

HS 236

Sociological Perspectives on Modernity

Sociology and the modernist paradigm

They tell me there's not much point saying anything substantial in this lecture, because a lot of people will miss the first one and a lot of people will be here to see if it sounds interesting. So instead of launching straight into it, I'm going to talk about why the stuff we're doing on the course is relevant.

What is the course about?

Very briefly, this course is a journey through social theory of the past hundred years or so. We start (next week) with Marx and Weber and wind up with Giddens and Habermas. In between the two we travel round the theoretical world: we get to visit structuralists and post-structuralists, Western Marxism and cultural studies, feminism and post-modernism, and other interesting places. As you might guess, we don't spend very much time in any one of these; this is mainly because we're more interested in the ideas than in the names. This isn't an exercise in learning off information about great theorists; it is an exercise in thinking sociologically.

For simplicity's sake, I've said this course is about "the critical modernist paradigm" in sociology - in other words, sociological thinking about modernity and sociology as a *modern* activity - and critiques of this approach. This "critical modernism" consists of four sets of ideas:

- "holism", the idea that "society" is a unit in some sense and that it can be studied as a single entity;
- "reflexivity", the idea that we can't simply observe society from the outside because we are also involved in it;
- "rationality", the idea that we can understand society in ways which we can explain to other people;
- and "social movements", the idea that creative human action both shapes the social whole and is shaped by it.

What I want to do in this lecture, then, is to explain why these ideas matter and how we get there.

Theory and the sociological imagination

This is a course in current social theory for sociologists. Who are sociologists? One obvious answer is that we are, because we are all studying for degrees in sociology, undergrad or postgrad. That is an immediate, institutional meaning. But since the institution is (at least partly) organised around our competence in a particular mode of thinking, that mode itself becomes important to us. C. Wright Mills called this mode the "sociological imagination" and

used this to mean the ability to "understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. It enables [its user] to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions. Within that welter the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated.... The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relation between the two within society." (1970: 11 - 12).

One of the elements of this imagination, I think, is a good working relationship with theory. This doesn't mean a static possession of information about what Marx or Weber said, or even a programmatic statement that we take their theories to be "true" and see our own work as "applying" them to the examination of specific problems - which often in practice means mutilating the reality so that it fits into the theory. Instead, a good relationship with theory means the ability to think about our immediate research problems in a way which generates ideas of more general relevance - which are thus, in one way or another, theoretical; and to examine the work of other sociologists for such ideas which might be of use in our own practice. This suggests a number of ideas:

Firstly, it means that theory is the common coinage of sociology; it is what makes the work of someone doing participant observation into the social organisation of dying in hospitals relevant to the work of someone attempting to analyse the social structure of East European society in the 1970s, and vice versa.

But it also means that theory is always theory *about* something, whether that something is as specific as the reasons for gender imbalances in the Irish civil service or as general as the nature of human society in the abstract; in every case it refers, at a greater or lesser degree of abstraction, to human experience - which is, after all, all we have to go on: our own experience and other people's. At some point, in other words, theory has to be about something; and it can fairly be judged, not so much in terms of whether it is right or wrong as of whether it helps us make sense of what we are looking at or whether it systematically prevents us from getting a grip with it.

As well as this empirical pull, though, there is always a pull towards (temporarily) abstracted thought. This derives initially from the requirement of coherence, a requirement which is (in principle) not restricted to academic theory. We all recognise inconsistency in everyday statements, such as the witness's statement "I wasn't there, and if I was I was asleep". More generally, this ability to detect inconsistency (the presence of contradictory statements) and to push statements to what we often describe as their "logical" conclusions can be generalised from this everyday level to any level of abstraction. Plato demonstrates this graphically in a dialogue where Socrates helps an illiterate slave to discover Pythagoras' theorem, simply by dint of asking him questions. Thus, in one way or another, thinking about our immediate research problems brings us into the murky waters of theory. This comes about by a generalisation of particular everyday ways of thinking, and we shall see later in the course that these have been increasingly brought into question.

The nature of sociological theory

At this point we can make some slightly more general statements about the nature of sociological theory:

Explicit *theorising* about the nature of the social world is the most characteristic feature of the sociological imagination, as against both everyday forms of thought and forms of research, in whatever discipline, which take theory for granted or abstract from "the social" altogether. This of course suggests that an awful lot of what passes for sociology is so only by courtesy and not on its own merits.

Sociological *theory* consists of perspectives on the nature of the social world. These are not "laws of society", but concepts, ideas and perspectives which are transferable from one context to another (Glaser and Strauss (1967) make a relevant distinction between "substantive" concepts derived from the specific context and "formal" concepts which can mediate between contexts). Because what we are interested in is the social, the interactive, the communicable, few sociologists believe that individual social realities can only be known in their own terms and cannot somehow be brought into relation with other social contexts. This does not, of course, mean that we are looking for "one-size-fits-all" explanations. If such an explanation was possible, we would probably have noticed by now. The primary content of sociological theory, then, is statements about the nature of the social world.

By thinking about the social world in a particular way, however, we are simultaneously making assumptions about the way we can know it. If we assume that it is constituted by language, for example, we will adopt a very different methodology than if we assume that it is constituted by economic exchange. Ontology, the question of the nature of what exists, thus leads us on to *methodology*, the question of how we can come to know it.

Finally, however, sociologists do not stand outside society any more than anyone else. We thus have to eat the food that we've cooked: if we make particular assumptions about the social contexts within which other people live, especially assumptions about the kinds of knowledge and understanding that are available to them, we cannot avoid thinking about ourselves in the same way. Our own thought is just as much a social fact as anybody else's, although it may be produced in different ways. In fact, sociology's claim to have an excuse for existing largely depends on the claim that the discipline of sociology does organise the social production of knowledge in a way which differs, in minor or in major ways, from the way in which knowledge is produced in other social contexts. This would at least explain why theory is an important part of sociological knowledge.

Sociology and everyday thinking

Metaphoric blood has been spilt in the past over the extent to which sociological thinking is different from everyday thinking. One position, which (rather like patriarchal ideology in society more generally) is in retreat as a matter of explicit theory but remains operative in much sociological practice is the assumption that a "scientific" methodology can take care of the problem so that we can see our own research as purified from the unscientific nature of everyday thinking. A mirror-image of this is the argument that sociological thought is no different from any other thought; this argument also mirrors the other one in that it appears only at the level of high theory, and virtually never at the level of everyday practice (except as pure cynicism). More common is the assumption that sociological thinking is under heavy pressure from many sources, but that (at least in principle) some statements about the world can be made which are (in whatever respect) better than others. I want to offer you one possible answer, which is this:

Precisely because thought always takes place within a human and social context, the question of whether it is true in the abstract is one which is effectively meaningless: we cannot know truth in the abstract, because we do not live in the abstract. Thought, even the most vague and grand theory, is an attempt to come to grips with something. As we move up in the scale of abstractions, of course, the extent to which it is a coming to grips with ideas, and ideas about ideas, increases. But thought without an object would be void. In other words, it is the object of our research, and our relation to it, which gives sociological thinking, and by extension theory, whatever validity it has. This means two things:

Firstly, we as sociologists deliberately set out to try to understand social situations which are not our own immediate circumstances; research is always at least partly a searching-out of social contexts that we might otherwise have missed and an attempt to make sense of elements of them that we might otherwise have taken for granted. This is true to an incomparably greater extent when we practice ethnographic research in contexts that we are not previously familiar with; and it becomes even more complex when we attempt to understand "society" (whatever we mean by that) as a whole. In other words, it is our grappling with the unfamiliar, or with the familiar in unfamiliar aspects (thinking about "society", for example) that makes the difference between everyday thought and sociological imagination. This means, of course, that there are a lot of amateur sociologists out there. In this respect, the greatest contribution of methodology is not to guarantee the truth but to push us into taking systematic account of phenomena which we would generally neglect, or treat anecdotally, in everyday life.

Secondly, though, this attempt to make sense of the world is not something which we can expect to have an end, except provisionally. Provisionally we make theoretical assumptions at the start of our research; hopefully we have modified them by the end. But if my previous unfamiliarity which is at the root of the sociological imagination. More generally, if theory is an active relationship of investigation and understanding, it is likely to continue developing at least until the social conditions of all thought are such that the barriers we have previously identified to knowledge in everyday life no longer hold. At this point, however, everybody would be a sociologist, and theory as a specialised professional activity would have lost its justification. The complete theory (if such a thing is possible) would thus coincide with the merging of sociological practice into a society from which it no longer differentiated itself.

What is a paradigm?

At this point I can start to tell you what this course is actually about. I've already said that this course is about the "critical modernist paradigm" in sociology, and I've defined some major elements of that paradigm, but that doesn't tell us what it is. One definition of "paradigm" is the "consensus across the relevant scientific community about the theoretical and methodological rules to be followed, the instruments to be used, the problems to be investigated, and the standards by which research is judged" (Marshall (ed.) 1994: 376). By now it shouldn't have escaped your attention that there are more than one of these in sociology.

The modernist paradigm, then, is that approach to sociology which treats modernity as a central, if not *the* central, issue in sociology. But, as I've already said, ontology leads on to methodology. In other words, if we assume that the contemporary social world is so constituted that "modernity" can be a central defining feature, we are saying something not

just about the object of knowledge, but we are also (by extension) making a statement about the way in which it can be known. Lastly, methodology involves thinking about the relationship between the knower and the known. Since knowing is itself a social activity, it involves power just as much as any other social activity, good or bad, and is thus in one sense political.⁽¹⁾

Insofar as it represents a consensus, then, the modernist paradigm represents an agreement about the key *issues* in terms of the proper object of theory, the nature of methodology and the formulation of the political relationships involved. It does not represent a consensus about the resolution of those issues.

Critical modernism and other schools

Within the overall modernist approach, we will be focusing on the "critical modernist paradigm" and its opponents. The "critical" paradigm is in a very broad sense the approach to sociology which derives from Marx and Weber. We will be looking at how this approach developed through structuralism and Western Marxism; at the critiques of this paradigm from feminist, postmodernist and other perspectives; and at contemporary attempts at rethinking the paradigm. The other major approach within the modernist paradigm, the functionalist and positivist tradition deriving from Durkheim and Parsons, is no longer a major contender in terms of explicit social theory in the English-speaking world, although its assumptions permeate most academic research and virtually all non-academic research.

This apparent paradox - that most contemporary sociological theorists reject a school whose ideas are dominant in most empirical research - has to do with the close relationship between this school and "common sense" in the sense of the dominant modes of thought within a given society. On the one hand, this school reproduces many elements of the ideology of common-sense (for example, the assumption that there are straightforward facts out there about which we can know the truth; or the assumption that our own thinking is not distorted and determined by anything other than foreseeable ignorance or occasional emotion). Its approach to the problem of reflexivity and the question of the relationship between the knower and the known tends to involve methodologies which claim to render the issue non-problematic and thus irrelevant. What is aimed at is a position from which "society" can be treated as an external given. In other words, positivism's bracketing of the issues related to reflexivity makes its approach to modernism appear as simply an unhelpful reduction of the complexities of critical modernism.

On the other hand, the functionalist and positivist school has decisively contributed to restructuring common-sense via its appearance in applied social science: the terms and categories of state and corporation activity are heavily influenced by this approach to social reality. "Modernisation theory", the best-known functionalist contribution to sociological modernism, is a classic example of this use of sociological theory as governing ideology. The process of development is treated as a mechanical sequence of events, which is simply an instrumental means to reach economic prosperity and enter full modernity. The crude ideological use of this argument is simply that political choices and the furthering of economic interests (the imposition of IMF aid packages, for example) can be presented as technical necessities: people have to make sacrifices now for the sake of a better future. What is in practice happening, of course, is that the present sacrifices of one group of people are benefitting another group of people in the here and now, and that the better future shows no signs of arriving. The crude effect of bracketing reflexivity, in other words, is to deny that

theoretical arguments can be designed to serve, or can be used to serve, political interests. Theorising is treated as being about society, but not as happening within social contexts. A more complex effect of avoiding reflexivity - or a more complex reason for doing so - is that by denying that knowing is a social relationship between the knower and the known it becomes easier to develop theories which treat other people simply as the passive objects, both of the theorist's description of them and of their practical treatment by managers, marketing executives, civil servants and politicians.

So critical modernism appears as the more interesting, the more complex and the more theoretically credible version of sociological modernism, and the course will mainly focus on it. We will of course run into functionalist and positivist approaches at various points during the course: because theorising starts from everyday thought, ways of thinking which are as close to common sense ideology as positivism have a habit of reproducing themselves and reappearing in the form of new theories. We will also be looking at arguments that critical modernism's adherence to rationality makes it unable to be genuinely reflexive: that, in effect, it is just as much an ideology of power as affirmative modernism.

The last thing I want to say about what a modernist paradigm in sociology is is that I will be using a substantive definition of sociology rather than a disciplinary one. I suggested earlier that the sociological imagination is characterised by explicit theorising about the nature of the social world: this is of course something which doesn't just happen in sociology departments. Around the corner, in departments of history, anthropology, philosophy, women's studies, cultural studies and so on, we run into people looking at the same issues. *They are really sociologists, but they don't know it!* At the same time, of course, many people in sociology departments do their level best to avoid making any of their theoretical assumptions explicit. Lastly, though, the sociological imagination is not confined to the universities. One of the most creative sources for social theory are social movements - radical-democratic movements, the workers' movement, the women's movement, the environmental movement, and so on; the everyday experience embodied in and transformed in these movements continues to nourish new forms of critical theorising just as much as the common sense of domination and exploitation nourishes affirmative theory, and we will look at some major social theories related to these movements.

Course methodology

I said at the start that this course does not require you to learn vast amounts of information about individual thinkers. What it does require you to do is to think clearly about the issues involved. There is no one right way to do this; the course and the reading lists are designed so that you can think about the things that interest you and read in whatever way you find most helpful. I'll be saying more about this in the seminars, but these lectures are basically there to help you find a way into the ideas and the language. Theory often seems more terrifying than it actually is, because one of the basic strategies of any aspiring science or profession is to develop jargon and specialised references. Mediaeval clerics spoke Latin and discussed the ideas of theologians; sociologists use their own language in a particular way and discuss each other's ideas. All of this is something that can be learnt, in the same way that people interested in films come to learn the names and techniques of particular directors or people who pick up a new sport learn the rules and the jargon that goes with it.

That might be enough analogy. There are an infinite number of possible ways into this field of thought, and they are all interrelated. Read one author, and you will learn a lot about

another one, and pick up ideas and phrases that will help you make more sense of the whole field. That's why there are no set texts, and no hierarchy of readings. The central thing is the ideas themselves, and your own thinking about them.

The modernist paradigm in sociology

I've said a few things about sociological theory and a few things about the critical modernist paradigm. I mentioned the themes of critical modernism at the start - holism, reflexivity, rationality and social movements - but without really saying very much about them. What I want to try and do now is outline critical modernism as a set of ideas.

Holism / totality

The initial and ultimately central idea of sociological modernism is that of holism: of "society" as the object of knowledge, or, more precisely, the idea of society as a unit, which can be characterised as belonging to a particular type and as determined by its own internal logics. The "type" which contemporary societies are seen as belonging to, in this approach, is generally a historical one: that is to say, contemporary societies are primarily characterised historically, as "modern" and in contrast to "pre-modern" societies. The internal logics of such societies presumably lead us, if they lead anywhere at all, either to the complete fulfillment of modernism or to its transcendence: in other words, at the end of the road is either a totalised version of modernity or a new social form.

"Modernity", in other words, is a component part of the object of sociology; and it is in this sense that we are told that sociology is pre-eminently the study of modern societies, their emergence and development: sociology, in this paradigm, is pre-eminently *historical* sociology. But there are other components, which need equal stress. Society is seen as a whole: what does this mean? Not that it cannot be subdivided, or there would be little enough to say. It means that the overriding characteristic of society is its relational nature: one element is related to another; or, better, the elements of society are in fact these relationships. Power is an obvious example, as is exploitation, or communication. We might think of these relationships in a static way, as a system of interactions connecting an entire society at a given point in time; we are likely to describe such a system as a structure. Or we might think of these relationships in a historical sense, as a series of processes which interact with one another and link a society to itself over time. In either case, it is these interactions - the idea of society as composed, not of units, but of *relationships* - which enables us to think of society as a whole. In either case, we are likely to explain social change in terms of the internal logics of these systems, or structures, or processes.

But all of this implies a concept of "the social", whether or not this is the word used: and we shall see that "culture", "politics" and "economics" are often transferred onto the social; that is to say, they are given the same extension and range of explanatory power that we associate with the concept of "the social". This concept is itself a characteristically modern one, and a characteristically sociological one. It is also one which most discussions of sociology find difficult to explain: what I want to suggest here is that the reason for this is that "the social" is coextensive with "sociology", so that there is a bootstrap problem, or a paradigm shift, involved here. Properly understood, however, the issue is not so much to define the *nature* of the social, because that is a problem within individual theories: it is to define the scope of the theoretical blank which specific concepts of the social are to fill.

This blank, then, is clearly that of totality or the social whole: "the social" is precisely that which includes and integrates *all* fields of human activity, from religion to politics, from housework to literature. It will then not surprise us that we sometimes find these individual fields being generalised to explain the totality, or that we occasionally find "the social" becoming a residual category, of that which cannot be handled by the concepts of the other humanities or social sciences. It is characteristic of sociology, in other words, not to be satisfied with concepts and theories which leave blanks or fields to which they cannot be applied: an ideal sociological theory would be a theory of everything, or at least of the totality of shared human experience; and there are strong arguments to suggest that the two are identical.

Reflexivity

The first element of the paradigm, then, is a totalising approach to the social. This then implies, as I have suggested, a methodology; in the modernist paradigm this methodology is primarily a reflexive one. This means that whatever assumptions we make about the nature of other human beings' experience and knowledge needs, all other things being equal, to be applied to ourselves. Sociologists, in other words, are reflexive social actors, because we are engaged in a continuous circle of thinking about society, then thinking about our own thought as conditioned by our social being, then thinking about society once more with the social relativity of our own knowledge in mind. If we can be reflexive social actors, however, it follows that others can be, too; and sociology is itself one of the key means by which reflexivity is imported into society. This is dramatically visible in authors like Montesquieu or Marx, whose ideas enter into the political and cultural self-understanding of whole societies; but it is also a more general and slower-moving phenomenon. Already in 1959 Mills commented that the "sociological imagination" was being transported into many other fields of cultural production.

I want to remind you at this point that the substantive definition of sociology that we have adopted excludes a purely disciplinary emphasis here: to the extent that non-academics (and Marx is a classic example) have concerned themselves with the sociological problematic they become sociologists. In other words, sociology as a social activity arises precisely at the point where sociological thinking becomes a need felt by individuals, whether or not they go on to develop an academic discourse on the matter. There is then a general increase in social reflexivity; this is one of the characteristic features of modernity. You will recognise this if you think of the transition from religious or other norms as one from their apparently natural and certainly taken-for-granted status to a situation where they become external roles that we play in a more or less consciously cynical manner to one where they are questioned in philosophical terms, where their existence is explained in terms of a theory of society, and where they are replaced by a way of living that we feel we have chosen for ourselves, and which in any case needs far more ideological work to maintain on our own part than modern ways of thinking. Many other ideas of reflexivity exist, and we will come to them during the course.

Sociological practice, then, is reflexive; this reflexivity is both to be traced back to modernity and becomes a constituent element of modernity. Social reflexivity, however, implies that "society itself" comes to know itself and to create itself on the basis of this knowledge. This approach leads us in two directions.

Rationality

Firstly, there is the development of what we call rationality. This is a central theme in the self-understanding of modern society, in other words in sociology. Society is variously said to be rational (in a number of different senses), to be proceeding towards rationality; or to be something which can be brought to rationality. It will be apparent that, despite the negative loading the word "rationality" has acquired and the positive loading of "reflexivity", the two concepts in fact presuppose one another: understanding, and the application of understanding. Rationality is also, however, a description of the way in which we attempt to understand society: not simply pragmatically, not in terms of everyday common sense, not religiously, not inarticulately. The claim of sociology - and of modernity (at this point the two are not to be distinguished) - is that society can be understood in terms of reason. This is fairly obviously a "black box" definition of rationality: it says what it does, but not what it is. In fact, the descriptions I have given you of holism and reflexivity, as well as what I am going to say about social movements, are equally "black box" accounts, although this may be less obvious. This is because of the nature of the modernist paradigm: it is a statement of what the important problem areas are, not a resolution of those problems. So these descriptions are in effect questions which modernist approaches set out to answer. We will come across a number of different ways of thinking about what rationality is during the course.

Social movements

The other implication of the statement that modern society, at least, is self-knowing and self-creating is that we need to specify what this means outside the narrow field of academic sociology. What I want to argue here is that, just as there is an everyday sociological imagination, there is an everyday sociological practice: a practical attempt to understand and transform society as a whole. The most important form that this takes, and a characteristic feature of modernity, is that of social movements. These are conventionally divided into "old" movements (primarily class movements, and primarily meaning the workers' movement) and "new social movements", which is normally specified to mean the women's, ecology and peace movements, although in practice most theories are developed with the ecology movement in mind. In the sociological paradigm of modernity, social movements are classically seen as the link between agency and structure. They define social formations, in that modernity, capitalism, post-industrialism or whatever can be arguably derived as a theory from the observation of its characteristic movements: for example, of citizenship, of class, of knowledge. This is not only because social movements come from particular types of social relations, but also because they create new forms of social relation. They are not only an indicator of the nature of the society that formed them; they are themselves involved in reshaping society.

These movements, as "practical sociology", have a key interaction with academic sociology; and I have already argued that many if not most of the classic social theorists have been practically or intellectually engaged with the social movements of their day. In other words, social movements, like society itself, or any individual social actor, are both the objects of knowledge and creators of knowledge.

These four ideas - holism, reflexivity, rationality, and social movements - represent fields of intellectual conflict within the modernist paradigm. Competing theories offer different concepts to fill these fields, different answers to these questions. Critiques of modernism, on the other hand, argue that the questions themselves are the wrong ones, and offer alternative

ways of defining the problem, and even alternative problems. It is these modernist and anti-modernist responses to these questions - answering the question, or rejecting it and proposing a new one - that we will be looking at in this course.

The ambiguity of rationality and control: governance versus emancipation

I want to make one last remark about the paradigm that I have just outlined. At the end of the twentieth century, we are accustomed to thinking of rationality in negative terms, and to identifying it with "instrumental rationality", the rationality of defining means to meet certain ends. This is the sense in which we say "rationalisation", and mean unemployment. In itself, what this critique points to is the extreme success of this particular mode of rationality: it can be applied successfully to virtually any end. (Instrumental rationality is conventionally opposed to "substantive rationality", a rationality of ends rather than means, or more exactly a way of thinking and doing things which is rational in its *results*, but not necessarily in its methods.)

The weakness in this simple critique of instrumental rationality is that it is in philosophical terms a purely idealist one: it assumes that a particular set of ideas, or a particular way of thinking, produces a particular social reality. What those ideas produce, however, is geared to certain ends, and the content of those ends, and their sociological origins, are often left out of sight. Thus we treat the Holocaust or Hiroshima as examples of instrumental rationality; but the goals for which these were instruments: on the one hand, the assertion of ethnic identity at the expense of all those defined as outsiders (a definition which, for all practical purposes, remains a key part of Federal German law on nationality) or the intention of defeating Japan prior to the entry of the Soviet Union into the war in the East (introducing a logic of "containing Communism" which remained operative up to and including the introduction of Cruise missiles to Europe) are often taken for granted.

This critique becomes more serious when it is combined with the argument that scientific discourses are discourses of governance: that they contribute to the definition of problems, the organisation of relations of power and thus to the control of their subjects. This critique makes the critique of instrumental reason that much more substantial by specifying the origin of the "substantively irrational" definition of aims: reason in the service of domination and exploitation.

This has been the negative contribution of sociological thinking to modernity: most visibly, perhaps, in the discourse on "modernisation" which I have already criticised. What needs to be said is this: sociology, and in particular its rationality, is certainly not "neutral technology", but rather it is structured in the service of power. In contemporary Ireland this tends to mean a close link with the institutions of the welfare state and a perspective which typically combines a radical rhetoric of outrage with a practical reformism whose double aims - to make "the system" work better and to improve the condition of those affected by "the system" - are combined. The net effect of this, of course, is to extend relations of domination and subjection: the improvements in people's conditions of existence brought about by this kind of top-down activity, are improvements in terms of the dominant relations, but not necessarily in terms of those people's own definition of their own needs.(2)

This is the major funding alternative to marketing research, whose substantive irrationality I am taking for granted. What I want to suggest, in opposition to the *generalised* critique of instrumental reason, is that this is precisely what happens when sociology becomes an

instrument in the hands of the state. The alternative - and it means a radical restructuring of the nature of the sociological "technology" involved, so that it becomes, in Ivan Illich's terms, a "convivial" technology - is precisely the link with social movements, in this case the use of social theory to articulate *alternative* needs and alternative possibilities for their satisfaction. The ambiguities involved in this are clear; but a sociological practice determined by an interaction with the central institutions of exploitation and domination in welfare-state capitalism faces ambiguities of quite a different order.

This sociology does not cease to be rational (or indeed reflexive), nor does it cease to be involved in power relations. *Any* social movement is, at least in part, an exercise in hegemony (in Gramsci's sense), and thus involves the organisation of power via intellectual and cultural domination. However, social movements are also, and to a degree unknown in capitalist firms or the state, movements towards emancipation; and there is an appropriation of sociological thought by all those involved rather than simply by the elite. This interaction with social movements, and as far as I can see only this interaction, is what keeps us from becoming managers and civil servants; it is also what keeps sociology, from degenerating into the positivism and lack of reflexivity that characterises what Raymond Williams describes as "a basic orientation to the world as available raw material", which treats nature, other people, and finally the self as the objects of domination and exploitation (1985: 261 - 2). If the primary source of positivist modernism is common sense as the ideology of relationships of domination, then the primary source of critical modernism lies - directly or indirectly - in the theory and practice of social movements which challenge this domination.

References

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(1) In much the same way knowledge can be described as an economic activity (because of its relation to value) or a cultural one (because of its relation to meaning) We should not take intellectuals' self-assessments as "political" or "not political" at face value. All intellectual activity is political in the sense described above. Sociology is also political in another sense, in that its object of study can be thought of as constituted partially or wholly by relations of power. However, relatively little sociology is "political" in the sense of being connected to action which alters the relations of power in society. Rather more of it is "political" in the sense that it serves as a weapon in the internal ideological battles of the local intelligentsia and as a means of career advancement; this is, of course, a kind of politics which tends to maintain the existing relations of power; and this may be true irrespective of whether the contents of the theory are conservative or radical.

(2) An extreme variant of this logic was the American definition, in the 1960s and 1970s, of the needs of the Vietnamese in terms of subjugation to a right-wing rather than a left-wing dictatorship - even at the cost of the lives of the people in question. A milder example of the