Questions of Theory:

Modern Trends in Sociology

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The most embarrassing question you can ask a sociologist is, "what is sociology?" No doubt all specialists find it hard to explain their subject to outsiders. No specialist finds it easy to simplify new developments without making them seem obvious or trivial, to translate technical language without losing sight of conceptual interconnections, to convey the excitement of current debates and discoveries. The problem is even more acute for the sociologist, however, since the very question, 'what is sociology?' is the most important one that we discuss and the one that divides us the most.

This is nothing new. Two of the traditional 'founding fathers', Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, represent very different answers. Durkheim stands for positivism, 'treating social facts as things', the radical separation of the social from the individual level of analysis, the use of the analogy between society and a biological organism with an attendant stress on the functional interpretation of parts and on social pathology. In contrast, Weber has left a heritage emphasising the need to focus on the individual subject and on collective action, to understand the world view of social actors in order to explain social patterns (bureaucratisation as an effect of an increasingly rational outlook, for instance), to understand social action in terms of conflict and competition in pursuit of ideal as well as material interests.

Recent Orthodoxy

Contemporary sociology has variously ignored, synthesised and interpreted these legacies. The empiricist tradition of British sociology makes formal obeisance to Durkheimian positivism as a cover for a very non-Durkheimian form of vulgar empiricism whose main object is to take everyday opinions about society and put them to 'scientific' test by systematic observation.

This involves a down-playing of theoretical work: concepts are derived not in relation to each other but by substructuring categories from ordinary language (as taught by its philosophical stable-companion, logical positivism). The special skill of the sociologist is seen as being a command of research techniques. The statistical analysis of large-scale sample surveys becomes the hallmark of the advanced social scientist, because quantification appears to enable objectivity. But along with this come features that Durkheim would have abhorred: a retreat from any attempt to study societies as social wholes or to trace overall patterns of social development, and a focus on the individual as the 'unit of analysis', as if societies were nothing more than a collection of individuals whose characteristics could be recorded in a computer archive and used to test hypotheses about correlations.

The pretensions of this sort of empiricism to the throne of sociology have by now been firmly checked. It has become apparent, though, that as a form of research it has its social uses. It is useful to know whether women in high-rise flats use more tranquillisers, whether rehousing programmes are causing old people to become isolated, whether children of manual workers learn less with less structured teaching methods, whether more mothers would go out to work if there were more nursery places.

The difficulty for sociologists has always been in the question, 'useful for whom?' Practical research to make social policy decisions better informed sounds like an admirable goal until you raise broader questions about who makes social policy. Our experience has been that the research projects that get the funds (and survey research, in particular, is expensive) are related to very limited notions of the scope of social policy. Fields like industrial sociology, medical sociology, the sociology of education, or criminology, tended to grow because they were useful to management or to ministries. For sociology, then, the cry of 1968 that education should be 'relevant' was not easy to take up. In practice, it was more likely to mean research into the most effective forms of prison 'treatment' and the training of personnel officers than research into urban decay or the education of trades unionists.

The Appeal of Functionalism

During the 1950s while empiricism, dispensing with any theoretical ancestry, dominated in Britain, a school of thought that attempted to integrate the functionalism of Durkheim with the action orientation of Weber flourished in the United States. The structural functionalism of Talcott Parsons was able
also to incorporate important ideas from the American tradition (Cooley, Thomas) and to establish a relation with Freudian psychoanalytic theory and symbolic interactionist social psychology. It is a remarkably unified and sustained theoretical construction. It was immensely effective for ideological purposes, since like some omnivorous monster it devoured and converted to its own use any theoretical element that showed some sign of life. Any opposition that could not be swallowed whole, like Marxism, wascrippled by being interpreted to the American students in distorted form.

Functionalism’s appeal in this country was that it offered a foothold for theory in the wastes of empiricism and that its specific theory had some kinship with the functionalism of British social anthropology. But it was long in gaining recognition and was never adopted wholesale. The neglect of power and conflict created too cosy an image for our history of explicit class conflict and national liberation movements; the emphasis on a common value system did not suit the intensely hierarchical view of the world that dominated here; the simple evolutionism that was its only theory of comparative social structures or of social change was too crude to fit our colonial experience in advanced civilisations as well as among tribal peoples; at the same time, the concern with the whole societies was too grand for the sociologist as handmaiden of social policy.

We garnered its terminology gratefully but reserved judgment about the system as a whole. A ‘mainstream sociology’ grew up that somehow drew on the American and European theoretical tradition and yet retained a distinctive concern with social relevance.

Radical Critiques and New Ideas

Structural functionalism itself is no longer with us. It has been banished rather than transcended. Its major crimes were that it embodied a conservative ideology, in which class and sex ‘inequalities’ were functionally necessary and race inequalities destined to fade smoothly away, and that it embodied this ideology in a difficult and abstract conceptual language that students often could not be bothered to master.

As Marxists, too, we are often victims of the attack on our technical language as nothing more than obscurantist jargon; we should be sceptical, then, when this charge is brought against sociology. Special words are needed to signal special ways of thinking. C. Wright Mills, the American liberal, once ‘translated’ a passage from Parsons into ordinary English, thinking to ridicule the pretentiousness of its terminology and show that the thoughts were simple and only the language obscure. This is an amusing but pointless exercise since one could equally well translate some passage from physics about the co-variance of temperature and volume into the ordinary English of ‘things get bigger when they are heated’. To do so would be to lose both the precision of the statement and, more importantly its links with other related statements using the same technical terms. If none of the statements in the whole system is anything but banal, then we might as well use ordinary language. But this is not the case with Parsons, who should be attacked for what he says as well as for how he says it.

The criticism that the Parsonian scheme is reactionary in its implications is a far more important one, but it is one that needs to be specified very clearly. The question is not whether Parsons himself is a conservative, nor whether his writings on such specific topics as law, the professions or the position of women are merely ideological justifications for the status quo (as indeed they are). In fact, it is quite possible to produce apparently radical analyses that can be couched in Parsonian terms and that, indeed, depend for their formulation on problems that arise only within a Parsonian framework.

To illustrate this, it is interesting to look at the development of ideas in the early days of the National Deviancy Conference. The NDC was set up in 1968 by a few sociological criminologists who wished to establish a critical alternative to an institutionalised criminology that was empiricist, had strong links with the Home Office and was oriented a ‘correctional perspective’: to informing policy on social control and on the treatment of offenders. The Young Turks countered this from a very effective position that drew on ideas from symbolic interactionism, the key element in which was the idea that deviance and crime are not qualities of acts or of actors but are social definitions that become attached to specific acts or actors in a process of social interaction with other people. This established the social character of official statistics of crime and made the agents of social control who produce those statistics as legitimate a subject of study as the criminals themselves.

It raised as problematic questions of how people define themselves, how they account to themselves and others for their behaviour, how they form defensive subcultures that may make an elaborate way of life out of an originally limited deviation like drug-taking or homosexuality, how social workers, police, mass media themselves create deviance by stigmatising and isolating people who they single out for attention. All of these were exciting questions and presented a radical challenge to the orthodoxies of criminology and of social control. For several years the thrice-yearly NDC week-end conferences were an important and dynamic meeting place for radical social workers, activists involved in prisoner,
squatting, mental patient and gay movements, students, teachers and researchers. Ripples spread round the country and courses in ‘deviancy’ replaced ‘criminology’ in sociology departments in most universities and colleges and they are able to attract and inspire many lively and radical students. The old correctional criminology is now confined to a few specialised institutes and the Home Office, and even there little weeds of doubt spring up from time to time.

Symbolic Interactionism

All of us who took part in the formation of the NDC were hotly opposed to structural functionalism, yet it is now apparent that the central theoretical orientation of symbolic interactionism is in no way incompatible with it. Indeed, re-reading the chapters on deviance in Parsons’s The Social System, we find that all the elements of radical deviancy theory are prefigured there. All that is missing is the indignation and the (untheorised) attribution of blame on the agents of social control. The reason for this is that the very definition of ‘deviance’ as an object of study is only possible within a theoretical framework that sees conformity to mutual expectations as the foundation of stable interaction between individuals and ultimately of the equilibrium of the social system.

The fact that deviancy theory was concerned almost exclusively with face-to-face interaction, and thus with only one element in the Parsonian system, enabled it to deny or ignore its true paternity in a theory of a social system integrated through shared ideas. Had the defeat of structural functionalism been achieved, as it should have been, through a critique of its theory and its philosophy of science, then the limitations of deviancy theory for a radical analysis would have been apparent from its birth, from its congenital likeness to its father-theory. As it was, we saw the father merely as reactionary and terminologically pretentious and so did not recognise a radical theory couched in more everyday language to reinstate the human subject in sociology. The reason for this is that all the elements of radical deviancy theory are prefigured there. All that is missing is the indignation and the (untheorised) attribution of blame on the agents of social control. The reason for this is that the very definition of ‘deviance’ as an object of study is only possible within a theoretical framework that sees conformity to mutual expectations as the foundation of stable interaction between individuals and ultimately of the equilibrium of the social system.

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Marxism Reappears

The recent reappearance of Marxism within sociology occurred at about the same time as these other ‘radical’ attacks on the old orthodoxies. It appeared at first in the guise of a humanism, an appeal to the works of the young Marx for a language to reinstate the human subject in sociology. Very often, especially at first, it was not so much a basis for Marxist analysis as a position from which to snipe at an ‘over-socialised concept of man’, as scientific empiricism and at the ‘consensus’ model of society.

Indeed, another form in which Marxism was sometimes presented at this stage was as a ‘conflict’ model of society. Whereas in the 1950s the great divide in sociology had been between those who espoused empirical and applied research and those who preferred theoretical, academic and ‘pure’ studies, in the 1960s the divide was often seen as being between order and conflict models, with Marxism numbered among the latter. Later, as elsewhere in this country, the impact of Althusser (as mediated by the Theoretical Practice group) became...
dominant and by now the story of Marxism within sociology is little different from that outside it.

A State of Disarray
To try to give a sketch, as I have done, of theoretical shifts and disputes in sociology is to present a picture of disarray and disorientation so extreme that it is hard to see how the field can maintain any unity at all. Yet to the outside world, sociology does have a distinctive character. It would not be difficult to draw a stereotypical profile of the sociologist, whether student or teacher. We are seen as left-wing, undisciplined in dress and thought, trendy, spurious and lacking in depth. What holds us together, in fact, is precisely our inability to settle comfortably to any one view of what the sociological enterprise is and our recognition that our doubts about the nature of sociology are also doubts about ordinary people's views of society.

Any form of sociology other than vulgar empiricism has the potential for breaking the bounds of ideological thought to one degree or another. It places the student at a distance from social relations and encourages moral scepticism and social criticism. Even functionalism, in posing the question "what Social function is served by crime, by religion, by ties of kinship?" rejects the blind acceptance of these things as bad or good, though in the end its logic is that of "the best of all possible worlds". Philosophy and other disciplines may share a critical approach, but only in sociology is it constantly made relevant to daily life and to politics. Sociology thus attracts—and creates—people who are not at one with their social world and who pursue projects whose worth and whose ground rules are not apparent to outsiders.

All of this holds sociologists together despite their diversity. One manifestation of our common sceptical stance is the almost obsessive way in which we recount to each other the history of sociological ideas, in our teaching and in books and articles. Indeed, the presentation of the similarities and differences between various schools of thought is often all that we have to say on many subjects. Some sociologists devote their careers to this reflexive activity, to tracing core themes and locating crucial divides. It is a uniting activity because a functionalist sociologist and a Marxist sociologist may well agree, or at least be able to debate, what have been the major schools of thought and how their ideas have been related.

Another unifying factor is the way in which these theoretical doubts and disagreements as to what is the sociological project become hived off as a separate specialism, 'theory', which exists alongside the substantive specialisms like industrial sociology, urban sociology, the sociology of education or of race relations. Within the topic-based specialisms, theoretical disputes may exist, but the focus is much more upon a knowledge of the research literature and detailed debates.

Much of the work in these subfields is eclectic, drawing on concepts of a variety of theoretical origins, as and when they seem useful. For people working in these fields, the study of the history of sociological thought is often a way of building up a stock of concepts and alternative ways of approaching problems, rather than a way of arriving at a firm definition of the nature of the sociological enterprise that will actually structure what problems are taken up.

Space for Marxist Work
With eclecticism as its nearest approach to an orthodoxy, sociology has now no principled basis for excluding Marxism. Indeed Marx, Durkheim and Weber are commonly taught as the 'founding fathers'. As we have seen, Marxism became important, in the past, as a response to problems arising within sociology. But its importance was also a reflexion of a general revival of interest in Marxist theory, especially since 1968.

Sometimes it has been present as an element in eclecticism, sometimes as an additional mode of academicism, sometimes, though, it has had powerful links with political theory and practice. It is in this final form that it has often aroused opposition
and there are many departments that are locked in struggle between Marxists and anti-Marxists, and others from which Marxists are excluded altogether. Yet, at the British Sociological Association's annual conference this year there were many Marxist papers delivered and one of the most recurrent themes was the criticism of Althusser and of Poulantzas from positions rooted in Marxist thought.

True, BSA conferences do not reflect the condition of sociology as a whole; this year's was on the State, a topic likely to attract Marxists. The same picture would certainly not appear from a perusal of the sociology journals. Yet Marxist sociologists do not have exceptional difficulty in publishing their work and there are plenty of forums for discussion in the BSA study groups and elsewhere.

It is interesting to consider why there is no sociological equivalent of the Conference of Socialist Economists. The nearest thing that we have is the National Deviancy Conference, which over the last few years has moved away from its espousal of symbolic interactionism and which, at different times, has aspired to unite radical sociologists or socialist sociologists. Most Marxists, though, have little to do with the NDC and would consider it only marginal to their concerns. When the Communist Party Sociology Group organises conferences and seminars they are well attended and attract a great deal of interest; but it is doubtful whether there would be much support for a broader based and more continuous grouping or for a magazine like the CSE's *Capital and Class* (formerly its Bulletin).

The reason is that sociology as such is an uncomfortable home for Marxists. They are more likely to relate to the CSE, as indeed many of us do, than to a group whose boundaries are those of sociology. For sociology as it exists in the universities (and it exists almost nowhere else) is defined as one of a sisterhood of social sciences, each dealing with one aspect of society: political science, economics, social and economic history, social psychology and so forth. In the days of structural-functionalism, sociology could claim to be the queen of the social sciences, since economics was understood, as the detailed working out of a particular subset of social relations. For Marxism, however, the separations are impossible and economics cannot be given a minor role.

Marxists have happily discussed epistemology and general theoretical problems at sociology's welcoming table. Such problems, as I have argued, are meat and drink to sociology. Indeed, I sometimes suspect that today's Marxist discussions are merely re-enactments of traditional sociological discussions. When it comes to more concrete analyses, however, their sails. The difficult problems arise when we try to influence what goes on in the arena as a whole. It is an important arena, if only because it attracts a large number of good and interested students who, moreover, often play a leading part in student politics.

At the present time it is also important because of the very state of disarray that I have tried to describe. For, in this state of confusion, there is a disillusionment with the old ideas and a search for new ones, and Marxism appears as only one among many of these, though at the moment the most important one. Given that we work within this arena we need to be thoroughly familiar with bourgeois sociology and able to assess which elements within it are progressive and which need to be criticised most fully.

The sceptical stance of much of the new sociology, like all forms of radicalism, has both progressive and reactionary potential. On the one hand it involves a break with the dominant ideology that can lead towards social analyses that are fresh and challenging. On the other, it can lead to a pessimistic relativism, a denial of the possibility of any objective science, a view that all knowledge is ideology. The strength of this latter tendency in the sociology of education has been pointed out in Maurice Levitas's recent article in *Marxism Today* (April 1976).

As teachers we also need to be able to introduce Marxist ideas in the context of the rest of sociology if students are to learn to use them as weapons in ideological struggle rather than adopt them superficially for the duration of their undergraduate careers. But this, of course, is not the best way of dealing coherently with Marxist ideas, nor of presenting debates within Marxism and inviting students to engage in Marxist work for themselves. Unease must be the lot of both teachers and students in sociology, but it is, I think, a fruitful unease.

**Fruity Unease**

We cannot be at ease, then, with the title 'Marxist sociologist'. We must, rather, see ourselves as Marxists working in the arena of sociology. As far as our research work is concerned this need not be very problematic for those who have tenured jobs. The unemployed and untenured may need to trim their sails. The difficult problems arise when we try to influence what goes on in the arena as a whole. It is an important arena, if only because it attracts a large number of good and interested students who, moreover, often play a leading part in student politics.

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