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IN A WORLD I NEVER MADE

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.
> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,* 2000 [1851]

> Bewitched, bothered and bewildered am I.
> Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, *Pal Joey,* 1940

At birth, we are – each one of us – hurled into a social world we never ever made. We will have absolutely no say about which country we are born into, who our parents and siblings may be, what language we will initially speak, or what religion or education we will be given. We will have no say about whether we are born in Afghanistan, Algeria, Australia, Argentina – or one of several hundred other countries in the world. We will have no say whether we are born into nations – or families – considered super-rich or in abject poverty. We will have no say whether our initial family is Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim or any one of several thousand other smaller religions found across the world. What is significant

here is that we are born into a world that pre-exists us and will continue after us. We are thrown into a social world that was quite simply not one we had any say in making. And it is this very world which sociologists study. Every day we confront social facts and social currents which 'come to each one of us from outside and … sweep us along in spite of ourselves'.[1] We look at worlds we cannot wish away – worlds that await us and shape us, independently of whatever we may wish.

But then, very soon, most of us learn to find our own feet in this 'thrown into world'. Most significantly, we start to become aware of other people in this world (usually initially our dear – or not so dear – mothers, fathers and siblings): we start to become attuned to them. We learn how to please them and others; and indeed how to annoy them. We slowly start to imagine the worlds that they live in and how they may respond to us. Like it or not, we become increasingly socialised to act towards them, to develop a primitive empathy or sympathy towards others. If we do not – if we fail to learn this empathy – then we will not be able to communicate, we will not be able to routinely go about daily social life in any kind of satisfactory way. Sociology is also charged with studying this daily life of adjustment – how the billions of people who dwell on planet earth get through the day living with each other. How we adapt and conform, rebel and innovate, ritualise and withdraw. We look at the complicated relations between our bodies, our feelings and our ways of behaving with others in the living of everyday life so that social worlds can proceed in a fairly intelligible and orderly fashion most of the time. It will of course also be subject to serious conflict and breakdown, and sociology looks at this too.

What is fascinating about this everyday world is that we – that little child thrown into a strange but given world at birth – actually also make parts of it ourselves. It turns out that from the moment we are thrown into this constraining world at birth till the moment we die and it comes to a dramatic end, we are given an active energy

1 This is a reference to the sociologist Émile Durkheim. (Durkheim, 1982, pp. 52–3). There are no further footnotes or references in this book as they are hereafter provided page by page, often with links, on the web site that accompanies this book. See http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415472067/.

to keep going – to move through the world with a tremendous creative ability to act in it and on it. We little human animals are the creators of social life all the time: we are active agents who make social worlds. Socialised into it, we then make it work for us. And sociology studies this too: sociologists ask how people come to assemble their social lives and social worlds in radically different ways in different times and places. Whilst some of us can develop ways of being the active agents of their lives, many others have much less access to such skills. While no one is determined, we are not capable or knowledgeable actors in the world to the same degree. And here is a key problem for sociologists (we will return often to it).

SOCIOLOGY AS CRITIQUE AND WONDER

The physicist looks at the skies and stands in amazement at the universe. The musician listens to Mozart, Beethoven or Stravinsky – or Abba – and stands in amazement at the magnificent works that little human beings can produce on earth. The sportsperson finds their adrenalin gushing at the thought of running or going to a football stadium. And the sociologist gets up every day and stands in wonder at the little social worlds – and indeed human societies – that we have created for ourselves: their meaning, order, conflict, chaos and change. For the sociologist, social life is sometimes sensed as something quite inspiring, and sometimes as something quite horrendous which brings about disenchantment, anger and despair. Sociologists stand in awe and dreading, rage and delight at the humanly produced social world with all its joys and its sufferings. We critique it and we critically celebrate it. Standing in amazement at the complex patterns of human social life, we examine both the good things worth fostering and bad things to strive to remove. Sociology becomes the systematic, sceptical study of all things social.

THE DARK SIDE OF SOCIETY – THE MISERIES AND SUFFERINGS OF HUMAN SOCIAL LIFE

So here is the bad news. On a bad day I can hardly get out of my bed. The weight of the world and its suffering bears down upon me: the

human misery, as it has confronted the billions before me. Luckily, I am not a depressive so I have my ways of getting up and springing into action. But lying there some mornings, I see the long historical march of humanity's inhumanities, the horrors of the world and the sufferings of humankind: and I squirm. How can it be, that for so long and with such seeming stupidity and blindness, human beings have continued ceaselessly to make human social worlds in which so very many suffer – that are so manifestly inhuman? Here is a world full of wars and tyranny, poverty and inequality, genocides and violence. Here is the horrendous treatment of other peoples different from us and the vast neglect and denial of the sufferings of others. All this seems to have been history's lot: they are just a few of the routine topics for sociology.

Sociologists just cannot stop seeing this suffering. Everywhere it seems societies cast 'others' into the roles of enemies and monsters – creating hierarchies of 'the good' to value and 'the bad' to dehumanise. It was after all human beings that designed slavery for much of history – a system that still exists (upwards of 27 million are in forced labour, child labour and sexual slavery today). It was human beings that set up the mass slaughtering of witchcraft trials and religious Inquisitions (deaths caused by the Spanish Inquisition starting in the late fifteenth century vary from 3 million – considered absurdly high – to 3,000 – which over a three hundred year period seems absurdly low!). It was also human activity – apparently supported by gods – which created the 'caste' system of social stratification (see Chapter 7), as Ayrian-speaking people moved into India around 1500 BCE; and a group of people called the untouchables, falling outside of regular human life, were left with all the dirty jobs. It is all a history of kings, rulers and popery dominating in splendour over the vast immiserated masses. There has been no period free from wars – over land, status, wealth and religion – and by all accounts the twentieth century was the bloodiest century of all: with its genocides, world wars, revolutionary mass slaughters, its 'fascisms' and its 'communisms'. There is controversy over how to count the number of actual 'mega-deaths' – but somewhere between 180 million and 200 million is a number often cited. That is to say that probably one in ten of the population of the world of 1900 were slaughtered through war or genocide in the

twentieth century. And the widespread problems of poverty, hunger and disease throughout time have only been marginally diminished in the current time. To all this must now be added the growing awareness of global warming and a potential ecological catastrophe before too long. We humans do not seem to have made a very good job of living together peacefully, happily and productively. All this is the stuff of great literature, poetry and film making – and sociology.

Sociology, then, generates concern at the billions of wasted and damaged lives engulfed by 'man's inhumanity to man'. Sociologists are interested in the social conditions which can produce human social suffering. They are concerned with the ways in which private and individual sufferings have major social and structural origins. Personal problems are public issues. Given this, many say that sociology is the dismal science – a dark, bleak, pessimistic discipline. Don't hang around with sociologists, they say, because the trade of sociologists makes them pretty gloomy people.

Always look on the bright side of life: the joys and potentials of human social life

Indeed, all this may have been enough to make you put this book down. But hold on. Is it really all such bad news? Critical we are. But at the same time, we cannot stop seeing how – most of the time – people in societies also go about their daily rounds working with each other, caring for each other, loving each other and much of the time in ease and cooperation.

A few years ago, as I lay in my modern hospital bed shortly after ten hours of major life-saving surgery, I pondered just how all this had come to be. My life-threatening illness – chronic liver cirrhosis – had killed millions of people throughout history; but over the past fifty years or so, the invention of transplant surgery through modern science had come to save thousands of lives. A life threatening illness had been tamed. But it was so much more than this. Here I was in a modern hospital – a hugely expensive bureaucracy employing thousands of workers in thousands of different ways in a massive division of labour in order to save my life and the lives of thousands of others. All around me I could see social acts of great learned skill and scientific knowledge, myriad social acts of

humane and loving care, multiple social acts of practical activity – cleaning the floors, pushing trolleys with patients, providing food, keeping the plumbing going, welcoming the outpatients, organising beds, orchestrating a million little daily routines. This was no small human *and social* endeavour. How had this come to be? As I lay there I celebrated the wonder of human social organisation and the way it had fashioned this whole experience. I pondered – in a flash – the history of hospitals, the training of doctors and nurses from all over the world, the social meanings of caring for others, the generosity and altruism of many people, the skills of surgeons passed on from generation to generation, the daily organisation of timetables and roles – for nurses, doctors, porters, ambulance drivers, social workers, pharmacists, phlebotomists, physiotherapists, transplant co-ordinators, volunteers, administrators, ward managers and the rest. I pondered indeed my own social timetable on the ward and my daily encounters with a myriad of health professions, a string of rituals from x-ray to medication. And I thought: this is what sociologists want to understand. Just how did this all come together? Just how does this work? And all of this so I – and all the others – could live?

Yet this is just one of hundreds of stories I could tell of my sociological amazement over many years. There are the marvels of a post-modern world, of massive human creativity and imagination. Of science, medicine, art, music: the clothes we fashion, the food we create, the music we delight in, the knowledge we have accumulated over the millennia – the museums and libraries, the technologies that get people on to the moon and allow them to speak to people all over the world. It goes on and on. Sociologists also look in sheer wonder at human social world making, at the ways in which we solve problems, do daily life, and often treat each other with care, respect, kindness and love. And all in a sort of orderly way. We look at the social organisation of everyday living – and the fortunate and fulfilled lives, even the privileged lives that some lead. And we ask about the social conditions under which the good, humane and happy social life can be lived?

THE GOOD NEWS AND THE BAD NEWS

Sociologists then are Janus-faced. In one direction we look for the problems and suffering and are highly critical. In the other direction, we look for the joys and humanity of the social world, and are (cautious and critically) celebratory. This has been a long time problem in the thinking about society. It is found for instance quite strikingly in the enlightenment philosopher Voltaire's famous satire *Candide* (1759). Here the hero follows his teacher Dr Pangloss's philosophy that 'everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds' (the Panglossian philosophy), only to encounter everywhere he travels the horrors of rape, bestiality, exploitation, murder, war and catastrophe. Concluding, he is led to say that this is not the best of all possible worlds, but we do make our own lives. We had better, he says, cultivate our own gardens. And here we may find some happiness in the world.

THINK ON: TRAVELLING IN THE AIR

I am waiting for a plane at a major international airport, and I stand in awe at what this is all about. How did it come to be that millions of *homo sapiens* can now travel daily across the globe in the air? This was not really possible even a hundred years ago? And I ponder the sheer complexity of this social action? From millions of little individual lives decisions are made to get from A to B (say Buenos Aires to Cairo, but anywhere). Phone calls are made, web sites are searched and tour operators are brought in. A massive worldwide system of booking involving thousands of business operations is brought into play. This is human endeavour at a manifestly global level. Bookings are made. Arrivals and departures are fixed. And airport terminals reached – here are huge complex enterprises where it would seem possible for so much to go wrong: queuing, ticketing, baggaging, passporting, security, boardings, take off, landings. In 2006, there were some 4.4 billion passengers across the world. At Heathrow, London, alone some 68 million people

moved through it. (Atlanta is the world's busiest with 85 million passengers per year). Here are amazingly complex timetables in place – in major international airports, planes take off and land every few seconds! And these places – spaces – are now built as huge cathedrals of consumption, as places where you do not just want to fly, but somehow need to buy a wide bunch of expensive commodities. I have often pondered why nearly all major airports have a fascinating bar where caviar, smoked salmon, sea food and champagne is served (it is the last thing I fancy before going up into the air: is it status food for the wealthy?). But there must be a demand for this. Airports are fascinating objects of study: they are communities, shopping malls and places of work. They show massive divisions of labour, multiple complex social encounters, the social organisation of spaces. There are sign systems that need to be understood, practical activities to be done, architecture to be tacitly understood. It is a world of markets, communication, conflicts, change and above all social order. And with it, there is a whole 'underworld' of airports that we know little about but which we sometimes read about. And we haven't even got up into the air yet.

Once we take off, a whole series of other wonders come into play. Who could have imagined 200 years ago that we would invent large metal cans to house some 600 people which can then fly in the air across space at nearly 1000 kilometres an hour. And even more than that: in these cans we would be served hot meals (vegetarian low cholesterol fusion Thai would be my meal of choice), play computer games and a have the choice of some 200 DVDs to watch, along with seemingly endless music to listen to from a variety of playlists? (Heaven forbid that we should be bored in our eight-hour trip across thousands of miles). A whole world of autopilots, airport mechanics, ground staff and of course flight attendants come into play. And finally I ponder what this means to the millions of individual lives and pathways

criss-crossing round the world to meet business appointments and loved ones? To watch the faces at the arrival gates tells a lot. The ending of the Richard Curtis film *Love Actually* (2003) shows the arrival gate of Heathrow and the screen slowly opens up to show hundreds of expectant faces meeting and greeting each other from their travels. Here indeed is a social structure at work – thousands of people doing things together in patterned ways – making social order at airports, making society work.

But hold on you rightly say: there is also very bad news here too. Most of the world's population have never been near a plane or an airport – suggesting a massive inequality of the world. And much can go wrong, technology is running amok, the environment is being damaged and planes can crash. After all, there were four planes hijacked and no survivors in the attacks by al-Qaeda on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Some 3,000 victims (and 19 terrorist hijackers) were killed and this has set up a train of horrific events that are shaping the course of the twenty first century.

For more on all this, see John Urry, *Mobilities* (2007) Chapter 7 'Flying Around'.

One more example must suffice and it is a much more general one. Although sociologists see and write about terrible things in the world, I have long been impressed – in literature and life – at the myriad little ways in which people construct their own little social worlds and go about their everyday lives, wherever they can, not being too nasty or disruptive to other people, and very often being kind to their neighbours and friends. Yes, we know there is conflict, there are bad neighbours, and according to some sociologists, the decline of community. But there are also the ubiquitous little worlds of human care, kindness and sensitivity to others. If you look at much great literature, you will certainly find tragedy and drama, hatred and jealousy. But you will also frequently find a celebration of ordinary people going about their ordinary lives. George Elliot's

nineteenth-century novel *Middlemarch* is a marvellous example. Generally considered to be one of the world's greatest novels, it tells the story of industrialisation and change coming to a small nineteenth-century community, with all the class and gender divisions you would expect to find. But it also tells the story of everyday heroism, of people getting on with their lives, sometimes looking after others, sometimes doing altruistic acts – and all the little personal foibles this generates. This is the social organisation of everyday life, it is everywhere and it is truly astounding. Sociologists thus also study the little acts of everyday life, how people care for each other – and indeed love each other. There is then a sociology of everyday life, a sociology of care – as well as a sociology of play and a sociology of love.

A SOCIOLOGY OF EVERY DAMNED THING

So in the end, it seems, sociology can study anything and everything – both the big things and the little things. Traditionally it is studied through a series of key institutions such as religion, education and the economy. Look at any school or college textbook on sociology (a good way to get the sense of the taken for granted in a field of study) and you will find chapters on social things like the family, the government and the workplace. But sociology actually studies a lot more: its range is the whole of social life. Since everything that human beings do involves social things, everything and anything can be analysed sociologically.

This certainly means it clearly studies all the *big* issues of social life – terrorism, environmental catastrophe, the new information technologies, the drug trade and migration. But it also means that sociologists can be interested in absolutely anything at all, including all the little things of everyday life. So here is a quick alphabet of a few topics. There is a sociology of Australia, a sociology of the body, a sociology of consumption, a sociology of drugs and deviance. There are sociologies of education, of food and football, of global things, of horror films. Sociologists study Ireland and Italy, Jamaica and Johannesburg. They investigate the sociology of knowledge, love, music and norms. They study oriental despotism, patriarchy, queer politics, rape, suicide, transgender, the upper classes and urban life,

voting behaviour, welfare, X-treme sports, youth and zero-tolerance policies. There can indeed be a sociological approach to any damn thing you can think of – even the most unlikely sounding subjects. If it involves people coming together socially, then it can be studied sociologically. Wherever there are social things, sociologists can study them. This means that sometimes sociology is mocked as a rather wild and silly discipline – because it can study the most seemingly ridiculous things, and seem to be trivial in the extremes. I hope to show you that this itself is a very silly view. Sociologists study all that is social in human life and that means everything.

SO IS SOCIOLOGY SILLY? THE THREE 'T'S.

Let me give three of these seemingly 'silly' examples quickly. I will call them the three T's: the sociology of tomatoes, the sociology of toilets and the sociology of telephones – the 'tomatoes, toilets and telephones' problem! Now you may laugh: and at first sight some might say this is typical and just what gives sociology a bad name. A sociology of tomatoes, or a sociology of toilets indeed? Think on. Here are their concerns.

What does *a sociology of tomatoes* look like? I have one colleague who has – for many years now – specialised in the sociology of tomatoes. He is a professor and he runs a research centre at a major university. He is a very serious man, and if you get him talking about tomatoes he will not stop. Why? He can trace the history of tomatoes – from the earliest Aztec salsa through to the famous Heinz Ketchup bottle and on to the latest fashionable pizza and bloody Mary cocktail. He can show how the tomato has been continually transformed in the ways it has been produced, exchanged and consumed. He looks at its role in recent capitalist societies and shows how 'it' was an early pioneer in mass production and a contemporary contributor to the creation of global cuisines. And these days it has become even more interesting as the variety or tomatoes found in our supermarkets become simultaneously more and more standardised and yet of a much wider range than people could have ever bought before. How can we get such standardisation and yet such diversity at the same time – and often just round the corner? How has capitalism organised the tomato? How the world has changed. Just go to the tomatoes and

have a look next time you are in a supermarket. What is the chain of people that got the tomatoes there? Why are they in this form? Who is buying them and who is making money out of them? And before you know it, you are discussing the historical nature of the global economic system under capitalism. And we haven't even started to discuss genetic modification and the environmental issues.

OK, but toilets? What can a *sociology of toilets* possibly be about? Well, I have another colleague, Harvey Molotch, a dear friend as it happens, and a world leader in 'urban sociology', who in recent years has taken to studying what he calls 'stuff'. He looks at all the social things we use daily – from toasters to chairs and asks questions about their social history (where did they come from), their social appearance (why do they come to look like they do) and how they are they used in everyday life. Our worlds are cluttered with objects – you could make a quick list of the things surrounding you right now, from computers to pens to books to mobile phones and so on. These are all social objects and they all have a sociology. Well a few years back, he got interested in toilets (and jokingly, he and his colleagues call it 'shit studies'). Now surely I can't be serious: a sociology of toilets? Shit studies? Again, think on.

Toilets raise a major spectrum of issues. Over the past century, they have become basic to our modern world (which reader does not use one?). And yet the flush toilet (WC) is recognised globally as an icon of modernity – an emblem of wealth. For an estimated 40 per cent of the world's population lives without one. Over two and a half billion people urinate and defecate in open spaces – in fields, mud, forests, bushes. Think alone of the smell and sights: but also of the environmental degradation. And the consequences for health? The lack of sanitation breeds diseases. When we socially reorganise sanitation, we change the smells, sights and health of a society. So a sociology of toilets raises the big issues of *health and modernity*: how did changes in sanitation in the nineteenth century prove to be a decisive factor in changing health and morbidity levels? And of *social inequalities* today – who in the world get the 'decent' toilets, even luxury bathrooms; and how do the poor so often dwell in such appalling sanitary conditions today ?

But now move to the more mundane level of everyday life. Spend a week observing your behaviour and those of others in toilets: look

for the tacit and overt social rules that organise your behaviour, and also the little social rituals you have developed. These things have been studied by sociologists to suggest ways in which our everyday lives are regulated by fine systems of rules and rituals, many of which we hardly notice. Think about the long queues often found for women's toilets; think generally about the gender differences – men rarely talk in toilets, women often do. Think about the adjustment of dress and the comportment of body. Maybe watch Paromita Vohra's documentary film *Q2P* (see this book's website for details; this documentary can also be found on YouTube). Set in Mumbai, it looks at who has to queue to pee and shows how gender and class inequalities are revealed through toilets. Sometimes, too, sociologists look into the so called deviant patterns – where rules are broken. In one remarkable classic and controversial sociological study *Tea Room Trade*, the sociologist Laud Humphreys (1930–1988) showed how toilets could be used by heterosexual men for homosexual pickups with routine users remaining unaware of the homosexual activities that were taking place.

Finally, consider *a sociology of telephones*? Probably no means of communication has revolutionised the daily lives of ordinary people more than the telephone. Invented around 1876, it diffused gradually from a few thousand elite users to a widespread way of communicating across the social classes and the world. By 2007, there were over three billion mobile phone subscriptions, and in low-income societies where most could not even think of using landlines, hundreds of millions of people now have their own mobile numbers. For most of human history, communication had been face-to-face. Now human interactions started to be more and more mediated by technologies – shifting who we could speak to, when we could speak to them and indeed where we could speak to them. In the short space of about ten years, the mobile phone revolutionised everyday life – putting people in perpetual contact and making it possible to communicate with anybody, anywhere, anytime, anyplace. Centuries of past social worlds were radically broken down as time and space was re-ordered. And here is the rise of a new mobile youth culture – anticipating a future world. The young lead here and it is hard to imagine them giving up their mobile phones in a future world. They will probably just become

more and more refined. Phones are also speeding up the changes in language. Languages – a key area of interest for sociologists – are always changing, but 'mobiles' have stepped up this process of change as texting becomes commonplace. There is a lot to be said on phones, and indeed sociologists have written many books on it.

SUMMARY

Sociology is the systematic, sceptical and critical study of the social. It investigates the human construction of social worlds. It can study anything from the big issues (like war and poverty) to the smaller things (like tomatoes, toilets and telephones) and can be both critical and celebratory. We are born into a world we never made, but one in which we then act and change. Sociologists adopt an outsider stance. Once encountered, the world will never be seen in quite the same way again.

THINK ON: PERPETUAL PUZZLEMENT – THE SOCIOLOGIST AS STRANGER AND OUTSIDER

The sociologist is often seen as a kind of outsider. Entering the human social worlds of others, it should be clear that all sociological thinking has – at least momentarily – to feel challenged by the differences of others. *People – in other countries, groups and times – are different from you*. But in order to truly see this, there needs to be a temporary abandonment of your own taken for granted view of the world and a call for empathy to the world view of others. You need to suspend your own world and for a while hold back on all judgments. At this most basic level, there are some sociologists who conduct 'breaching experiments' making strange our everyday life experiences. They invite students for example to question everything that is said to them: to ask and probe every convention of the daily round. A friend says 'how are you'? They ask back: 'what do you mean