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introduction: on being sociological

Reading this book

This book has an open and shameless purpose. We want to seduce you into the world of sociology where we, and you, can explore this curious thing – society – in which we all have a part. The ‘social’ is produced in and through humans doing things collectively. It is characterized by amazing richness, variety, complexity, puzzlement, and capacity to excite both pleasure and misery. That’s a lot for one book to attempt, and so it’s pretty obvious that our version of being sociological is just that. It is one set of descriptions and explanations among the many possible others and so we must begin by explaining why our version of the subject is shaped the way it is.

Seduction is not necessarily about sex (though it is often thought of and used in that context) or about ‘leading astray’. But it is about being tempted and enticed. Some textbook writers are inhibited by the belief that all the ideas (sociological theories) that have been proposed by sociologists should, like competing candidates for election in a democratic state, be given equal time and attention. This is undoubtedly fair but it won’t necessarily achieve our goal of tempting and luring you into wanting to know more. The project of seduction requires different strategies. So it is only proper that we begin by revealing the choices we made.

We set out to make a book that introduced some of the main ideas and issues in the contemporary world that are currently being explored in present-day sociology. Because sociology today rests on the work of earlier generations of sociologists, discussing the present also meant returning to the past and describing the platform of their ideas that grounds our present thinking. Our central purpose is to demonstrate the form and content

of sociological analysis and argumentation. This is achieved through presentation of a range of social institutions – family, community, religion, education, work, for example – and sociological concepts such as class, ethnicity, gender, power and consumerism. Each chapter describes and illustrates the uses we make of theory and evidence within that particular context.

The first three chapters may be read as an extended introduction to what follows. ‘On Being Sociological’ introduces the idea that sociology exists to make sense of the many shapes and dimensions of social being. West-Newman and Matthewman describe the practice that we call ‘being sociological’ as a process which is also a perspective; a way of using evidence to see and understand, and very often to critique existing social arrangements. The structural, institutional and behavioural dimensions of society are seen as social processes through which we make and maintain our world. ‘Doing Research’ describes some of the ways in which sociologists collect and analyse the evidence that forms the basis of their research and theorizing. Curtis critiques the idea of a great conceptual divide between qualitative and quantitative methods and illustrates their reconciliation through the case study of Muhammad Ali’s boxing fight record. ‘Modernizing’ takes the circumstances of colonization in one settler society as the starting point from which to describe the historical antecedents and theoretical foundations of sociology. Carter describes the relationship between modernity and the discipline of sociology through its founding fathers (Marx, Weber, Durkheim) to the present and traces modernity’s positive and negative aspects. He argues that ‘processes unleashed by the Enlightenment and the Dual Revolution remade, and still remake, the world, so nobody was or is untouched’.

Within this context ‘Working’ pays its respects to the founding fathers, especially Marx, and focuses on processes of control and resistance in the workplace. Drawing on contemporary accounts that prioritize the labour process, Curtis describes a range of conceptual understandings which have been developed over the past 25 years, including individualist practices in face of a triumphant managerialism, cyborg work, and tactics of consumption. ‘Consuming’ looks at what it means to live in a consumer society, where social status is equated with spending power and where constant desire exists for the new and fashionable; the chapter considers

the implications of global inequalities in the ability to consume. 'Trading' introduces the social significance of market, money and trading and sets them in the context of a globalized world economic system. 'Stratifying: Class' introduces the concept of class through three empirical case studies – Aotearoa New Zealand (where class appears to be subordinated to ethnic and gender inequality); Argentina (where recent events suggest that class has given way to social movements of the unemployed); and Iraq (where categories of religion and nationality cut across those of class). Bedgood argues that class relations remain a fundamental feature of modern capitalist society and that other dimensions of social inequality such as race, gender and nationality are rendered more intelligible through an understanding of their relations to class. 'Governing: Power' then introduces some of the many sociological uses of the concept of power, including Weber's foundational connection between power as capacity and the mechanisms of political dominance, pluralist conceptions of power in democracy developed in mid-twentieth-century American political sociology, and Manuel Castells' more global perspective on poverty as an inequality of power. Finally there is a description of Foucault's conception of disciplinary power, its sources and effects.

The next four chapters are concerned with characteristics of social identity that are associated with collective and individual experiences of inequality. Each considers the extent to which such identities are socially constructed and determined and the role of ideology in privileging certain identities over others. In 'Racializing' Vodanovich traces the sometimes complex connections between 'race', ethnicity and nationalism both conceptually and in the everyday lives of people and notes some of the ideological and practical consequences of this mode of classifying human collectivities. 'Gendering' examines several perspectives on the social construction of gender – as difference, as division, and as performance – and describes some of the ways in which notions of femininity and masculinity are (re)produced alongside and against each other. In 'Sexualizing', Stevens is concerned with how the social patterning of sexual expression, desire and behaviour has been shaped and challenged since the advent of modernity. He describes how various societies at different times have allowed more or less freedom and tolerance of sexual difference; contemporary challenges to hetero-normativity; and the uses

of state power to regulate human sexuality. 'Being: Identity' introduces the sociology of self through its conceptual origins in American social psychology, illustrates its sociological development in the work of Goffman, and sets those ideas into the context of contemporary disability rights activism. It then looks at recent developments that claim the arrival of post-modern fragmented identity.

So far, the chapters have fallen relatively easily into groupings. But, as is always the case with classifying anything, more than one method is possible and no scheme is perfect. So although we might pretend to have a strong reason for grouping the next chapters together, the truth is that they run in the order they do because that seemed as good as any other possibility. 'Feeling: Emotions' is about the social causes and consequences of emotional experience, which is a quite new field of sociological interest. Here West-Newman describes the links between biological and social constructionist explanations of emotions and looks at some social dimensions of love, revenge and grief.

The remaining chapters could be said all to be about social institutions in some way or another, although this is a category so broad it can hardly count as a meaningful classification. 'Believing: Religion' is about sociological understandings of spiritual beliefs, many of them religious, and about the social and political implications of such beliefs, when they are collectively held. McIntosh argues that as a tool for making sense of human consciousness and experience religion is a core element of social life and its significance should not be underestimated. In 'Educating' Dale considers education systems as a significant means by which societies seek to define and strengthen national distinctiveness, strengthen national economies, address social problems and in the process deeply affect the life chances of individuals. He argues that current processes of change in education, brought about through the global impact of neo-liberalism education, require new modes of envisioning and understanding.

The sociology of deviance, introduced in the chapter called 'Straying: Deviance', deals both with crime and with non-criminal behaviours that are said to violate social norms. The decision to call the chapter 'straying' rather than 'deviating' signals that not all apparent violations of social norms are either individually blameworthy or socially disruptive. By writing not about crime but about the experience of other forms of social

deviance Lloyd offers a rather different way of beginning to think about what sociologists mean by 'deviance' and why the concept has been so widely used within the discipline.

'Mediating: Technology' begins from the acknowledgement that contemporary existence takes place within complex, yet vulnerable, socio-technical systems that inform everything that we do. Matthewman takes the automobile as his case study of technology's global impact and argues that technology and user are engaged in a relationship that is sometimes enabling and sometimes constraining and either way is fully implicated in social life. 'Informing: the Media' introduces the sociology of the media through a focus on three significant research areas: media effects on audiences, the production of meaning through mediated signs, and the political economy of the media. Finally, there are two chapters on areas of active social interaction and participation. In the first of these, 'Relating: Family', Shaw examines the significant changes in the sociology of the family since the foundational work by Talcott Parsons on the American nuclear family in the 1950s. She describes the diverse and complex forms taken by current family formations and draws on actual examples of family practices and types to illustrate the cultural and situational diversity of family life. Discussion of new trends in family formation includes changing patterns of intimacy and care, same-sex and elective families, changes to marriage and fertility patterns, and the impact of the latter on reconstituted, blended and sole-parent families. In 'Belonging: Communities', the concept of community is taken back to its late nineteenth-century formulation by Tönnies and its subsequent uses in sociology, taken through to its present contemporary appearance in the context of social groupings that have grown up around the internet and made 'virtual' communities of their own.

Many of these chapters cover a variety of theoretical approaches and examples from diverse places. But some do not. This is because we wanted to demonstrate the range and variety of sociological styles and subjects available when the sociological imagination is at work. And so we have chapters that are unashamedly partial in both senses of the word. Their authors choose and write about the theories, issues and evidence that allow them to make a strong case for the position they favour. Now we need to explain what we mean by this phrase, 'the sociological imagination at work'.

Pleasure and play

If I read this sentence, this story, or this word with pleasure, it is because they were written in pleasure.

R. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, p. 4

Chances are you will not be reading this book because you have already decided to become a sociologist. Few of us have ever decided that in advance; mostly it happens by accident, a seduction of ideas and possibilities. However, there are reasons why some people take to this subject with enthusiasm; they do so because they have realized what might be discovered through being sociological. This is a subject with quite distinct pleasures and possibilities.

Probably the most significant characteristic of good sociology is that it understands what it is for – that it is above all ‘an *attempt to understand*’ (Berger, 1966, p. 15). Because curiosity is the key quality for sociological understanding we need to be deeply interested in the spectacular and mundane details of the lives of other people. What, we continually ask, is actually going on here? And we are not necessarily satisfied by the obvious answer because commonsense explanations are not always right. Sometimes what we take for granted about the way the world is may, in fact, be wrong. Human interaction in social situations is amazingly complex and diverse and the collective social arrangements that we construct and within which we live our individual lives are the result of choices among multiple possibilities. Because social arrangements are incredibly complex there is a very high probability that things won’t always work in the ways they are supposed to. From the point of view of a politician or any authority given the task of managing segments of the society, this is an issue of working out why things go wrong and how they can be fixed – they look for, or are ambushed by, social problems. But for sociologists the really interesting questions are about the means by which society ever works at all and why, most of the time, it seems to be quite effective. Of course, there are societies that fall apart – usually under the stress of warfare, economic collapse, or biospherical disasters of famines, earthquakes and tsunamis – but when this happens it is perceived as a disaster and not as business as usual.

In the local butcher's shop on a Monday morning we discuss the weather – hot and sunny. He says one of the staff has not turned up today so everyone else has to do more work. I say that it is too hot to sit at my computer writing a book. He asks, 'What is it about?' I say 'Sociology'. His eyes glaze over and the conversation comes to a halt while he rather hopelessly waits for me to tell him what that is and I struggle to find the right short sentence. 'Exploring what people do together in society', I say feebly. What I might have said if the next customer had not been leaning over my shoulder was that sociology uses causal reasoning based on evidence to explain how society works. All of which makes the point that it is easier to say what sociology does than what it 'is' and that it might take more than one sentence to explain. Everything that happens in society – when people are making arrangements to achieve their particular purposes, managing their collective existence, doing things together – can be the source of that evidence. Almost everyone notices to some extent what is happening around them in the world (some with more care and enthusiasm than others) but being sociological means looking at the world *in a particular way*. Its distinctiveness comes from 'the habit of viewing human actions as *elements of wider figurations*: that is, of a non-random assembly of actors locked together in a web of *mutual dependency*' (Bauman, 1991, p. 7). This has been described as the sociological way of seeing and, if we take 'seeing' to mean much more than just gazing with our eyes, this idea makes sense. Sociological seeing is a particular way of finding meaning in what is there to be observed about the ways in which people live together in their world. What is too often left out of books that introduce sociology is precisely that sense of lateral thinking, of play, of humour, which more often than not characterizes the very best sociology. We need to recognize that we are dealing with the 'human comedy' of society because, Peter Berger points out, if we remain unaware of 'this comic dimension of social reality' we will miss some of its most essential features, for there are, in short, 'insights that one can obtain only while laughing' (1966, p.187).

In his *Invitation to Sociology* Peter Berger (1966, pp. 32–3) explained the pleasure of sociology as an 'excitement of discovery' not of finding out new and strange things but of encountering the familiar 'transformed in its meaning'. Sociology has a fascination, he said, which 'lies in the

fact that its perspective makes us see in a new light the very world in which we have lived all our lives' (1966, p. 33). This matter of studying the world we live in has implications not only for those coming new to it but also for sociologists who must simultaneously live in the world and examine its workings. Our lives and our professional knowledge and practice inevitably become intertwined so that in the midst of even the most intense personal experience we may suddenly remember what sociological analysis says. Burying loved ones, losing one's job, falling in love, are all accompanied by recalled knowledge of theories, facts, and even figures about the social aspects of these experiences. Sometimes such knowledge, and the distance it brings to the experience, helps one to cope better; sometimes it does not. Ian Craib (2003), after a diagnosis of cancer and extended treatment, used his inside knowledge to write about fear of death, supposedly defeated for the time being by cocktails of dangerous drugs. But we read his reflections with the poignant knowledge that cancer returned, quite quickly, so that he died before the work appeared in print. Such knowledge inevitably shapes our engagement with his analysis, but does not alter the point that understanding the social conditions of his fear and offering insights to others in a similar situation seemed good to him, even though it did not alter the outcome. On a less profound level, what we choose to investigate, as sociologists, is inevitably shaped by our tastes, life experiences and perception of what is, and is not, important.

Some chapters in this book will undoubtedly interest you more than others; probably this will be related to your own life circumstances and experiences and also your hopes and intentions for the future. On the other hand, all good sociology has certain other characteristics which you may find less than appealing.

You might want to stop here

Who was it that said that the outskirts of every city should have a billboard which simply reads: 'I doubt it'? It's a very sociological sensibility.

There are two schools of thought: that knowledge is power and that ignorance is bliss. If you think the former, then sociology will serve you

well. If you think the latter you might want to discontinue the journey. It is better that you do not proceed past this point. ‘Little animals from cartoons, talking rabbits, doggies, squirrels, as well as ladybugs, bees, grasshoppers’, Czesław Miłosz tells us, ‘have as much in common with real animals as our notions of the world have with the real world. Think of this, and tremble’ (Miłosz, 1998, p. 47). Indeed it can be terrifying: sociologists tell us that we may be at most risk from those we are most intimate with (Brownmiller, 1976), that the most ordinary people can do the most unspeakable things – torture, murder, even genocide (Arendt, 1963). There are comforts in delusions, in thinking that the world is as it should be. It is so much easier to believe that the unemployed are out of work because they are lazy, that the homeless live outside because they prefer fresh air, that prisons are full of bad people because there are no bad circumstances. It is much more troubling to think that the *system* itself is at fault, that structural inequalities are embedded within it, that some people do so well only because others do so very badly.

Precisely these points are captured in Richard Flanagan’s (2001) novel *Gould’s Book of Fish: A Novel in 12 Fish*, which begins with a central character who sells reproduction furniture to wealthy American cruise ship passengers. The chairs are surplus from a government office, but they are passed off as (American) Shaker furniture brought to Australia by Nantucket whalers. The passengers were not, the character says in his defence, buying furniture but buying stories – in this case, the most comforting that a wealthy American can, for these are tales of ‘Us Finding Them Alive and Bringing Them Back Home’ (Flanagan, 2001, p. 6). The tourists had money, something that the furniture sellers were short of. In return for their money:

66 [T]hey only asked ... to be lied to and deceived and told that single most important thing, that they were safe, that their sense of security – national, individual, spiritual – wasn’t a bad joke being played on them by a bored and capricious destiny. To be told that there was no connection between then and now, that they didn’t need to wear a black armband or have a conscience about their power and their wealth and everybody else’s lack of it; to feel rotten that no-one could or would explain why the wealth of a few seemed so curiously dependent on the misery of the many. (Flanagan, 2001, pp. 8–9)

To have illusions punctured can be unsettling and sociology does this. Our ‘first wisdom’ is that things are not necessarily as they appear (Berger, 1966, p. 34). It exposes connections and relationships; it renders visible the links between past and present, rich and poor. Sociology illuminates what the privileged and the powerful prefer to hide, but it may also show us things that will challenge our ontological security. So, before we proceed any further, some more words of caution: Warning: Sociology will corrupt your taken-for-granted world. You will never take anything at face value again.

If you lack inquisitiveness, avoid shock and never seek to be challenged; if you really take no pleasure in discovery and have no desire to see the world afresh; if you want to believe that things can only be how your teacher or preacher said they are; if you never say ‘I doubt it’, sociology is best avoided (Berger, 1966).

To be sociological is to come to the realization, as Italo Calvino (1995, pp. 9–10) does in ‘The Flash’, that things do not have to be as they are, that we do not simply have to accept present arrangements and that all of the mundane objects in our existence – traffic lights, cars and everything else besides – are not separate from the world. We can consider alternatives. It can be otherwise. Take the first things on Calvino’s list: traffic lights and cars. Why lights instead of a roundabout? Why *that* number of colours? Who colour-coded social actions? Why must red mean stop, green go, and amber stop or go? Why drive on *that* side of the road? Why drive at all? Why cars instead of mass transit? Why not public as opposed to private transportation? Who decides? Who benefits? How does it all affect us?

How do the threads run? Sociology as critique

Reflecting on the place of C. Wright Mills, probably still America’s most famous sociologist as social critic, Robert Merton saw that ‘he reached out, crystallised, politicalised ... he represented a *social* protest, a social anger, and there was a good deal to rebel against’ (quoted in Mullan, 1987, p. 287). Some claim that a critical position is inherent to sociology: ‘I think the sociologist’s question is always “it looks exactly like that, therefore it cannot possibly be – how is it really?” ... [S]ociology is by definition the

critical edge, even to its own assumptions' (Stuart Hall quoted in Mullan, 1987, p. 249).

If so, then this positioning has a long and honourable history. For the young Karl Marx and his comrades, criticism – *Kritik* – functioned as rallying cry and as programme. Dogmatic assertions, prefabricated solutions and free-floating abstractions were dispensed with. The only way towards a future perfect world was by critiquing the one existing. Criticism clarifies and demystifies, if used to help explain social actions. In such a task nothing is to be spared. As Marx (1978, p. 13) wrote to Arnold Ruge: 'I am speaking of a *ruthless criticism of everything existing*.' Neither the conclusions derived from this process nor the powerbrokers that would oppose them should be feared. This is the essence of the sociological spirit, our approach to the world. No social formation is fixed and unchangeable; nothing is 'natural' and timeless; there are always alternatives. Marx makes this point in *The German Ideology*. 'As for that seemingly unalterable realm, supposedly not human, it is human in disguise. No countryside, no matter how bucolic, has meaning beyond its historical and social context' (Finkielkraut, 2001, p. 37). Where Ludwig Feuerbach saw 'true essences' and 'sensuous certainty', Marx saw the actions of commerce and industry. To Feuerbach the cherry tree was obviously part of nature. To Marx it was brought into this place at a specific time by specific people bent on agricultural exploitation. 'Beneath the sand, the cobblestones; beneath the appearance of what is given', then, 'the reality of conflict and of what has been constructed' (Finkielkraut, 2001, p. 37).

We find a similar exchange between two of the principal characters in Robert Musil's (1997) modern classic *The Man without Qualities*. Once more we see that human labour lies behind beautiful nature. The world was not always this way; it was made so. Passing through an enchanting valley, its hillsides paved with pines, Diotima heaps praise on the scenic splendour. To be sure, she is not so naïve as to see a pristine nature without a human presence; she can accept the hand of a planter. But what she is not able to see is an intensively managed plantation that exists solely for the purposes of profit. Ulrich, meanwhile, views this 'nature' as nothing more than raw material for primary industry. 'Who planted you, O lovely woods, so high up there above?' asks Diotima, echoing the lyrics of a song. Ulrich is quick to respond:

“ The Landbank of Lower Austria. Don't you know, cousin, that all the forests hereabouts belong to the Landbank? The master you are about to praise in the next line is a forester on the bank's payroll. Nature in these parts is a planned product of the forestry industry, a storehouse of serried ranks of cellulose for the manufacturers, as you can see at a glance. (Musil, 1997, p. 302)

As in Marx and Feueurbach, here are two very different takes on how the world is as it is. To Diotima we attribute a commonsense view, while Ulrich seems fully possessed of the sociological imagination. Indeed, there is a long history of dominant groups using capital, equipment and skills to arrange nature into something of their liking (Williams, 1975, p. 123). Sociologists seek to uncover such actions. For us nothing is given, everything is constructed.

In any society or social formation some groups of people do better than others. Advantage and disadvantage are unevenly distributed, and often they fracture along lines of social class, age, gender, ethnicity and sexuality. Sociologists sometimes use the acronym CAGES to remind ourselves of these inequalities and their place in the constraints within which we all make our histories. 'Sociology', then, 'originated in the impulse to criticize the principles of the society with which it found itself confronted' (Adorno, 1981, p. 46). When Theodor Adorno (1981, pp. 37–46) inspected Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge he saw a scene that was altogether too benign: harmony and integration, life chances in the lap of objective forces, neutral laws and the lottery of personality. Against this Adorno draws our attention to the sort of questions sociologists *should* ask: who controls whom; the sources of social conflict; what is right and wrong; patterns of dependence, deprivation and sacrifice; the operations of social power and the conferment of privilege; economic and political control. Learning from Marx and Adorno, we can make an important point: first and foremost sociology is a critical discipline. Pierre Bourdieu would say that it is a discipline which makes trouble. Sociology is a problem because it 'reveals things that are hidden and sometimes *repressed*', because it speaks truth to power, because its 'objects are stakes in social struggles – things that people hide, that they censor, for which they are prepared to die' (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 9). Sociologists are troublesome because they do not stick to the official script, because they go beyond everyday understandings, because they are forever sceptical of

the politics of naming. What separates a just war from an illegal occupation, a terrorist from a freedom fighter? Sociology interrogates those that decide and the mechanisms they employ to legitimate these judgements.

Ghosts and silences

Among the difficult questions sociologists may raise when they look beneath the surface of things present, and the past which made them so, are those that probe noteworthy silences and seek out ghosts. In an evocative exploration of such things Avery Gordon (1997, p. 7) explains their significance:

“ Haunting is a constituent element of modern social life. It is neither pre-modern superstition nor individual psychosis; it is a generalizable social phenomenon of great import. To study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it. This confrontation requires (or produces) a fundamental change in the way we know and make knowledge, in our mode of production.

The traces of ghosts which appear to those sensitized to their existence, or at least willing to concede possible conditions for existence, mark injustices and injuries of the past, now passed into silence. Gordon's own examples of ghosts include the disappeared of Argentina and the slave ancestors of African Americans. Many others may also be identified – for example in the disturbing and uncomfortable remains of indigenous peoples colonized in ‘the great European imperial adventures’, which reshaped so much of the global configuration of peoples into modern nation states (see Chapter 2, ‘Modernizing’). In contemporary societies the sociological imagination can allow us to see that ‘that which appears not to be there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities’. This, Gordon argues, is the ghost – ‘the sign or empirical evidence ... that tells you a haunting is taking place’ (1997, p. 8).

Again the haunting theme returns us to the sociological necessity of critique that exposes both the violence of modernity and the mechanisms of its forms of domination. The transformative power of sociology, if indeed it is to have any, lies in the capacity to reveal what has been silenced and denied; but that same potential is constrained by disciplinary norms

of evidence which are more appropriate to some sociological tasks than to others. In cases like these, literature may turn out to be more sociological in effect than sociology itself. Indeed Gordon (1997, p. 25) points out that the separation of story telling (as fiction) and social science (as fact) wrenches apart much that belongs together because good sociology is about 'both the production and the interpretation of stories of social and cultural life'. In this Introduction the imaginations of Musil and Sebald walk the boundaries of fact and fiction to show us new things about the sociality of life and the essential 'constructedness' of meaning. They engage 'a whole realm of experience and social practices that can barely be approached without a method attentive to what is elusive, fantastic, contingent and often barely there' (Gordon, 1997, p. 25).

Because they sit so comfortably with our own declared position on the possibilities of the sociological imagination, we've given considerable attention to Gordon's ideas. But they are by no means the only invocation of haunting in contemporary explorations of our globalized world. Sneja Gunew's (2004) work on multiculturalism in (former) British settler colonies likens them to 'haunted nations' entangled in their imperial past and points to the role of imagination as a 'social faculty' through which we see the world. Similarly, Jacqueline Rose (1996, pp. 4–5) seeks to understand the roots of Israeli–Palestinian relations in their bedrock of 'states of fantasy', arguing that 'political identities and destinies' can only be understood by 'letting fantasy into the frame' for it 'plays a central constitutive role in the modern world of states and nations' as it 'involves, alongside the attempt to arrest the present, a journey through the past'.

How do the threads run? Consciousness and connections

I have kept asking myself ... what the invisible connections that determine our lives are, and how the threads run.

W. G. Sebald, *Campo Santo*, pp. 200–1

Sociology is a form of consciousness, a way of thinking. Of particular concern are the often unarticulated or hidden connections within society, the figurations that help shape our fate. We may be unaware of invisible

constraints, conducting our lives '[a]s if everything did not depend on who regulates whom' (Adorno, 1981, p. 37). It is the task of good sociology to reveal to us the unseen connections that determine our lives. Disciplined by history, anchored to persons and place, mindful of context and nuance, able to see the often unseen connections that are nonetheless there and that make a difference – this is precisely how all good sociology should proceed. *What are the unseen connections that determine our lives? How do the threads run?* These are amongst the most profound questions a sociologist can ask.

The microcosm of a rock pool seen through the eyes of a neurophysiologist's patient illustrates this theme (Broks, 2003). James was troubled by an encyclopaedia illustration of such a pool, most particularly by what he could not see in that picture but that was, for him, there. The scene was too benign – underneath was an unnamed thing that avoided categorization, beneath a brittle star, partially obscured by tangles of brown weed and shore crab claws, a spidery thing. But worst of all, it was the very same thing that inhabited his own brain. The peculiar anguish of this 'reality' is, of course, particular to James and his illness, but the perception of unseen connections is not. Sketched depictions do not capture all of real life and a rock pool, like a brain, can be a fraught place. James realized that there was more going on in this environment than the illustration allowed him to see. This supposedly authoritative version seemed to omit the most crucial elements. A fixed image can neither convey patterns of dependence and predation within the pool – the barnacle at risk from the dog whelk – nor 'the invisible alchemy of the seaweeds' as they absorb sunlight, and take nourishment from water and gas. Niches and networks, actions and processes – the very things of life itself – all lost in the frozen moment. This is the problem with still lives – life is not still. 'A rock pool is, in reality, a precarious place', notes Broks (2003, p. 81), '[t]o survive is to mesh with complex networks of behaviour and intricate patterns of physics and chemistry, all shaped minutely by the ebb and flow of the tides and the rotation of the Earth'. Biology, chemistry, physics; the microscopically small and the astronomically large; all of them have their place in the humble rock pool of life. What on the surface appears simple is in reality deeply complex. Budding sociologists can take lessons from this: what counts are the things we clearly see and the things we do not,

things small, medium and large, and the dynamic ways in which they relate to and interact with each other. Good sociology will take cognizance of all of this: of structures, systems and forces in motion; of relationships, connections and forms of interaction; and of the meaning of individual and collective action.

W. G. Sebald (2003, pp. 12–13) gives us a sense of this complexity. Here is his answer to the causes of the post-war German economic miracle; it contains a mixture of the obvious, observable and mundane with things far less noticeable, much less named:

“ The prerequisites ... were not only the enormous sums invested in the country under the Marshall Plan, the outbreak of the Cold War, and the scrapping of outdated industrial complexes – an operation performed with brutal efficiency by the bomber squadrons – but also something often less often acknowledged: the unquestioning work ethic learned in a totalitarian society, the logistical capacity for improvisation shown by an economy under constant threat, experience in the use of ‘foreign labour forces’, and the lifting of the heavy burden of history that went up in flames between 1942 and 1945 along with the centuries-old buildings accommodating homes and businesses. ... And in addition to these more or less identifiable factors in the genesis of the economic miracle, there was also a purely immaterial catalyst: the stream of psychic energy that has not dried up to this day, and which has its source in the well-kept secret of the corpses built on the foundations of our state, a secret that bound all Germans together in the post-war years, and indeed still binds them, more closely than any positive goal such as the realization of democracy ever could.

Modernity

Thus far we have discussed the pleasures of discovery, sociology’s claims to novelty, our insistence on criticism, our quest to give voice to the marginalized, and the ways in which we try to render visible the habitually unseen. What we have yet to discuss are the reasons for sociology’s being. In short, sociology came about to make sense of the ‘great transformation’ (Polanyi, 1957) from traditional to modern life. This includes a series of shifts: in cognitive and political authority from religion to science, church

to state, monarchy to democracy, making citizens of subjects; in socio-economic organization from field to factory, guild to vocation, kin unity to bureaucracy; and in the location of social activity from country to city, region to nation. In sum, they profoundly alter the scope, scale and intensity of social life. Another way to think about modernity is through nouns of action: industrialization, urbanization, bureaucratization, rationalization, democratization, individualization, secularization, fragmentation. This draws our attention to the fact that we are dealing with processes of rendering, states of being, alterations and transformations, acts of conversion. Such processes are uneven and they meet resistance. They continue to happen, and they are yet to come.

Terry Eagleton (2004) once joked that no one knows which month the Dark Ages ended. A similar problem presents itself with what we call modernity. There is no single point at which modern times began. Writing in the European context, Jürgen Habermas (1981, p. 5) isolates three great cultural transformations that begin at the start of the sixteenth century: European discovery of the 'New World', the Renaissance, and the Reformation. For him, these are the events that delineate the modern world from the Middle Ages. Alex Callinicos (1999, pp. 14–15) also writes from a European perspective, but prefers to begin a century later, urging that the modern world begins with the peace that follows the Wars of Religion and the Thirty Years War (1618–48), the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century, and the European powers' global struggle for supremacy from the mid-eighteenth century. Also included are the French and Industrial Revolutions. Doubtless there are other factors, for this is a list which can never be complete. Marshall Berman (1982, p. 16) would certainly want us to be mindful of mass: demographic upheavals, the significance of communication systems, the effects of social movements, all undergirded by the ever-growing – but crisis-ridden – capitalist mode of production. Taken together, these processes make people think *in fundamentally different ways* about the world and their place in it.

The medium of film can help us make yet more sense of modernity. It is an interesting exercise to read Georg Simmel's (1964) 'Metropolis and Mental Life' and then watch Charlie Chaplin's (1936) *Modern Times*. If you did not 'get' modernity by reading about sensory overload or becoming a cog in the machine, you would certainly recognize it when

you see it. Ron Fricke's (1992) documentary film *Baraka* is another way into the stuff of sociology. It is a meditation on human–environment relationships, ranging across six continents and 26 countries. While its entirety is recommended, we want to focus here on 14 minutes of it. They provide stunning visual imagery of the great transformation. For this short segment shows the move from hills to plains, forests to shanties, country to city; and nature's thorough domination by culture.

The process begins with the attack of rainforest by chainsaws and of mineral-rich land by high explosives. Ants scurry across the leaves as the saws buzz, a sign of things to come. Later we see the creation of a world that looks fit neither for animal nor human habitation. A young Kapayo gazes out from the foliage. The next time that we are shown children they stare through the cages that frame their slum windows. 'Free', so to speak (remember our CAGES). High-rise city apartments are shown, box on box, life on life. Then high-rise cemetery compartments, box on box, death on death. We have reached a threshold moment in our history: more people now live in urban areas than in rural. Henceforth global population growth will be in the cities. Most of this growth will be in the developing world, where 'only the slum remains as a fully franchised solution to the problem of warehousing the twenty-first century's surplus humanity' (Davis, 2004, p. 28). Cut to an Indonesian cigarette factory, where hundreds of women toil shoulder to shoulder. Their individual machines are made of wood. The film moves onwards, to the subways of Tokyo, then to São Paulo and Park Avenue, New York. A great mosque in the Middle East, then two train stations in two different countries: Shibuya and Grand Central. The camera fixates on the clock. Traditional societies worked on organic time; they needed to know when to sow and reap harvests, and when livestock would give birth. Ours is a world dominated by precise mechanical time; it synchronizes social actions and dominates our lives. Next we see a pair of factories devoted to high technology: one makes video recorders, the other computer keyboards. This time things are more recognizably modern: metals and plastics have replaced wood, the machines seem to be in charge now, and the pace of work is no longer controlled by the workers. The assembly line moves the components. Then escalators move commuters. Battery farms are shown. Subway gates control the flow of rush-hour workers; who goes where. Sorting gates in the factory farms do something

similar, only this process sorts more fundamental destinations: life from death. The tempo quickens; the soundtrack and the images speed up. Eggs on conveyor belts, chicks on conveyor belts, and people on conveyor belts blend into one another to dizzying effect.

The film has no dialogue. The director has deliberately omitted signposts on this journey. He is not interested in us knowing where each scene is filmed. In a world of change we have no certainty. It could be a Brazilian gold mine – the Serra Pelada? Is the next mine Chuquicamata in Chile? The wetlands could be on any number of continents. The slums look as though they are Brazilian *favela*, but perhaps they are Bolivian, just as the later shots could be the *conventillos* of Quito or the *colonias populares* of Mexico City. The high-rise slums could be the old walled city of Kowloon or they could be in part of Manila. Is it the Grand Mosque in Mecca that is shown or the great mosque in Cairo? We can be reasonably sure that footage is taken in a JVC factory (in Yokosuka?), and the other factory is definitely producing keyboards, but its location is unclear. Thailand? The escalators could be anywhere in the urbanized world and the battery farms could be anywhere in the West. This uncertainty is not merely geographic, it is also existential. Where in the world are we? (We are, after all, dealing with global happenings.) How did we come to be here? And how are we to live our lives? These are questions that we all have to face.

We have just witnessed the spread of instrumental reason in the modern world. After all, the most rational way to house millions of people is on top of each other; likewise, the most rational way to get the maximum number of people from A to B is to stuff them together on mass transportation, just as production is most rationally organized by breaking down each task into its smallest possible component. But what is the human cost of all of this? The final scene contains a solitary figure (a Butoh dancer?). The person screams. In light of everything we have just witnessed, this is perhaps the most rational response. It appears that society rather than the person is sick. Sociology came about to make sense of the metropolitan experience, and in these scenes we see many of our greatest concerns: the irrationality of rationality, the double-edged sword that is progress, the significance of clock-time, the intensification of social life, and the fate of the individual in mass society. Though the person screams the scream is silent. It is the task of sociology to give voice to that scream.

Worrying for the world – ethics and social theory

Sociologists make social theory ‘in order to try to understand the world better’, or so Howard Becker (quoted in Mullan, 1987, p. 121) says, and, as one of the more durable and respected of United States sociologists, we see no reason to disbelieve him. What Becker is actually getting at here is an explanation of sociology’s need for theorizing. The word itself has a particular meaning for us in this book. Each chapter begins with a gerund – identifying, feeling, stratifying, gendering – the form of a verb that acts as a noun while retaining the verb’s capacity to signal activity, process, movement, happening. This is because we want most strongly to signal two things. First, that understanding how societies work and making theory are ongoing processes, always necessarily under construction. And second, that while sociology cannot do its work without theory – some kind of abstracted generalizing about why things are the way they are – that theory should be always subservient to understanding, prized for its practical capacity not as an end in itself. Theory exists not to be understood but to help us to understand.

If our processes of generalizing from evidence and extrapolating from what we know to what we do not generates plausible theory then we have established a baseline to argue that some social arrangements and effects are desirable and life-enhancing but others damage lives, destroy human potential, and generate suffering to the extent that they deserve rejection and replacement. We need, therefore to theorize so that we may understand the operation and consequences of capitalism, the subjugation of women, imperialism, environmental degradation and the mechanisms through which social inequalities are created and sustained.

Ghassan Hage lives in Australia and holds up a mirror to the local paranoia of ‘white nationalism’ and Australian dilemmas of living in a multicultural society constituted through indigenous Aboriginal people, British settlers, and waves of European and, more recently, global migration. In particular he unwraps the problems of racism in societies where anti-intellectualism is a respectable social and moral position. His granny in Bathurst cared for the nation in a quite particular way – by worrying about it. She ‘worried about Australia, she worried about Catholics in Lebanon, she worried about my marriage and she worried

about me driving on the highway to Bathurst'. In short, she did what people do when 'worrying is the last available strategy for staying in control of social processes over which they no longer have much control' (1998, pp. 10–11). It is also what people do when they do not understand the social processes around them that are changing their world and the way they can live within it. Frameworks of ideas for comprehending our social world and its tendency to reconfiguration and change do not, of course, give individuals the power to reverse such things. But they may, nevertheless, provide the somewhat uncertain but better-than-nothing comforts of explanation and perhaps even strategies to minimize personal fall-out.

It is at this point, of course, that the question of ethical positioning in the sociological project becomes most acute. Since its earliest days many, though not all, sociologists have conceived the practice of sociology to be a moral project. This is true both of those included in the official canon (more or less affectionately known as the dead white men) and those less visible who are themselves still ghostly presences – a haunting on the perimeter of the discipline. Two kinds of disappearance have taken place. Sociology as a moral project was diminished and blurred, perhaps more in America than elsewhere, as practitioners succumbed to the lure of scientific respectability and 'pure reason'. More importantly, though, were the individuals whose voices were silenced and lost because their social location placed them outside the 'charmed circle' of professional academic sociology. Charles Lemert names three figures – Anna Julia Cooper (a black woman), W. E. B. Du Bois (a black man) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman (a white woman) – whose work was profoundly sociological and might easily be regarded as foundational if they had been socially relevant and acceptable within the academic world of their time. This is, then, a matter of inclusion and exclusion, of recognized and unrecognized capacity to generate knowledge. Lemert remarks the irony that they were, as part of their society's many 'repressed and ignored public intellectuals ... either scrupulously excluded or not plainly visible from within the culture sociology meant to explain and save' (2004, p. xxx). In a sense he sees this as an inevitable consequence of sociology's dual positioning as '*both* a prophetic voice criticizing modern society *and* a believing adherent to the promise of modern culture' (2004, p. xxxi).

C. Wright Mills, writing in the 1950s, used the term ‘post-modern’ to refer to social conditions in the world of his own time. What he discerned in his own society led him also to argue for the necessity to reclaim for sociology a moral position through the contributions of its public intellectuals to that society. Those who responded to the call include women and members of racial and ethnic minorities, who appear from the 1970s and in ever-increasing strength are part of the resurgence. Making the invisible visible in themselves, they have prompted majority scholars to join the cause. Charles Lemert, Zygmunt Bauman, bell hooks, Avery Gordon – naming is invidious because there are so many. If you agree that being sociological is an ethical practice then these names are worth pursuing. Of course we hope that this all makes good sense to you, but you won’t really know unless you give it a try. So now read on ...

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