

WHICH SOCIOLOGY? A CONSUMERS' GUIDE

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This short paper, in which I outline the dissenting views of a dissident sociologist about sociology, is not intended to persuade anyone to my way of thinking. I hope, more modestly, that it can serve usefully as a constructive provocation, and thus help readers as they go about the business of thoughtful clarification which that forgotten sociologist W. G. Sumner described in a graphic injunction: "We must untangle", he said, "*the snarl of half ideas and muddled facts.*"

SOCIOLOGY AN ENEMY OF FREEDOM

Modern British sociology is, in my judgement, an enemy of freedom. Most sociologists teaching and writing today in Britain are:

- Obsessed with inequality.
- Hypnotised by the concept of class.
- Fanatical supporters of the Welfare State.
- Naively trusting of state power.
- Opposed to capitalism and suspicious of business, enterprise, and individual initiative.
- Contemptuous of the capacity of individual men and women to run their own lives competently without the bossy interference of a Governmental Big Brother or the fussy ministrations of a Nanny State.

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

I have examined these collectivist, paternalist, and socialist inclinations of British sociologists in *Seeds of Bankruptcy* (1988), in *Cradle to Grave* (with Ralph Segalman, 1989), in two papers published by the Libertarian Alliance, *Fact and Fancy in Social Analysis* (1992) and *A Deadly Embrace* (1994), and in my latest book *Welfare or Welfare State?* (1995). Parallel errors in American sociology are mercifully investigated by Irving Louis Horowitz in his remarkable book *The Decomposition of Sociology* (1993).

Students of sociology who are averse to the orthodoxy, especially students coming to the discipline for the first time, should not be surprised by these prejudices and distortions. Be warned, and read some of the references I suggest as antidotes. Use them by way of support for your own natural, common-sensical inclinations, and as a stimulus to persevere with your own analysis of the truth about the nature of social life in Britain.

Don't give up on sociology, or abandon it to the conformists. Stick with it. Don't let yourself be bullied or tricked into swallowing the orthodox line either. Read. Think. Sift the evidence. Seek out for yourself alternative concepts and more truthful theories.

EASTER PARADE

At Easter last year the British Sociological Association held its annual conference in Preston. The theme was "Sexualities in Social Context". It provided almost a week of gay liberationists and radical feminists sounding off about their peculiar and predictable hobby-horses.

Britain was condemned yet again as a "patriarchal" society, as if it were here rather than in the Middle East and Africa that women have to wear veils, stay at home to cook, and avoid the polluting shadow of every man except their masterful husband. There were also the usual mendacious accusations about the "oppressive" character of British society, about "stereotypes", about "prejudice", and about the supposed inadequacies of British democracy. All this in relation to one of the most genuinely free and most unusually tolerant societies in human history!

This annual festival of politically correct nonsense and sentimental vanities provides an appropriate symbol of the contribution of sociology to life and progress in Britain. How much good and how much harm are sociologists doing, and how much does it matter? They all have, to quote the BT television advertisement, at least one "ology", so what exactly does that qualify them to do?

CORRUPTION OF A PROUD TRADITION

There is a long tradition in Britain of wise and scholarly social analysis. This includes brilliant figures from the Scottish Enlightenment such as **Adam Smith**, who identified and explained the benefits of capitalism and the market economy. It includes such careful observers of the temptations of modernity as **Edmund Burke**, who correctly predicted the dictatorial outcome of the French Revolution and celebrated the advantages of moderate British democracy by contrast with the extravagant utopianism of continental philosophers.

It includes the intelligent common-sense of **Herbert Spencer**, who foresaw the destructive effects of state welfare right from the start. It includes remarkable contributions in the first half of this century by British statisticians, such as **Fisher**, and anthropologists, such as **Fortes**, to the development of research methods used all over the world in the study of societies and social relationships.

This proud tradition was gradually frittered away over the past fifty years as sociology became established as a large-scale enterprise in the universities. There were two strands to this process of intellectual decay. First it weakened commitment to scholarly standards and to the disciplines of scientific research. Secondly, it opened the flood-gates to politically inspired nonsense of all sorts.

This did not happen all at once. In the first post-war generation of sociology in the nineteen fifties, people whose ideas had been shaped by re-constructionist socialism, many of them actual or fellow-travelling communists, moved into influential positions. They were people to whom equality mattered more than freedom, and who believed that society could be and should be planned in detail by so-called experts. They organised the expanding curriculum of sociology. They wrote the text-books. They appointed their successors.

MODERN SOCIOLOGY: ANYTHING GOES?

In the nineteen sixties sociology rapidly expanded, in the old universities and the new, in the polytechnics, in the teacher training colleges, and in the schools. Right across the board, this newly fashionable discipline began to disseminate socialism, radicalism, and straightforward, unabashed Marxism as if they were the fifth Gospel.

Anything less was dismissed as conservative — and therefore not sociology at all. Text-books, lectures, and examination scripts were suddenly full of one-sided, dogmatic re-discoveries of poverty, implausible allegations about “inequality”, and ignorant critiques of the supposed injustice and inefficiency of “capitalist Britain” by contrast with the Soviet Union, China, and even Cuba.

In the nineteen seventies and right through to the mid-eighties, as sociology grew bigger and bigger, all this hokum got worse and worse. As I have shown in *Seeds of Bankruptcy*, the textbooks and other teaching materials of sociology were by this period un-self-critically anti-capitalist, unashamedly anti-democratic, sweepingly anti-British, and deeply prejudiced against individualism. Students of sociology were being indoctrinated at the state’s expense to undermine the culture and traditions of Britain. They were being trained for nothing more useful than a subversive role as saboteurs of society as most ordinary people wanted it to be.

The nineteen eighties saw continuous defeat for the old, socialist Labour Party, successive electoral victories for Margaret Thatcher, and the gross world-wide failure — now manifest even to addicts — of the planners’ paradise of socialism. This had some effect on sociology — but less than one might have hoped or expected.

New left-wing fantasies sprang up to replace the old ones. Instead of economic planning — ecology and the green movement. Instead of the anti-war movement — feminism and gay liberation. Instead of international socialism — third-world campaigning. Instead of attacks on business - defence at all costs of the Welfare State. The more sociology changed, the more it stayed dreadfully the same.

Indeed, the only new element so far in nineties sociology — enthusiastic incorporation of the fashionable gibberish of post-modernism — has made its incoherence and its systematic negativism even worse (Gellner, 1992). This French pseudophilosophy has been stirred in with the absurd fantasies of German socialism to render sociology almost entirely immune to the careful, common-sensical sifting of evidence which is fundamental to the traditional British approach to the advance of knowledge. Now anything, or almost anything, goes.

THE NECESSITY OF SOCIOLOGY

This is a gross distortion of sociology. It doesn’t have to be this way. It is an exciting and important discipline. Provided it works in co-operation, rather than in rivalrous conflict, with history, psychology, biology, economics, and political science, it promises accurate, vivid descriptions of social life, and powerful, cogent explanations of crucial social issues. Provided that social analysis and social research are shaped by rational concepts and disciplined methods, it can help significantly to advance the British people’s understanding of the state of our society, and assist in finding genuine solutions to the real and difficult problems we face.

If we could begin to get some honesty and sense back into the discipline, young sociologists could very soon get on with the urgent business - in central and local government, in industry and commerce, and in the public services - of correcting the collectivist assumptions and utopian ideas which have dominated thinking in all these spheres since at least the Second World War. For example:

- How can we get a more competitive spirit in industry unless the key role of profit and incentives in a modern economy is properly understood?
- How can we bring the escalation of crime under control until the concept of punishment and the crucial importance of individual moral responsibility are acknowledged?
- How can we expect the decay of the family to be controlled and reversed while the negative effects of state welfare in creating a dependent underclass and in subverting parental responsibility are denied on sectarian ideological grounds?
- How can we improve the efficiency and responsiveness of our expensive educational and health care systems without new understanding based on objective analysis of the damaging impacts of state monopoly and bureaucratic planning?

- How can we develop rational employment policies and reduce unemployment while social policy analysts are allowed to get away with incoherent, outmoded concepts of poverty?
- How can we secure British interests effectively with sensible foreign and defence policies until the mischievously influential prejudice of social scientists against nationalism and the nation state is exposed and refuted?

And so on. There are dozens of immensely important issues and problems where public understanding — or rather misunderstanding — is presently defined and controlled by phoney sociology. From the academics, these mistaken ideas are passed on to the media, and on again from the media to the politicians and the people. This vicious process, which magnifies nonsense, multiplies misunderstanding, and perpetuates folly, cannot be reversed simply by ignoring or deriding the erroneous social science which feeds it. Instead, poor sociology has to be replaced by better sociology, utopian dreams by realistic analysis, wish-fulfilment by honest facts, and incoherent notions by lucid concepts.

TOWARDS HIGHER STANDARDS IN SOCIOLOGY

If all this is to be achieved, our best students have to try sociology and stick with it, to read hard and argue back, to wrest intellectual hegemony from the left and collectivist orthodoxy and retrieve it for open-minded, liberal scholarship. We will have to win the discipline back to the pursuit of truth in that genuinely critical, objective spirit which Sir Karl Popper has so powerfully characterised and defended in *Objective Knowledge* (1972). We shall have to overcome the threats to honest research which I have examined in my paper “Methodological Weaknesses in British Social Science” (1992).

There are sociologists who, on my reading of their work, can help you in this task. Assistance is also available from several organisations. For addresses, for names, and for bibliographies, write to me.

A new sociological analysis of the state of Britain, Brown and Crompton’s *Economic Restructuring and Social Exclusion* (1994), is described in advertisements as “A timely reminder of persisting inequalities of class, race and gender”. Perhaps it is sociologists who need a timely reminder — of their privileged good fortune in living in modern Britain, and of their duty as teachers and researchers to sustain a balanced and objective approach in their work.

I have just handed to my publisher the manuscript of my latest book *Welfare or Welfare State?*. I argue there that the Welfare State is not, as is commonly claimed, the high peak of civilization. On the contrary, universal, state-monopoly welfare provision has serious deficiencies and is causing grave damage.

First, the whole concept of the “Welfare State” is philosophically incoherent. It inevitably produces in consequence irresolvable operational contradictions in practice. Second, the forward march of normal economic progress, and the massive generalized increase in standards of living and in the quality of life which prosperity has generated, make the bloated system of universal state welfare provision entirely unnecessary. Thirdly, the costs of the Welfare State have

escalated to such an extent that they threaten national bankruptcy.

Fourthly, the Welfare State is in any case almost wholly ineffective. The inevitable consequence of its monopoly power, its inherently bureaucratic character, and its principled inattention to the real nature, in all its unpredictable variability, of concrete, individual people, is that it fails routinely to help those who genuinely need and deserve special support. It squanders the billions of pounds which it costs every year on third rate services delivered to the wrong people, in inappropriate ways, to little useful effect.

Finally, *and worst of all*, it wreaks enormously destructive harm on its supposed prime beneficiaries — the vulnerable, the disadvantaged, and the unfortunate. By generating dependency it makes of perfectly normal, entirely capable people who happen to be in temporary difficulty, a fractious, subjugated underclass of welfare dependents. The Welfare State thus cripples the enterprising, self-reliant spirit of individual men and women, and lays a depth-charge of explosive resentment under the foundations of our free society.

Now, there is no overwhelming reason why anyone should agree with me in this pessimistic diagnosis of the Welfare State if they are not persuaded by my account of the relevant facts. There is no reason for any student of sociology to sympathize with the proposals for radical reform of state welfare which I set out in detail in my book — unless they are convinced by my arguments.

But we ought at least to consider why there is apparently a near-total consensus in sociology about state welfare. We ought to examine as critically as we examine everything else this addiction of sociologists to the Welfare State. We ought at least to consider whether, like sociology’s other errors, it might be a product not of rational analysis and honest pursuit of the facts, but of the ideological orthodoxy which I have talked about — an orthodoxy which conceals the facts and hinders rational analysis.

Is it perhaps a part of that utopian myth which W. G. Sumner described in his sadly neglected essay “The Absurd Effort to Make the World Over” (1894)? “It is”, he says, “the greatest folly of which a man can be capable to sit down with a slate and a pencil to plan out a new social world.” There is but one social world, and the task of sociologists is no more or less than to understand it.

COMPETING BRANDS OF SOCIOLOGY

They should also help in improving it where they can, but in this they should be modest, anticipating as much of failure as of success. Above all they should resist the temptation to confuse their own ideological inclinations with the facts — a tendency which is manifest in the most commonly used textbooks.

Of Bilton’s *Introductory Sociology* (1987) I have said, and repeat it, that one might imagine it had been written in Moscow rather than in Cambridge. Its main rival, Haralambos’ *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives* (1991), manages to maintain a semblance of objectivity only by deploying systematic rhetorical resort to a disingenuous balancing act which carefully loads the dice in favour of the usual prejudices. Abercrombie and Warde’s more sophisticated *Contemporary British Society* (1994), which I have examined in detail in *A Deadly Embrace*, is a travesty of objec-

tive analysis which paints a wholly negative picture of our society, and surreptitiously inveigles its student readers into collusion with the authors' own predictably collectivist antidotes to supposed inequalities and fictitious injustices.

Then there is a fourth major textbook by the doyen of contemporary British sociology, Anthony Giddens, who once urged, in shrewd anticipation of developments in socialism in the past few years, that we should "outflank Marx from the left". His book *Sociology* (1993) is sometimes criticized for its interminable scale and its impenetrable jargon, but it has worse faults. Like the other key textbooks and like contemporary British sociology in general, it is shaped through and through by:

- Spurious assumptions about human nature and social relationships;
- Inadequate attention to the canons of logic and scientific method; and
- Intellectual inebriation with utopian fantasies of a life which is other than human life can ever be and alien to the values of a free society.

As Horowitz (1994) has shown, the situation is scarcely better in the United States. Consumers of sociology must read warily, yield nothing of their belief in liberty or their commitment to liberal democracy, and demand better. An alternative sociology, less inimical than the contemporary collectivist orthodoxy to the traditions of British empirical social analysis, and more compatible with libertarian values, must be constructed and developed urgently.

The foundations are there in the work of classic scholars whose work has been either neglected, like **Spencer** (Turner, 1985; Offer, 1993), **Sumner** (Bannister, 1972), and **Pareto** (1991 and Powers, 1987), or, like **Weber** (Roth and Wittich, 1978) and **Parsons** (Holton and Turner, 1986), grossly misinterpreted. The beginnings of a new structure for the discipline are evident in the research and writing of remarkable modern sociologists such as **Aron** (1984), **Bell** (1960, 1991), **Berger** (1987), **Douglas** (1992), **Elias** (1993), **Gellner** (1988, 1994), **Lipset** (1960), **Bernice Martin** (1981), **David Martin** (1978), **Murray** (1984), **Runciman** (1983), **Shils** (1981, 1982), **Turner** (1986), and **Wilson** (1982).

It is for younger sociologists to complete the work of reconstruction, and to make of sociology an instrument of liberty rather than an enemy of freedom. The choice is not between swallowing sociology whole or rejecting it in its entirety, but between actively developing its positive scientific potential — or suffering passively the destructive consequences of its worst and most illiberal tendencies.

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