What do sociologists do?

Sociology has been an established discipline — in most universities the world over — for many years. Yet the subject is a worrying one to some people in a way that other academic endeavours are not. It would be overstating the case to say that it rouses the passions, but it would probably be fair to hold that it quite often produces feelings of disquiet which do not seem to attach to most other fields of academic enquiry. There is something about sociology that tends to raise hackles which remain undisturbed by most other academic pursuits. Disciplinary chauvinism is a familiar enough phenomenon in universities. One may legitimately suspect that it is rather rarely based upon a deep acquaintance with whatever areas of study happen to be the objects of disparagement. But there does appear to be something more involved in reactions to sociology than the commonplace expression of resentment and ignorance for which universities are unhappily on occasion the breeding-grounds.

What is the source of the unease which the presence of sociology in the academy in some degree creates? One rejoinder to such a question might be that there is no clear-cut field of study to which it corresponds — no subject-matter which can be definitely pointed to as delimiting its province of investigation. There is surely very little indeed in this view. Sociology is concerned with the comparative study of social Institutions, giving particular emphasis to those forms of society brought into being by the advent of modern industrialism. There might be differences of opinion as to how modern societies should best be studied, but to suggest that such societies are not worthy of systematic enquiry seems more than faintly absurd.

1 'What sociologists do?' was an inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Cambridge on 29 January 1986.
In any case, there is more emotion involved in antagonistic responses to sociology than is compatible with an intellectual worry over how well-defined its field of study may be. Could the prompting impulse therefore be fear? Perhaps, however vaguely, there is some sort of threat implied in subjecting our own social behaviour to academic scrutiny? This is closer to the mark. If it is at all interesting, sociological work is bound to unsettle some people some of the time. Yet anyone who knows anything about sociology will affirm that it is very far from unsettling all of the people all of the time. There are some who naively associate sociology with political radicalism, with a shabby horde pouring over the barricades to overturn all that every sensible citizen holds dear. However at least as many sociologists have been conservatives as radicals, and the probability is that most are political middle-of-the-roaders in much the same proportion as any other discipline. It would demand a piece of extended social research in its own right to validate this assertion properly. But no one having a developed familiarity with the subject is likely to suppose that its leading traditions of thought are located in a particular corner of the political spectrum.

No, it is surely not primarily a sense of brooding opposition to the status quo that can explain the attitude of reserve which sociology seems to provoke. Maybe it is that sociology is felt to be unenlightening? Perhaps we tend to feel that we already know enough about the sources of our own conduct, and that of others in societies like ours, not to need anything further? Let me put it in a provocative way. The sociologist, it might be said, is someone who states the obvious, but with an air of discovery. You might think it unlikely that anyone who would accept the designation 'sociologist' would be at all happy with this, because it would seem straight away to put him or her out of a job. In fact I think this is really the nub of the issue, and it gives particular cogency to the question: What do sociologists do? Putting the question in a slightly more elaborate form — What kind of enlightenment can sociologists offer about the origins and nature of our own social conduct? — turns up some very real problems. They are problems that are shared in some part by all the social sciences, and indeed the humanities too. But they are posed in a peculiarly acute way in sociology.

The matter can be put quite simply. One of the distinctive things about human beings, which separates us from the animals, is that normally we know what we are doing in our activities, and why. That is to say, human beings are concept-bearing agents, whose concepts in some part constitute what it is that they are up to, not contingently, but as an inherent element of what it is that they are up to. In addition, human actors have reasons for their actions, reasons that consistently inform the flow of day-to-day activities. Neither reasons nor act-identifications need be expressed discursively for them to govern the content of behaviour. Yet in general I think it valid to hold that agents virtually all the time know what their actions are, under some description, and why it is they carry them out. There is a further consideration. It is intrinsic to human action that, in any given situation, the agent, as philosophers sometimes say, could have acted otherwise. However oppressively the burden of particular circumstances may weigh upon us, we feel ourselves to be free in the sense that we decide upon our actions in the light of what we know of ourselves, the context of our activities, and their likely outcomes. This feeling is not spurious. For it is arguable that it is analytical to the concept of agency that the actor in some sense 'could have done otherwise' — or could have refrained from whatever course of action was followed.

These remarks seem doubly to compound the difficulties of sociology. For the persistent critic may push the argument beyond that mentioned previously. Not only are sociologists prone to state the obvious, but they tend to dress up what they have to say in terminology which seems to deny to agents the freedom of action we know ourselves to have. They may suggest that what we do is impelled by social forces, or social constraints, independently of our own volition. We believe ourselves to be acting freely, and in cognizance of the grounds of our actions, but really we are moved by compulsions of which we are quite unaware. This sort of claim does not ring true, for it transgresses what we feel ourselves to be — in my view rightly — as human actors. Sociology might therefore seem to be a doubly redundant discipline, not only telling us what we already know, but parading the familiar in a garb which conceals its proper nature.

However I am fairly confident that this is not all there is to it. I am not about to suggest that sociologists should all quietly pack their bags and slip away to pastures new. I am willing to accept, and even to accentuate, the claim that large segments of the discipline of sociology are concerned with things we think we know. But far from rendering the subject, or its practitioners, redundant, or their ideas without bite, this makes sociology in some ways the most challenging and the most intricately demanding of the social sciences. I do not want to say that there do not exist versions of sociology that I find
either objectionable, or essentially uninteresting, or both. My speaking of ‘what sociologists do’ has something of an optative sense to it. I do not by any means approve of what all sociologists do. I wish only to give examples of what the discipline can accomplish, to show why, as an area of study, sociology is both intellectually compelling and of great practical importance.

Sociology and Lay Knowledge

In analysing what sociologists do, let me start from the observation that what seems obvious, or what ‘everyone knows’, may not only not be obvious at all, it might actually be wrong. Not many of us today belong to the flat-earth society, although it seems obvious enough when you look at it that the earth is as flat as any pancake. In the case of our presumed knowledge about social institutions, it might be argued, we are particularly inclined to error. At any rate, examples are very easy to find. It is commonly known — or believed — for example that there has been a steep rise in the number of ‘broken homes’ or one-parent families over the past century. Thus if we look back to Victorian times, we see a dramatic contrast between the stable, integrated families of that era and the disarray of the current period. In fact the proportion of one-parent families was possibly greater in the Victorian epoch than it is today — not as a result of divorce, but mainly as a consequence of higher rates of mortality in relatively youthful age-groups. Or again, it is common knowledge that the United Kingdom is particularly strike-prone, its tendency to industrial disruption even being taken by some to be the main origin of its shortcomings in respect of economic performance. However, in terms of any accepted measures, the incidence of strikes in Britain is not especially high as compared with various other industrially-developed countries. To take another example, it is well-known — or imagined — that Sweden has an extremely high rate of suicide. Something in the gloomy Nordic character, or the long years of having had to tolerate a socialist government, creates a disposition to melancholy or to despair. In actuality Sweden does not display a particularly elevated suicide rate, and never has done so.

One should not underestimate the contribution which social research can make to identifying false or slanted beliefs widely held about social phenomena. For such beliefs may often take the form of prejudices, and hence contribute to intolerance and discrimination, or
one might legitimately ask about social conduct, none of which contravenes the assertion that human individuals always know what their actions are and why they engage in them. These four kinds of enquiry, which have a logical unity with one another, supply the keys to understanding what sociologists do — to what the discipline of sociology is all about.

Consider again the example of signing a cheque. Everyone in a modern society knows what signing a cheque is, but someone from a culture in which there are no banks, and perhaps not even a monetary system at all, would not. What is familiar convention to one individual or group, in other words, is not necessarily so to another. This is true not only between different societies, or forms of society, but within them too. All of us live our lives within particular sectors of the societies of which we are members, and the modes of behaviour of those in other milieus may be largely opaque to us. Showing what it is like to live in one particular cultural setting to those who inhabit another (and vice versa) is a significant part of what the sociologist does. This might be called the anthropological moment of social research, and it is worthwhile noting some of its implications. Notice, for example, that the identification of the cultural diversity of social life is simultaneously often a means of disclosing the common rationality of human action. To provide an account of the conventions involved in a given cultural milieu, or a given community, allows a grasp of the intentions and reasons the agents have for what they do, which may entirely escape us in the absence of such an account.

There are complicated problems of a philosophical sort involved here, and I do not want to underestimate them. But it is fairly easy to develop the point. In a world riven with conflict and embedded hostilities, and yet increasingly interdependent, mutual comprehension across diverse cultural settings becomes of the first importance. The sine qua non of such cross-cultural communication is the effective prosecution of the ethnographic tasks of social research. This is just as true of the cultural distance which separates West Indian communities in Brixton from affluent white suburbs (and from Whitehall) as it is, for example, of that which separates the Islamic Revolution from the culture of the West. Of course, bridging the spaces of cultural dissimilarity does not inevitably lead to a reduction of pre-existing conflicts. The better one knows one’s enemies, the clearer it may become that hostility towards them is justifiable or unavoidable. But this should not lead us to doubt what an elementary part the ethnography of culture plays in forging mutual understanding.

Its natural counterpart on the level of academic disciplines is the close meshing of sociology and anthropology.

Without seeming unduly mercenary, let me revert to the instance of signing a cheque. We all know what it is to sign a cheque, but this is not the same as saying we know all there is to know about it. Would a cheque be valid if I wrote it on the back of a bus ticket, rather than on the printed slips the bank so thoughtfully provides? Most of the knowledge we have of the conventions which define our actions is not only contextual, it is basically practical and ad hoc in character. In order to have a bank account, and cash cheques on it, we are not required to have an elaborate understanding of the banking system. Nor could everyone necessarily put into words what a ‘cheque’ or an ‘account’ is, if asked to do so. We all know (in modern societies) what money is in the sense that we have no trouble handling monetary transactions in our day-to-day lives. But as any economist will attest, giving a clear definition of what money is tends to be far from unproblematic. As St. Augustine remarked in the course of his celebrated observations about time, we all know what time is — until someone asks us.

Various inferences might be drawn from this, but I want to concentrate only upon one of them. This is that our discourse — what we are able to put into words — about our actions, and our reasons for them, only touches on certain aspects of what we do in our day-to-day lives. There is a highly complex non-discursive side to our activities which is of particular interest to sociology, and to other social sciences as well. It is not paradoxical here to say that sociology in this respect does study things we already know — although ordinarily we do not know them in the sense of being entirely aware of them. To put the matter another way, a good deal of our knowledge of social convention, as Wittgenstein famously observes, consists of being able to ‘go on’ in the multifarious contexts of social activity. The study of how we manage to accomplish this is a matter of great interest — and has potentially profound consequences, or so I shall try to indicate later.

We might offer as an illustration Erving Goffman’s brilliant observations about body idioms. To be a human agent, one must not only know what one is doing, but must also demonstrate this to others in visible fashion. We all expect each other to maintain a sort of ‘controlled alertness’ in our actions. We do this through the disciplined

management of bodily appearance, control of bodily posture and of facial expression. Goffman shows how dazzlingly intricate are the bodily rituals whereby we ‘exhibit presence’ to others, and thereby routinely and chronically defend our status as agents. The best insights into how tightly controlled our public exhibition of self ordinarily is can be gained by analysing circumstances in which it lapses. Thus we might investigate the behaviour of young children from this point of view, because it takes children years to acquire the controlled bodily idiom of their elders. Or we might study inadvertent interruptions in body management — slips of the tongue, lapses in control of posture, facial expression, or dress. In this regard there are intriguing connections between Goffman and Freud, although I shall not pursue them here.

The social world never seems the same again after having read Goffman. The most inoffensive gesture becomes charged with potential associations, not all of them pleasant. But why should this be? What accounts for the fact that, for most of his readers, Goffman’s writings tend to produce a feeling of privileged insight into the mundane? It is, I think, because they deal with what is intimate and familiar, but from its non-discursive side. They enhance our understanding of ourselves precisely because they reveal what we already know and must know to get around in the social world, but are not cognisant of discursively. There is from this perspective no paradox in saying that what we already know warrants detailed study, yet that the outcome of such study is far from self-evident. We could make the same point about the investigation of language. Linguists spend their professional careers studying what we already know, and indeed must know to be competent language speakers at all. But this in no way compromises the importance of linguistics, or makes it less demanding than other areas of research.

I have so far distinguished two qualifications to the proposition that we all know most of the time what our actions are, and why we perpetrate them — that all of us inhabit restricted milieus within a culturally variegated world, and that we are normally able discursively to identify only little of the complex conventional frameworks of our activities. To these we now have to add a third: that our activities constantly, I would even say routinely, have consequences that we do not intend, and of which we might be quite oblivious when undertaking the behaviour in question.

Let us trudge once more up the High Street to the bank. A modern monetary system depends upon public confidence in the exchange transactions it regularizes in order to keep going. At a given point of time banks only possess coinage to cover a small fraction of the deposits that are lodged with them. Therefore although every individual creditor can withdraw the whole of his or her deposit at will, the same is not true of all creditors. If there is a run on a bank, a spiralling diminution in confidence in the bank’s ability to pay up may ensue, leading perhaps to its collapse. Now it will probably be the case that few, and perhaps none, of the bank’s customers had the intention of initiating such a spiral. The outcome may be one that none of them wanted, even if it came about through their agency. It was an unintended consequence of a large number of intentional actions. The bank-run example is a special case, but it is not that special. There is, for example, a general category of unintended consequences that sociologists have often labelled ‘perverse consequences’. Consider the following illustration. The state government in Florida made the shooting or trapping of alligators illegal, in order to rescue them from imminent extinction. But swampland areas that had been marginally profitable for farmers, when used for the cultivation of alligators for game hunting, then became uneconomic. As a result, the farmers began to drain the land, in order eventually to produce crops from it. The consequence was that the habitat of the alligators disappeared, and they were wiped out in the very region in which they were supposed to be conserved.3

Or consider an example taken from research carried out on urban renewal programmes. In some such programmes in the United States, legislation was introduced to force the owners of dilapidated buildings to bring them up to standard, especially where there were tenants in those buildings. As a consequence, some owners abandoned their buildings completely, while others only improved them insofar as they were able substantially to raise rents or turn them into non-rented accommodation. The end result was a diminution in the available amount of rented accommodation for low-income groups, coupled with a further deterioration in the housing stock in the areas involved.

Of course, not all unintended consequences are perverse. Schelling provides the following example. In the 1930s Federal deposit insurance was introduced to provide recompense for people losing their bank deposits.4 By generating confidence, the effect of the insurance was

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precisely to tend to obviate the behaviour that led to the problem. Similarly those who act purely selfishly may unintentionally contribute to the collective well-being. Those who act from base motives may contribute to the good of everyone. They echo Goethe's Mephistopheles, who is 'a part of that force which always intends evil and always does good.' Perverse consequences are a particularly significant and interesting class of unintended consequences, partly because they have a certain irony, tragic in some instances, deliciously comic in others; but mainly because the boomerang effect they express is a common feature of social policy-making. My point, however, is not just to suggest that one of the things sociologists can and should do is to study the perverse effects that attempts at social intervention frequently bring in their train. It is to emphasise how fundamental the analysis of the unintended consequences of intended actions is to the whole sociological enterprise. For it is this more than anything else that entails that, while as social agents we are necessarily the creators of social life, social life is at the same time not our own creation.

The examples of unintended consequences I have given this far are instances in which there is a discrete and singular outcome. And of course many of the unintended consequences which preoccupy us in social analysis are of this form. No one intended the overall sequence of events that led up to the Russian Revolution of 1917, not even Lenin and the Bolsheviks, anxious as they were to propel history along certain rails. It is surely always true of cataclysmic social events, like the outbreak of the World Wars, that they are only marginally the outcomes of design. But the unintended consequences of actions are not confined to sequences of events having discrete outcomes. When I speak English in a syntactically correct way, it is not my intention to reproduce the structures of the English language. Such is nonetheless a consequence of my speaking correctly, even if my contribution to the continuation of the language is a rather modest one. Generalizing this observation, we may say that unintended consequences are deeply involved in the reproduction of social institutions, however much such reproduction is also governed by intention and contrivance; and the study of the intertwining of what is intended and what is not is the fourth type of task that is of elementary importance in sociology.

This needs a certain amount of commentary, because it allows us in some part to link together each of the aspects of sociological study. As a way of thinking about what is involved, take the example of a poverty cycle. In the deprived areas of inner cities we may be able to trace a continuity in underprivilege across the generations. These areas tend to have badly-equipped schools, with teachers who have to spend more time maintaining some degree of order in the classroom than in the formal business of teaching, addressing pupils whose motivation to follow the academic syllabus is less than overwhelming. Children from such schools inevitably tend to have limited opportunities in job markets when they leave the place of education. Hence they are likely to live in similarly deprived areas to those of their parents. These areas will have badly-equipped schools... and so the cycle continues. Such a poverty cycle is not intended by any of those affected by it, or by anyone else either. It can be explicated via a 'mix' of intentional actions and unintended consequences, but it should be noted that these have a feedback effect, so that they become conditions of further action. This is pervasively true of social life as a whole, and forms a point of connection with the contextuality or cultural diversity mentioned earlier. Given that all action is situated in limited time-space contexts, it follows that all of us are influenced by institutional orders that none of us taken singly — and perhaps none of us taken collectively — intentionally established.

All I do under some description I do intentionally and knowledgeably. However this scarcely makes me the master of my own fate. In following the routines of my day-to-day life I help reproduce social institutions that I played no part in bringing into being. They are more than merely the environment of my action since, as I have stressed previously, they enter constitutively into what it is I do as an agent. Similarly, my actions constitute and reconstitute the institutional conditions of action of others, just as their actions do of mine. The key concept tying together the several different endeavours of sociology which I have listed is that of what I like to call the recursive nature of social life. When I pursue the activities of my daily life, I draw chronically upon established convention — in a manner which is both largely tacit and at the same time extraordinarily complex — in order to do so. But this very process of drawing upon convention reconstitutes it, in some part as a binding influence upon the behaviour of others as well as that of myself. My activities are thus embedded within, and are constitutive elements of, structured properties of institutions stretching well beyond myself in time and space.

In one of the most quoted methodological statements in sociology, Emile Durkheim observed: 'The system of signs that I employ to express my thoughts, the monetary system I use to pay my debts, the credit movements I utilise in my commercial relationships, the
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practices I follow in my profession, etc., all function independently of
the use I make of them. Thus there are ways of acting, thinking and
feeling which possess the remarkable property of existing outside the
consciousness of the individual. There is nothing wrong with the
general drift of the statement, but the conclusion is quite awry. For
Durkheim was led effectively to deny that very sense of agency that all
of us quite properly have. It is entirely possible to acknowledge the
force of his point without drawing the implication that we are not
after all the purposive reasoning agents we take ourselves to be.

Durkheim tended to argue as though only the study of the large-
scale and the long-term were sufficiently important to warrant
the attention of sociology. Yet — as a further element in drawing together
the several strands of sociological endeavor I have identified — it
can readily be demonstrated that the analysis of the apparently trivial
or ephemeral can contribute in a basic way to understanding the more
durable features of social institutions. Consider the following snippet
of conversation. A husband and wife are conversing while idly
watching television. The husband remarks that he is tired. After this,
the conversation runs as follows:

W: 'How are you tired? Physically, mentally, or just bored?'
H: 'I don't know, I guess physically, mainly.'
W: 'You mean that your muscles ache, or your bones?'
H: 'What's the matter with you? You know what I mean.'
W: 'I wish you would be more specific.'
H: 'You know what I mean! Drop dead!'

What is going on here? Well, what is going on is actually a piece of
social research. The wife was a participant in a study designed to
investigate the nature of ordinary language. Those involved in the
study were asked simply to engage an acquaintance in conversation
and to try to get the other to clarify the sense of commonplace remarks
that he or she might make. On the face of things, it would be difficult
to think of anything more trivial upon which to spend good research

6 From Harold Garfinkel: 'A conception of, and experiments with, “trust”
as a condition of stable concerted actions', in O. J. Harvey: Motivation and
the interchange slightly.

money, and indeed many within the sociological profession have
concluded just that. I think such a judgement is quite wrong. The
research is interesting from several different angles. The very severity
of the responses elicited indicates that the deviation from certain
accepted canons of small talk was perceived as a disturbing one. For
breakdown in communication, and the assumption by the victim of
what the researchers rather charmingly call a posture of ‘righteous
hostility’, occurred very rapidly indeed. There is something in the tacit
conventions of small talk which has a very powerful moral fixity. This
something might be defined as unstated trust in the integrity of
others, anchored in the assumed mutuality of what stays unsaid in
the words of the conversation. The demand to supply precision of
meaning was experienced as a breach of trust.

The apparent vagueness of ordinary language is expressive of the
fact that it is geared to social practices, our tacit knowledge of the
conventions that order those practices being the grounds of its
meaningfulness. This is essentially the discovery that Wittgenstein
made, by a very different route, when he forsook his earlier views in
favour of the idea that language is what language does. Ordinary
language cannot be tightened up and made into a simulacrum of
scientific language. What remains unsaid — and, in a certain sense,
unsayable — in day-to-day talk has largely to be taken on trust. For
most of us this has become second nature. But imagine what the
day-to-day social world would be like if no one ever felt secure that
they could rely on the mutuality of the unstated conventions shared
with others. That is to say, imagine a social universe in which every
interaction was experienced by an individual as threatened by collapse
in the manner brought about in the research setting. For how can I
ever really be sure that the other party in a situation of interaction
does not harbour malicious intentions towards me? Even the most
harmless gesture may seem a possible threat. Now this is probably
just how social life does look to some of those individuals whom we
call mentally ill. There has been some very promising work done
relating mental illness to the incapacity (or unwillingness) of certain
types of person to take on trust what for most of us is only infrequently
a source of serious worry. This connects back directly to Goffman’s
discussion of body idioms and its relation to continuity of self. Mental
patients will often sit slackly, move jerkily rather than with the flow
and control we ordinarily expect of agents, and may allow their
clothing to become randomly disarrayed. They may avoid the gaze
of another who talks to them, may flout the convention that one does
not talk to oneself in public, and generally fail to observe other tacit conventions of talk and interaction.

The point is not that these characteristics are necessarily relevant in an aetiological sense to mental disorder, but that they drive home how important are apparently trivial features of micro-settings for broader institutions. The complex conventions we observe in day-to-day life are not just a superficial gloss upon large-scale social institutions, they are the very stuff of their continuity and fixity. That is why it is unsurprising that the French social historians, headed by Fernand Braudel, both concentrate upon the 'long duration' and are at the same time fascinated by the seemingly insignificant routines of mundane daily life. For the long-term institutional history that absorbs their interest is sedimented in the routine practices of day-to-day social activity. Among the things sociologists do, and must do, is to study long-term patterns of institutional stability and change. Although there may be differences of emphasis from the work of historians, with sociologists less concerned with recovering a sense of 'pastness' and more preoccupied with demonstrating the impact of the past on the present, the boundary-lines are, and should be, difficult to draw.

As an example, we may take the upsurge of recent work on the development of carceral institutions. This is one area among many others where there has been a marvellously fruitful cross-fertilization between sociology and history. In modern societies, certain categories of individuals are kept largely shut away from casual contact with the majority of the population. There are forms of structured concealment which separate from view a range of persons who in some way deviate from the normal run of activities in day-to-day life. These include the sick and the dying. The sight of death is not a common experience for the vast majority of those living in modern societies today. Ambulances typically have blacked out windows, concealing the potentially disturbing spectacle of injury or death from the onlooker:

Closed like confessionals, they thread
Loud noons of cities, giving back
None of the glances they absorb.  

Sociologically most significant are prisons and asylums, 'total institutions' that sequester from the everyday world the criminal and

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the mentally ill. These are substantially creations of the eighteenth century and after. Prior to this period, as Foucault and, following him, many more scrupulous but less innovative historians have shown, incarceration was relatively rare. Thus to take the influence of crime, far from being hidden away, punishment — including capital punishment — was a spectacle, an open display. The anonymous, impersonal discipline of the prison, where the main sanctions are no longer public humiliation or the marking of the body through the imposition of physical pain, but the loss of 'freely controlled time', is something very different. Where it remains, even capital punishment is really a 'maximal loss of time', in which far from publicly demonstrating the process of putting to death, there is a more or less private execution, where pain is minimized as far as possible.

Current Issues

So far, I have been analysing what sociologists do as if the discipline were an unchanging one, and as if there were complete agreement among its practitioners about its objectives and methods. Neither of these are the case, and in the next part of my discussion I want to indicate some of the changes going on in sociology today and where they look likely to lead us. Like the social sciences in general, sociology has undergone a considerable mutation in recent years — were the term not so over-used in the wake of Kuhn's writings in the philosophy of science, we could with some justification speak of the occurrence of a revolution in sociological thought. The changes involved are both substantive and methodological.

The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries set the substantive agenda for, as well as the methodological content of, sociology in the current century. Sociology has its origins in the coming of modernity — in the dissolution of the traditional world and the consolidation of the modern. Exactly what 'traditional' and 'modern' should be taken to mean is a matter of chronic debate. But this much is plain. With the arrival of industrialism, the transfer of millions of people from rural communities to cities, the progressive development of mass democracy, and other quite fundamental institutional changes, the new world was savagely wrenched away from the old. What began as a series of transformations substantially internal to Europe and North America has increasingly traversed the globe. The lurching juggernaut of change which the West launched is still careering erratically over the surface
of nuclear weapons, conjoined with the continuing application of science and technology to the intensification of weapons systems.

The list is formidable one, and I certainly do not want to claim that sociology is the only discipline relevant to tackling it. But daunting though the intellectual and practical problems facing us in the late twentieth century may be, it is surely indisputable that they are above all organizational and institutional in character. That is to say, they are in a fundamental sense sociological. The sociological enterprise is now even more pivotal to the social sciences as a whole, and indeed to current intellectual culture generally, than it has ever been before. We live today, not to put too fine a point on it, in a world on a knife-edge between extraordinary possibility and global disaster. We cannot even say with confidence which of these alternatives is the more likely. This is the residue of modernity for us all, and it is distant indeed from the scenarios laid out by the more optimistic of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century founders of sociology. For they expected modernity to culminate, one way or another, in a humane and rational social order. In the light of trends of development in the current century, we must see these anticipations as at best premature and rash.

Nonetheless we must sustain the practical intent that underlay their writings. We must defend the ambition of sociology in a practical fashion if influence for the better the human condition. This thought both allows me to fashion a conclusion and also to return to the themes with which I opened. For in some degree the unsettling character of sociology derives from the special position it has in respect of the practical governance of social change. Sociology occupies a tensed zone of transition between diagnosis and prognosis; and this is another area in which a spate of controversies over the past few years has allowed us eventually to clarify what the role of sociology can and should be.

These controversies cannot be comprehended without an analysis of methodological problems in sociology — concerning which, it would be fair to say, sociologists recently have been rather radically reappraising what they themselves do. The majority of the early founders of sociology, in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, sought to derive the logic and the method of their field of study from the natural sciences. This view certainly never went unchallenged, for such an idea is difficult to reconcile with those features of human agency that I have discussed. Consequently the discipline — and in some considerable degree the whole of the social sciences — tended to be divided between the notion that a natural
What do sociologists do?

Science of society is possible and the opposing view that sociology is essentially a type of humanism. For advocates of the former standpoint, everything short of a precisely specified corpus of laws about social life is a disappointment. In the eyes of the anti-naturalists on the other hand, the claims of sociology to emulate natural science are spurious and misleading. This methodological division was for many years given conceptual form by the contrast, drawn from German traditions of historiography, between Verstehen and Erklären — understanding versus explanation. It was accepted by both sides that the natural sciences have to do with explanation. The differences of opinion concerned whether the realm of Erklären could also be extended to the explication of human social institutions.

We know today that the separating of Verstehen from Erklären was a misleading way to characterize both social and natural science. Summarizing complicated matters briefly, advances in the philosophy of the natural sciences have made it plain that understanding or interpretation are just as elemental to these sciences as they are to the humanities. On the other hand, while generalizations in the social sciences are logically discrepant from those of natural science, there is no reason to doubt that they involve causal attributions. We must therefore discard the conceptual clothing of the Verstehen versus Erklären debate. There is no harm done, and there are positive virtues, in continuing to use the phrase social 'sciences'. The social sciences share with natural science a respect for logical clarity in the formulation of theories and for disciplined empirical investigation. But social science is not a battered tramp steamer chugging along vainly in the wake of the sleek cruiser of the natural sciences. In large degree the two simply sail on different oceans, however much they might share certain common navigational procedures. There are thus profound differences between the social and natural sciences, but they do not concern the presence or absence of interpretation as such. Rather, they are bound up with what I have elsewhere, no doubt rather clumsily, called a 'double hermeneutic'. As I have been at pains to emphasize earlier, the subjects of study in the social sciences and the humanities are concept-using beings, whose concepts of their actions enter in a constitutive manner into what those actions are. Social life cannot even be accurately described by a sociological observer, let alone causally elucidated, if that observer does not master the array of concepts employed (discursively or non-discursively) by those involved.

All social science, to put the issue bluntly, is parasitic upon lay concepts, as a logical condition of its endeavours. Sociologists invent their own conceptual metalogues, and have to do so for reasons described earlier — that they seek to grasp aspects of social institutions which are not described by agents' concepts. However, unlike in natural science, in the social sciences there is no way of keeping the conceptual apparatus of the observer — whether in sociology, political science or economics — free from appropriation by lay actors. The concepts and theories invented by social scientists, in other words, circulate in and out of the social world they are coined to analyse. The best and most original ideas in the social sciences, if they have any purchase on the reality it is their business to capture, tend to become appropriated and utilized by social actors themselves. John Barnes expressed this aptly when he wrote that sociology makes it possible for us 'to take a more informed and more far-seeing view of the social scene' than is available to those 'who have not been trained to take a detached view of their own social institutions and who lack the opportunity to compare these carefully with alternative arrangements found in other societies'. Harrold that sociology is 'concerned with the regularities and the lack of regularity in institutions', he added: 'There is a two-way or dialectical relation between the conceptual apparatus of the sociologist and the world view of the people whose actions, sentiments and beliefs he [or she] seeks to understand.9 This two-way relation, however, deserves careful consideration, for grasping its nature leads us to a major reappraisal of the practical influence of sociology upon modern societies.

It is often thought that the social sciences — not only sociology — have been unsuccessful as policy-making aids. Perhaps this is even one final reason why their critics have found them wanting. After all, consider the impact that natural science has had, via the implementation of technology, in shaping our interactions with the material world. The natural sciences have plainly increased our capabilities of controlling the material contexts of our activities. For surely one cannot make a parallel claim for social science? For there just are not

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the social technologies that would allow us to control social life in the manner in which material technology permits us to harness the forces of nature.

However we can see the issue in an entirely different light if we follow through the implications of the double hermeneutic. Those who have discussed this problem, particularly philosophers of the social sciences, have tended to concentrate their attention upon the manner in which they intrude into the technical discourse of social science. Few have considered the matter the other way round. But the concepts of the social sciences are not produced about an independently constituted subject-matter, which continues regardless of what these concepts are. The ‘findings’ of the social sciences very often enter constitutively into the world they describe. Let me give examples from several of the social sciences to show how significant this point is.

When, in the early fifteenth century, Bodin, Machiavelli and others invented some novel ideas about political power and government, they did not simply describe an independently occurring series of social changes. They helped constitute the state forms that emerged from those changes. Modern states could not exist at all were not concepts such as ‘citizen’, ‘sovereignty’, and ‘government’ itself, mastered by the individuals who administer them and those subject to their rule. Political theory has ever after been reflexively tied to what it is about: the elucidation of the mechanics of government within modern states.

Something very similar is true from the late eighteenth century onwards of both economics and sociology. The discourse of economics has not only made it possible for us to understand — within limits — the workings of modern economies, it has become basic to what those economies are. Shifts in the usage of terms like ‘economic’, or ‘industrial’ were in some part fostered by the writings of academic economists, helping to introduce into the newly-forming fields of economic activity the concepts that constitute what those fields have become. Economics has thereafter been reflexively implicated in processes of continuity and change in modern economic systems.

The same can be said of sociology in respect of a whole spectrum of modern social institutions. One of the best illustrations that can be given of this is the collation of social statistics. For statistical surveys might seem on the face of things to be furthest removed from incorporation into what they are about. Statistics on the distribution of population, patterns of birth and death rates, or marriage and the family, all might appear to be simply quantified analyses of objectively-given sets of phenomena. So, of course, in a sense they are. But as I emphasized at the beginning, the gathering of social statistics also enters in a fundamental way into the constitution of modern societies. Modern societies could not exist were their demographic characteristics not regularly charted and analysed. In the study of class divisions, bureaucracy, urbanism, religion, and many other areas, sociological concepts regularly enter our lives and help redefine them.

The inferences to be drawn from this are far from simple, but they are of very considerable importance. On the one hand we are able to see why even the most brilliantly innovative ideas in the social sciences risk becoming banal. Once they become constitutive of what we do, after all, they are part of the patterns of our daily activities and may become almost numbingly familiar. Every time I use a passport to travel abroad I demonstrate my practical grasp of the concept of sovereignty; far from being novel any longer, it has become an entirely routine part of modern life. Precisely because of its adoption within society itself, knowledge generated by the social sciences does not have a neatly cumulative form. By this I do not mean that we do not progressively learn more about social institutions than we knew before, or that there is not continual conceptual and theoretical innovation. But the achievements of the social sciences tend to become submerged from view by their very success. On the other hand, exactly because of this we can in all seriousness make the claim that the social sciences have influenced ‘their’ world — the universe of human social activity — much more strongly than the natural sciences have influenced ‘theirs’. The social sciences have been reflexively involved in a most basic way with those very transformations of modernity which give them their main subject-matter.

There are no options in this regard. The practical impact of social sciences is both profound and inescapable. Modern societies, together with the organizations that compose and straddle them, are like learning machines, imbibing information in order to regularize their mastery of themselves. Because of the perversity of unintended consequences, and the very contingency of social change, we may presume that such mastery will always be less than complete. Yet upon our capabilities for social learning, in the world that is the legacy of modernity, we predicate our future. Only societies reflexively capable of modifying their institutions in the face of accelerated social change will be able to confront that future with any confidence. Sociology is the prime medium of such reflexivity. The degree, therefore, to which a society fosters an active and imaginative sociological culture will be a measure of its flexibility and openness.