certain points about the animal protection movement make it particularly worth attention. The RSPCA has been the most successful of all voluntary associations in changing social attitudes. The movement is one of the most striking examples of the conversion of the general public to a view originally held only by a small minority.

There can be no doubt of its success. Cruelty still exists, and continually takes new forms; but the kind of all pervading brutality, with which the society had to cope in its early days, has disappeared. The society is still forced to prosecute for acts of the most revolting description; but no public figure would dare to defend or dismiss them as they did in the 1820s. Even animals themselves appear to have been influenced by the change in opinion; very few modern dogs attack cats, as it would seem they did in the 19th century. The RSPCA has not achieved this transformation without help from altered social conditions. A rising standard of living, universal education and, in particular, the developments in medicine, all contributed. When it was impossible to alleviate the pain of human beings, and even such an everyday occurrence as having a tooth out involved pain which would now be considered intolerable, anyone who noticed the suffering of animals must have been exceptionally sensitive. None of these factors, however, began to operate until the last quarter of the century. The fact that treatment of animals had shown a marked improvement well before was mainly due to the society's efforts.

As in all such movements, there were two stages in the establishment of the RSPCA: the growth of an idea and its crystallisation in an institution.

The basis of concern for animals is a naive sympathy. However often this is nullified by hunger, fear or desire for money, it can be seen in rudimentary or sporadic forms in all human societies, from the simplest to the most complicated. It is compatible with killing, and even with deliberate cruelty, but it seems to be a deep-seated human tendency. Like other tendencies, however, it can be encouraged or smothered by social and cultural conditions. Before such an institution as the RSPCA could be established, these combined factors had to be favourable.

First, however, instinctive animal lovers had to be assured that their attitude was sanctioned by religion and reason, while others had to be persuaded that the welfare of animals was part of the duty

of a Christian. This preparatory phase was completed during the course of the 18th century. It is usually regarded as part of the humanitarian movement, and there is obviously much truth in this view. The names of the first committee of the RSPCA include William Wilberforce, Fowell Buxton (almost as famous in the anti-slavery campaign as Wilberforce himself) and Sir James Macintosh, the penal reformer. They were all most emphatically "do gooders," and refute the criticism, sometimes made, that the founders of the RSPCA would have done better to concern themselves with their fellow men. Richard Martin may indeed seem an odd associate for the sainted Wilberforce and the enlightened Macintosh: a great Irish landowner, a friend of George IV and a noted duellist, he swore freely and was more than once rebuked by magistrates for his language when he brought a case against some drover, who had ill-treated cattle or horses. But Martin, too, was committed to the cause of penal reform.

It is easy to understand how the attempt to relieve the sufferings of men could lead to a realisation of the miseries of animals. But in spite of the connection between both the personalities and the attitudes of the humanitarian and the animal welfare movements, the former cannot wholly explain the latter. Concern for humans has not always been accompanied by concern for animals. Even at the end of the 19th century, when humanitarianism had affected the whole of Europe, only the Protestant countries of north western Europe had laws to protect animals. Something more than a vivid sense of the importance of every human individual is required to inspire a similar attitude to animals; this was supplied, in the 18th century, by new schools of theology.

Sociological factors also contributed. The political stability and comparative prosperity of the period allowed a proportion of the population to think about other than mere survival. Few would worry about man's relations with the animal world during a civil war, or in desperate economic circumstances. But although improved social conditions were necessary before concern for animals was widespread enough to produce practical results, they were clearly not sufficient. A change in the theoretical status of animals was essential, and this was indirectly brought about, or at least greatly encouraged, by the Latitudinarian divines of the late 17th and early 18th century.

Their aim was to correct the idea of God enshrined in Puritan theology, which one of them described as representing "God as the eternal hater of far the greater part of his reasonable creatures, and the designer of their ruin." In contrast to this gloomy and mistaken view, the "Latitude" men emphasised above all the benevolence of God.

This insistence on benevolence led to a subtle alteration in the prevailing metaphysical theory. The idea of a great chain of being, leading from