Adapted from Peter Berger, *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*

The sociologist is someone concerned with understanding society in a disciplined way. The nature of this discipline is scientific. This means that what the sociologist finds and says about the social phenomena s/he studies occurs within a certain rather strictly defined frame of reference. One of the main characteristics of this scientific frame of reference is that operations are bound by certain rules of evidence. As a scientist, the sociologist tries to be objective, to control her/his personal preferences and prejudices, to perceive clearly rather than to judge normatively. This restraint, of course, does not embrace the totality of the sociologist's existence as a human being, but is limited to her/ his operations *qua* sociologist.

In order to understand society, or that segment of it that s/he is studying at the moment, the sociologist will use a variety of means. Among these are statistical techniques. Statistics can be very useful in answering certain sociological questions. But statistics does not constitute sociology. As a scientist, the sociologist will have to be concerned with the exact significance of the terms s/he is using. That is, s/he will have to be careful about terminology. This does not have to mean that s/he must invent a new language of her/his own, but it does mean that s/he cannot naively use the language of everyday discourse. Finally, the interest of the sociologist is primarily theoretical. That is, s/he is interested in understanding for its own sake. S/he may be aware of or even concerned with the practical applicability and consequences of her/his findings, but at that point s/he leaves the sociological frame of reference as such and moves into realms of values, beliefs and ideas that s/he shares with other people who are not sociologists.

The sociologist will occupy herself/himself with matters that other regard as too sacred or as too distasteful for dispassionate investigations. S/he will find rewarding the company of priests or of prostitutes, depending not her/his personal preferences but on the questions s/he happens to be asking at the moment. S/he will also concern herself/himself with matters that others may find much too boring. S/he will be interested in the human interaction that goes with warfare or with great intellectual discoveries, but also in the relations between people employed in a restaurant or between a group of little girls playing with their dolls. Her/ his main focus of attention is not the ultimate significance of what people do, but the action in itself, as another example of the infinite richness of human conduct.

In these journeys through the world of people the sociologist will inevitably encounter other professional Peeping Toms. Sometimes these will resent her/his presence, feeling that s/he is poaching on their preserves. In some places the sociologist will meet up with the economist, in other with the political scientist, in yet others with the psychologist or the ethnologist. Yet chances are that the questions that have brought her/his to these same places are different from the ones that propelled her/his fellow-trespassers. The sociologist's questions always remain essentially the same: 'What are the people doing with each other?' 'What are their relationships to each other?' 'How are those relationships organised into institutions?' 'What are the collective ideas that move people and institutions?' In trying to answer these questions in specific instances, the sociologist will, of course, have to deal with economic or political matters, but s/he will do so in a way rather different from that of the economist or the political scientist.

The scene that s/he contemplates is the same human scene that these other scientists concern themselves with. But the sociologist's angle of vision is different. When this is understood, it becomes clear that it makes little sense to try to stake out a special enclave within which the sociologist will carry on business in her/his own right. The world is the sociologist's domain, but s/he shares it with others. We may get closer to the sociological angle of vision by comparing the latter with the perspective of the other disciplines concerned with human actions.

The economist, for example, is concerned with the analysis of processes that occur in society and that can be described as social. These processes have to do with the basic problem of economic activity. The allocation of scarce goods and services within a society. The economist will be concerned with these processes in terms of the way in which they carry out, or fail to carry out, this function. The sociologist, in looking at the same processes, will naturally have to take into consideration their economic purpose. But her/his distinctive interest is not necessarily related to this purpose as such. S/he will be interested in a variety of human relationships and interactions that may occur and that may be quite irrelevant to the economic goals in question. Thus economic activity involves relationships of power, prestige, prejudice or even play that can be analysed with only marginal reference to the properly economic function of activity.

The sociologist finds her/his subject matter present in all human activities, but not all aspects of these activities constitute this subject matter. Social interaction is not some specialized sector of what people do together. It is rather a certain aspect of all these doings. Another

way of putting this is by saying that the sociologist carries on a special sort of abstraction. The social, as an object of inquiry, is not a segregated field of human activity. Rather, it is present 'in, with and under' many different fields of such activity. The sociologist does not look at phenomena that nobody else is aware of. But s/he looks at the same phenomena in a different way.

To ask sociological questions, then, presupposes that one is interested in looking some distance beyond the commonly accepted or officially defined goals of human actions. It presupposes a certain awareness that human events have different levels of meaning, some of which are hidden from the consciousness of everyday life. It may even presuppose a measure of suspicion about the way in which human events are officially interpreted by the authorities, be they political, juridical or religious in character. If one is willing to go as far as that, it would seem evident that not all historical circumstances are equally favourable for the development of the sociological perspective.

It would appear plausible, in consequence, that sociological thought would have the best chance to develop in historical circumstances marked by severe jolts to the self-conception, especially the official and authoritative and generally accepted self-conception, of a culture. It is only in such circumstances that perceptive persons are likely to be motivated to think beyond the assertions of this self-conception and, as a result, question the authorities. Albert Salomon has argued cogently that the concept of 'society', in its modern sociological sense, could emerge only as the normative structures of Christendom and of the feudal society were collapsing. We can, then again, conceive of 'society' as the hidden fabric of an edifice, the outside façade of which hides that fabric from the common view. The sociological perspective can then be understood in terms of such phrases as 'seeing through', 'looking behind', very much as such phrases would be employed in common speech—'seeing through the game', 'looking behind the scenes'. In other words, 'being up on all the tricks'.

It is 'the art of mistrust', a process of 'seeing through' the facades of social structures. A few examples of the way in which sociology 'looks behind' the facades of social structures might serve to make our argument clearer. Take an example from economic life. The personnel manager of an industrial plant will take delight in preparing brightly coloured charts that show the table of organization that is supposed to administer the production process. Every person has her/his place, every person in the organization knows from whom s/he received her/his orders and to whom s/he must transmit them, every work team has its assigned role in

the great drama of production. In reality things rarely work this way and every good personnel manage knows this.

Superimposed on the official blueprint of the organization is a much subtler, much less visible network of human groups, with their loyalties, prejudices, antipathies and codes of behaviour. Industrial sociology is full of data on the operations of this informal network, which always exists in varying degrees of accommodation and conflict with the official system. Very much the same coexistence of formal and informal organization are to be found wherever large numbers of persons work together or live together under a system of discipline—military organizations, prisons, hospitals, schools, going back to the mysterious leagues that children form among themselves and that their parents only rarely discern. Once more, the sociologist will seek to penetrate the smoke screen of the official versions of reality (those of the supervisor, the officer, the teacher) and try to grasp the signals that come from the 'underworld' (those of the worker, the enlisted personnel, the schoolchild).

Let us take another example. In western societies and especially in America, it is assumed that men and women marry because they are in love. There is a broadly based popular mythology about the character of love as a violent, irresistible emotion that strikes where it will, a mystery that is the goal of most young people and often of the not-so-young as well. As soon as one investigates, however, which people actually marry each other, one finds that the lightning-shaft of Cupid seems to be guided rather strongly within very definite channels of class, income, education, racial and religious background. If one then investigates a little further into the behaviour that is envisaged in prior to marriage under the misleading euphemism of 'courtship', one find channels of interaction that are often rigid to the point of ritual. The suspicion begins to dawn on one that, most of the time, it is not much the emotion of love that creates a certain kind of relationship, but that carefully predefined and often planned relationships eventually generate the desired emotion. In other words, when certain conditions are met or have been constructed, one allows oneself to fall in love.

The sociologist investigating our patterns of 'courtship' and marriage soon discovers a complex web of motives related in many ways to the entire institutional structure within which an individual lives his life—class, career, economic ambition, aspirations of power and prestige. The miracle of love now begins to look somewhat synthetic. Again, this need not mean in any given instance that the sociologist will declare the romantic interpretation to be an illusion. But, once more, s/he will look beyond the immediately given and publicly approved interpretations. Contemplating a couple who in their turn are contemplating the

moon, the sociologist need not feel constrained to deny the emotional impact of the scene thus illuminated. But s/he will observe the machinery that went into construction of the scene in its non-lunar aspects---the status index of the automobile from which the contemplation occurs, the canons of taste and tactics that determine the costume of the contemplators, the many ways in which language and demeanour place them socially, thus the social location and intentionality of the entire enterprise.

It may have become clear at this point that the problems that will interest the sociologist are not necessarily what other people may call 'problems'. People commonly speak of a 'social problem' when something in society does not work the way it is supposed to according to the official interpretations. They then expect the sociologist to study the 'problem' as they have defined it and perhaps even to come up with a 'solution' that will take care of the matter to their own satisfaction. It is important, against this sort of expectation, to understand that a sociological problem is something quite different from a 'social problem' in this sense.

For example, it is naïve to concentrate on crime as a 'problem' because law- enforcement agencies so define it, or on divorce because that is a 'problem' to the moralists of marriage. Even more clearly, the 'problem' of the supervisor to get her/his team to work more efficiently or of the line officer to get the troops to charge the enemy more enthusiastically need not be problematic at all to the sociologist. The sociological problem is always the understanding of what goes on in terms of social interaction. Thus, the sociological problem is not so much why some things 'go wrong' from the viewpoint of the authorities and the management of the social scene, but how the whole system works in the first place, what are its presuppositions and by what means it is held together. The fundamental sociological problem is not crime but the law, not divorce but marriage, not racial discrimination but racially defined stratification, not revolution but government.

This point can be explicated by an example. Take a settlement house in a lower class slum district trying to wean away teenagers from the publicly disapproved activities of a juvenile gang. The frame of reference within which social workers and police officers define the 'problems' of this situation is constituted by the world of middle – class, respectable, publicly approved values. It is a 'problem' if teenagers drive around in stolen automobiles, and it is a 'solution' if instead they will play group games in the settlement house. But if one changes the frame of reference and looks at the situation from the viewpoint of the leader of the juvenile gang, the 'problems' are defined in reverse order. It is a 'problem' for the solidarity of the gang if its members are seduced away from those activities that lend prestige to the

gang within its own social world, and it would be a ‘solution’ if the social workers went way the hell back uptown where they came from. What is a ‘problem’ to one social system is the normal routine of things to the other system, and vice versa. Loyalty and disloyalty, solidarity and deviance, are defined in contradictory terms by the representatives of the two systems. Now, the sociologist may, in terms of her/his own values, regard the world of middle – class respectability as more desirable and therefore want to come to the assistance of the settlement house. This, however, does not justify the identification of the director’s headaches with what are ‘problems’ sociologically. The ‘problems’ that the sociologist will want to solve concern an understanding to the entire social situation, the values and modes of action in both systems, and the way in which the two systems coexist in space and time. Indeed, this very ability to look at a situation from the vantage points of competing systems of interpretation is one of the hallmarks of sociological consciousness.