



SOCIETY DOES EXIST BUT IT IS NOT AUTONOMOUS

JOHN HIBBS



There seems to be a widespread tendency among free-market economists to bad-mouth sociologists. Without naming names, it is not hard to identify an element of *dirigisme* in the policy recommendations of some distinguished authors in the field of “social studies” (as it used to be called), but no good can come of erecting Chinese Walls around the social science disciplines, of which I take Economics to be one. Perhaps the attitude of economists was best put by Roy Harrod in the closing words of his Chichele Lectures in 1970,¹ when he said:

Is Sociology a science? I hope I have given you sufficient reasons for thinking that it ought not to be so considered, and, more important, sufficient

reasons for thinking that it ought not to *desire* to be so considered. But I hold that, in this phase of human history, it is the most important subject of adult study.

SOCIOLOGY OFFERS A MAP OF SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

Some years ago I was asked to develop and present a course on “The Sociology of Industry and Commerce” for a Business Studies Diploma and as part of the Foundation level for a first degree in that field. This sent me back to my own undergraduate days, when my Sociology lecturer in the third year of a course in Social Studies at Birmingham was

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the late Leo Kuper. Kuper left me with a continuing interest in the subject, and a desire to offer something useful, and rigorous, for non-specialist students.

What emerged was a course which, with development over the years, I continued to teach until recently. What I found that I had to provide for the students (and many of them told me I was right) was a framework of ideas that would illuminate the activities we were studying, just as Economics illuminates what may be called “relationships in circumstances of scarcity”. I was in the habit of saying that Sociology could offer them a “map” of social behaviour; a very large scale map, to be sure, but still useful. It might not matter so much to know where Kettering is, as it is to know that it is north of London.

I found that this approach made sense to students, especially to those on part-time courses or who had been in placement on sandwich courses. I had escaped the great and futile debate between structure and process, and could merge the two — how can you talk about class (Marx apart) without talking about mobility: “clogs to clogs in three generations”? My thinking was influenced by that of Peter Berger,² and the course was built round a kind of matrix bringing into relationship the concept of institutions and the theory of organisational behaviour, with social class as a further dimension. I have found from my economics classes that students find a similar “map” of reality in the neo-Austrian paradigm; again, not least those who have some experience of business.

WHAT WAS THE ORIGIN OF THESE EXPECTATIONS?

My matrix was all very well as a basis for the practical business of life in society, but it begged the question, “*What is this thing called Society?*” Teaching large classes with a rich ethnic mix of students, I found myself faced by the question, “Where does it all come from?”, which is not something that bothers economists a great deal. What was the origin of these expectations of our behaviour, which we have to learn to live with, first in the family; then in the school, the church and the mosque; and finally in the world of work? The matrix could help us to understand the processes, and our multi-cultural background showed that it was open to change, but what carried the authority that tells us what is expected of us within this framework?

Unless you can answer this question, which the students themselves raised, you cannot account for the existence of the matrix, and you lack any rigorous

foundation for the theory. But to say that it all comes from “Society” is to give that term an authority uncomfortably close to Fascism. To reify an abstract concept is to give it power, and it was this idea of Society that Margaret Thatcher quite rightly denied, in a comment that has been misunderstood ever since. Yet the subject matter of Sociology must be society, and how we behave in terms of its expectations of us.

Now there is a powerful difference between expectations and rules (even though many penalties exist, formal and informal, for those who do not behave as they are expected to do). Rules are fixed to an extent that expectations are not, as is plain to see in a multi-cultural city like Birmingham. Rules, whether those of the “mores” or of the law, are attempts to codify expectations, so we have to ask once more, where do these expectations come from?

REAL BUT NOT “THERE”

The answer, as I see it, can be best expressed in the statement: *society is real but not autonomous*. Its reality is that of an epiphenomenon. The analogy with the rainbow is helpful: it is “real” but it is not “there”. We are all familiar with that, except no doubt the Leprechauns. And just as the rainbow reflects back diffused light from water drops, so society “reflects back” the outcome of our acculturation, our social experience — our conversation. (Not to mention the contribution of the media.) We are, ourselves, the society that shapes our behaviour, in a constant process into a future that is unknowable, in much the same way as it is seen in neo-Austrian Economics.

I can’t claim there is anything new in this. But I would argue that it gives Sociology a rigour that economists should respect, and that libertarians can use to dispose of the myth of a society that can be centrally organised (even by the French).³

NOTES

1. Published as Roy Harrod, *Sociology, Morals and Mystery*, Macmillan, London, 1971.
2. My recommended initial text was Peter L. Berger and Brigitte Berger, *Sociology: A Biographical Approach*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, revised edition 1976, and subsequently.
3. “‘They order’, said I, ‘this matter better in France.’” Sterne, opening sentence of *A Sentimental Journey*. (Or do they?)