HS-307

Introduction to Sociology

34 classes

Module One (Seven sessions)

- Invitation to sociology: wonderment; critical; squint-eyed
- Difficulty 1: different a) from the 'science that precedes' and sets the terms of acceptance; b) in terms of object, subject, method, effects, use (ethics and power)
- Difficulty 2: Isn't everyone a sociologist? Why training, method, evidence?
- Then how?: Thomas Kuhn's demonstration; Bruno Latour's argument; what scientific *practice* is
- *Science* then is a collective enterprise with specific protocols: standing on the shoulders of the giants (compete, yet collaborate)
- usability

Module Two (Seven sessions)

- Some descriptions of what sociology is: the constructed 'social' yet enduring and framing; CW Mills (the "interplay of biography and history," and the distinction between the "personal troubles of milieu" and "the public issues of social structure"); Deshpande (critiquing the commonsense (symbolic interactionist, neo-Marxist and Bourdieu)); Berger (to see the hidden; to debunk); Durkheim (social fact), Weber (elective affinities, ideal type, rationalisation & disenchantment), Marx; Cooper (interaction, institutional, hierarchical); sutras

Module Three (19 Sessions)

- What do sociologists do?: Here we take a careful look around us and see what a sociological perspective enables, to see the world differently, critically.
    - Let's eat out!
    - But can we think with/about shit/ting!
    - Making sense of a poster used in a demonstration.
    - What do advertisements do?
    - What does government data (e.g., NSSO) tell a sociologist?
    - Become a gang leader for a day!
    - Listening to a construction labourer.
    - Why do rich people like quiet?

- 34 lectures.
- One pre-mid-semester test (10 marks) based on Module One; mid-semester (20 marks); end-semester (40 marks) examination; and a group-assignment with a bit of fieldwork (30 marks).
- All the readings will be made available on Moodle. This covers Modules One and Two.
- Attendance is required. The question papers, let me assure you, will be geared towards rewarding those attending classes and working with the readings as we go along.
- I will be available in my office between 3 pm and 4 pm every Monday and Wednesday, through the semester. You could drop in – for anything ranging from a casual chat to a serious discussion on issues that I discuss in the class. An e-mail before you come would be appreciated but is not mandatory. I am particularly anxious about those who have difficulties in language. The sooner I get to know of your difficulties, the easier it will be to address the same.
- Please do let me know if you have any accessibility requests regarding the conduct of this course. These could include, but need not be confined to, the availability of readings in different formats, visual aids, approaches to discussion boards, moodle, teaching aids, software, other resources. Confidentiality will be ensured. The course will strive to make reasonable accommodations. This is a large class and I have no institutional way of knowing who in the class will require extra time in the examinations, who will need scribes etc. I have with me a few TAs who will be allotted to anyone who requires their help in reading the material, writing exams etc. Please, please let me know at the soonest.

Science Wars:

When the May 1996 issue of the journal *Social Text* appeared, an issue devoted to the understanding of "Science Wars," the editors became targets in these "wars" in ways they had not imagined. The issue included a bogus article by New York University mathematical physicist Alan Sokal, who feigned an earnest reflection on the political and philosophical implications of recent physics research for cultural studies. Sokal revealed the hoax himself, and it immediately became a hotly debated issue in academic and popular media around the world. The appearance of the article was not only taken as a sign of shoddy scholarship by the *Social Text* editors but as an expose of cultural studies and social science in general. For instance, Nobel prize-winning physicist Steven Weinberg used the hoax to identify what he calls a fundamental "opposition" between natural and social scientists, especially regarding what Weinberg sees as dangerous anti-rationalism and relativism in social science and cultural studies. Those on the other side of the "wars" countered by criticizing Sokal [for iterating a] "reductionist view of science."

The year before Sokal's hoax, the "wars" had raged over the scientific status of a high-profile US National Opinion Research Center study, which had been launched as a "definitive survey" of sexual practices in the United States. Here, too, doubts were raised not only about the status of scholarship of the study in question, but of sociology and social science as such. The study had received the doubtful honor of becoming the topic of an editorial in The Economist under the heading "74.6% of Sociology is Bunk." In The New York Review of Books, Harvard biologist and statistician R. C. Lewontin criticized the researchers behind the study for believing what people said when filling in the survey questionnaires on which the study builds. "It is frightening," Lewontin wrote, "to think that social science is in the hands of professionals who are so deaf to human nuance that they believe that people do not lie to themselves [and to others] about the most freighted aspects of their own lives." Lewontin concluded his review by warning social scientists that in pretending to a kind of knowledge that it cannot achieve, "social science can only engender the scorn of natural scientists." Other social science critics participating in the debate talked of "dumbed-down" sociology and social scientists' "physics envy." The authors of the NORC study responded in kind by calling Lewontin's review "professionally incompetent" and motivated by an "evident animus against the social sciences in general."10 The authors also observed that the notion that an economist or a sociologist should review work in population genetics, one of Lewontin's fields of competence, "would properly be greeted with derision." [This] leaves us wondering … what it is regarding natural and social science that makes it fairly common practice for natural scientists to review social science, whereas the opposite is less common.

Is the 'science' in social sciences the same as the 'science' in natural sciences?

[O]ne confronts [a question], which is as old as the very concept of science itself, and which continually reappears in discussions of the scientific enterprise: can the study of humans and society be scientific in the same manner as the study of natural objects? Can we speak of a unified science, or should natural-science inquiry and social-science inquiry be viewed as two basically different activities?
The history of science shows these questions to be both difficult to answer and controversial. The controversy is due partly to the fact that besides having fundamental methodological consequences, these questions touch on sensitive factors such as the status of social science in relation to natural science, as well as what the philosopher Richard Bernstein calls, "Cartesian anxiety," that is, the fear of ending in relativism and nihilism when one departs from the analytical–rational scientific tradition that has dominated Western science …

The theoretical ambition

The natural-science model has been, and continues to be, an ideal shared by several traditions in the study of human activity … Although it has now been argued that the ideal does not even work for the natural sciences, and even though the natural sciences and the technologies they have generated have shown themselves to be far more costly and hazardous locally and globally than assumed just a few decades ago, it is easy tounderstand why the natural-science ideal over time has been so attractive to so many scholars. There is a logical simplicity to the natural science paradigm, and the natural sciences' impressive material results speak for themselves: these sciences certainly have an undeniable basis as a means by which we have attempted to achieve mastery over nature, technology, and over our own conditions of life. In this interpretation advances in natural-science research and technological progress are founded upon a relatively cumulative production of knowledge, the key concepts being explanation and prediction based on context-independent theories. The consequence of this knowledge production is a strong, prestigious position for natural science in society.
In this sense, it is not surprising that many who study human affairs have attempted to imitate the natural science paradigm. This was the case with the founder of positivism, August Comte, but it is just as true for figures such as Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx. In the Paris Manuscripts, Marx thus expresses his faith in a future unified science: "natural science will in time subsume the science of man just as the science of man will subsume natural science: there will be one" … Freud, too, early in his career, was as optimistic as the young Marx. Freud's declared goal was "to furnish a psychology that shall be a natural science: that is, to represent psychical processes as quantitatively determinate states of specifiable material particles, thus making those processes perspicuous and free from contradiction." Later on, Freud continued to view the natural sciences as an ideal worth striving for, but he became more skeptical about how far one could go in approaching this ideal within psychology and psychiatry. "I always envy the physicists and mathematicians who can stand on firm ground," Freud later said, "I hover, so to speak, in the air. Mental events seem to be immeasurable and probably always will be so."
Lesser thinkers than Marx and Freud have looked, and continue to look, to the

natural sciences as their ideal for the study of human activity. If anything, the idealization of the natural sciences has become more pronounced since Marx and Freud. This applies … also to areas of research not normally associated with the natural science model. The fact that Marx and Freud erred in their ambitions about developing their sciences into natural sciences is perhaps not so interesting today. But the general question of whether the natural science model is an appropriate ideal for the study of human activity remains timely. The question remains: must the "science of man" be different from natural science?

The natural sciences are relatively cumulative. Thomas Kuhn's famous phenomenological evolutionary scheme for the natural sciences contains long periods with stable normal science; that is, periods with a generally accepted mode of conducting research.8 The researcher's work in such periods consists according to Kuhn in what he calls "puzzle solving" within the framework of a common, accepted "paradigm." The stable periods of normal science are at times broken by periods of radical instability and "revolutionary" change. After a time, change leads to a new paradigm, to cumulative replacement in which the old paradigm becomes superfluous.

Periods with scientific revolutions are a consequence of periods with stable, normal-science research, in that it is via the daily normal "puzzle solving" that the anomalies and contradictions appear which gradually undermine the original paradigm. The resulting crisis continues until the anomalies and contradictions can be explained within a new paradigm; that is, until researchers experience "the pieces suddenly sorting themselves out and coming together in a new way," to use Kuhn's words. The result is a new paradigm around which there is again general agreement and on the basis of which normal-science research can again be conducted.

Kuhn's now-classic description of the research process was criticized for introducing an element of relativism within the natural sciences and in the theory and history of science, a critique which has recently been restated by physicist Steven Weinberg. Kuhn apparently activated the Cartesian anxiety of natural scientists and of philosophers and historians of science. A similar critique and anxiety has been directed at Foucault, Derrida, and other nonessentialist thinkers. The matter is far from settled, but it is clear for most observers, that even though natural-science theory, following Kuhn, cannot be seen as entirely so constant and cumulative as previously assumed, there is still room for a degree of stability and progress for these sciences, also in a Kuhnian interpretation. Therefore the ambition has continued to be to emulate the natural science model in the study of human affairs, especially as regards the development of theory which is typically seen as the pinnacle of scientific endeavor.

Hermeneutical stumbling blocks

Since Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, natural science has been further relativized via what could be called the "universality of hermeneutics' …

Whereas hermeneutics according to Wilhelm Dilthey and, in part, to Max Weber was regarded as an activity linked only to the study of human activity, it is now argued that the natural sciences are also historically conditioned and require hermeneutic interpretation. In other words, the natural science ideal can not even be found in the natural sciences themselves. Natural scientists, too, must determine what constitutes

relevant facts, methods, and theories; for example, what would count as "nature." These determinations are made on the basis of a common interpretation of what constitutes scientific work. Interpretation tends to occur implicitly, but is, nevertheless, interpretation. It is acquired as tacit practical skills and conventions via training in the actual performance of scientific activity.

Possession of these skills is a requirement for being able to undertake scientific work at all, and performance occurs without reflection. One can produce and reproduce objective results from these skills, but one cannot argue objectively for the skills. Methodology is not a universal theoretical rationality and can never be argued to be so because one ends in infinite regress: how does one argue theoretically for the practical skills one uses to formulate a theory? How does one determine scientifically what science is?

The answer is that one cannot. Methodology is a concrete practical rationality. In this sense, the natural sciences are just as lacking in objectivity as the social sciences. This has led Richard Rorty and others to conclude that the two branches of science are not essentially different. It must be concluded, however, that despite the argument of the universality of hermeneutics and despite the common conditions in the form of epistemological relativism, which is argued to be valid for both natural and social sciences, it can be phenomenologically demonstrated that the natural sciences are relatively cumulative and predictive, while the social sciences are not and never have been. In other words, on the basis of the universality of hermeneutics, it is incorrect to underplay the differences between natural and social sciences ...

The social sciences do not evolve via scientific revolutions, as Kuhn says is the case for the natural sciences. Rather, as pointed out by Hubert Dreyfus, social sciences go through periods where various constellations of power and waves of intellectual fashion dominate, and where a change from one period to another, which on the surface may resemble a paradigm shift, actually consists of the researchers within a given area abandoning a "dying" wave for a growing one, without there having occurred any collective accumulation of knowledge. Not paradigm shifts but rather style changes are what characterize social science: it is not a case of evolution but more of fashion. Foucault poses the question of whether it is reasonable at all to use the label "science" for this kind of activity. Even the expression "body of knowledge" is too pretentious for Foucault: "let us say, to be more neutral still . . . body of discourse."

The social sciences have always found themselves in a situation of constant reorganization, characterized by a multiplicity of directions. It is not a state of crisis in a Kuhnian sense, that is, of a period with competing paradigms located between periods with normal science. The condition of the social sciences has been termed "pre-paradigmatic," if we remain in the Kuhnian terminology. The social sciences have always been in this state and as a result are neither relatively cumulative nor relatively stable. Why are the social sciences characterized by such instability? Is it immanent, or can it be transcended? Why have the social sciences not been able to develop predictive theory to the same degree as the natural sciences? These are the questions which we will now attempt to answer.

Pre-paradigmatic sciences

To maintain that the study of humans and society finds itself in a pre-paradigmatic stage is to imply that a coming "maturation" of the social sciences will produce a more desirable paradigmatic stage characterized by normal science. It is argued that the study of human society is somewhat younger than the natural sciences; the social sciences have not benefited from the same resources as has the study of nature; their object of study – human activity – is more complex; their conceptual apparatus and research methods need to be more refined; and with more time for further development and refinement, there should, in principle, be nothing in the way of the social sciences achieving the same paradigmatic stage as the natural sciences, becoming cumulative, stable, and predictive. This is the essence of what is here called the "pre-paradigmatic argument."

It follows from this line of thinking that there is a fundamental distinction between normal and non-normal science, a distinction which cuts across the boundary separating the study of human affairs on the one hand and the study of nature on the other. …

According to the pre-paradigmatic argument, both the natural and the social sciences may find themselves in periods where they are cumulative, stable, and predictive, and both may also experience periods with confusing and incorrect predictions. The immature state of social science on which this argument is based has nothing to do with fundamental properties of human beings or of social science. For example, even though political scientists may disagree as to what constitutes "the political," while physicists seem to be in more agreement as to what constitute physical phenomena, this state of affairs does not necessarily have to remain permanent. According to the pre-paradigmatic argument, there is nothing in principle which prevents political scientists from being able to reach agreement concerning the political domain, nor physicists from again disagreeing as to the basic categories of nature, as they did when quantum theory first appeared.

The pre-paradigmatic argument is seductive. First because it entails a high degree of methodological clarity for the study of human activity, where, following the argument, it models itself on the natural sciences' well-developed and well-tested methodology for theory development. Second, the natural sciences have had inordinately great success with their methodology. Could the social sciences achieve similar results if they developed their research methods sufficiently far along the natural science path? Yes, the argument goes. It is therefore not surprising that the pre-paradigmatic argument is popular among many social scientists. …

Belief in the pre-paradigmatic argument provides the basis for a good portion of optimism within social science. But the fact remains that today's natural-science-modeled social sciences are no more "normal" and have no more predictive success than their seemingly less sophisticated predecessors. After more than 200 years of attempts, one could reasonably expect that there would exist at least a sign that social science has moved in the desired direction, that is, toward predictive theory. It has not. And when the social sciences are compared with relatively new natural sciences such as meteorology and biology, which also struggle with especially complicated objects of study, it can be seen that the latter exhibit slow, but relatively cumulative, progress. These relatively new natural sciences have evolved ever more complex theories which account for an increasing range of phenomena, while social

science typically seeks to develop theories pertaining to one class of phenomena and then abandons these for theories which include another. The social sciences appear unable to demonstrate the kind of progress which is supposed to characterize normal science.
The difference between the natural and social sciences seems to be too constant and too comprehensive to be a historical coincidence …. We may thus be speaking of so fundamental a difference that the same research procedure cannot be applied in the two domains.

Dead objects, self-reflecting humans

[There is] a critical difference between natural and social sciences: the former studies physical objects while the latter studies self-reflecting humans and must therefore take account of changes in the interpretations of the objects of study. Stated in another way, in social science, the object is a subject.
Anthony Giddens … expresses this difference as follows:
The technical language and theoretical propositions of the natural sciences are insulated from the world with which they are concerned because that world does not answer back. But social theory cannot be insulated from its "object-world," which is a subject-world.
Two types of self-interpretations appear in what Giddens calls the "double hermeneutic." First are the self-interpretations among those people the researchers study. According to hermeneutics and phenomenology, these self-interpretations and their relations to the context of those studied must be understood in order to understand why people act as they do. Hermeneutics is here closely connected to Max Weber's *verstehen*, which emphasizes understanding as distinct from explanation. The second aspect of the double hermeneutic concerns the researchers' own self-interpretations. Just as the people studied are part of a context, research itself also constitutes a context, and the researchers are a part of it. The researchers' self-understanding and concepts do not exist in a vacuum, but must be understood in relation to this context. Context both determines and is determined by the researchers' self-understanding.
Following the double hermeneutic, the question of what are to be counted as "relevant" facts within a given discipline – for example, political facts within political science or social facts within sociology – is determined by both the researchers' interpretations and by the interpretations of the people whom the researchers study. In the hermeneutic–phenomenological argument, this means that the study of society can only be as stable as the self-interpretations of the individuals studied. And inasmuch as these interpretations are not constant, the study of society cannot be stable either. The natural sciences, say the practitioners of hermeneutics, do not have a corresponding problem because their objects of study are not self-interpreting entities: they do not talk back.

Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology is especially interesting in relation to the second part of the double hermeneutic. The ethnomethodologists assert that the basic skills which researchers in the social sciences must possess in order to carry out their work are just as situational, just as dependent on the context, as the interpretations of the people whom the researchers study. People's daily activities, regardless of how trivial they may seem, and the researchers' work within the

sciences, are both objects of the ethnomethodologists' scrutiny. Garfinkel describes the field of ethnomethodological inquiry like this:

> No inquiries can be excluded no matter where or when they occur, no matter how vast or trivial their scope . . . Procedures and results of water witching, divination, mathematics, sociology – whether done by lay persons or professionals – are addressed according to the policy that every feature of sense, of fact, of method, for every particular case of inquiry without exception, is the managed accomplishment of organized settings of practical actions.

In accordance with Kuhn, the ethnomethodologists assert that the researchers' basic skills and work cannot be derived from general logical and methodological rules for scientific rationality. Basic skills must be seen as an internal affair within a given research area, as an "ongoing, practical accomplishment" which cannot be generalized theoretically or methodologically:

> [A] leading policy [of ethnomethodology] is to refuse serious consideration to the prevailing proposal that efficiency, efffcacy, effectiveness, intelligibility, consistency, planfulness, typicality, uniformity, reproducibility of activities – i.e., that rational properties of practical activities – be assessed, recognized, categorized, described by using a rule or a standard obtained outside actual settings within which such properties are recognized, used, produced, and talked about by settings' members. All procedures whereby logical and methodological properties of the practices and results of inquiries are assessed in their general characteristics by rule are of interest as phenomena for ethnomethodological study but not otherwise. ...

Because researchers' background skills are internal in relation to their activity, ethnomethodologists contend that researchers must explicitly account for their procedures in producing knowledge. This is seen by the ethnomethodologists as especially important in the study of society, because here researchers' production of knowledge is an important part of human activity and can therefore not be left out as study object. It is precisely here that the ethnomethodologists see a breakdown in the possibility for objective social sciences. A formalization and theorization of the researchers' background skills into genuine rules of research is thus necessary for this objectivity, say the ethnomethodologists. However, such formalization is not possible because the researchers' basic skills are situational. Infinite regress again sticks up its ugly head: how does one formalize the skills, which make formalization possible?

[But is there] something more fundamental in social science [that] prevents normal science (in the Kuhnian sense) from developing?

The deadly paradox of social theory

Hubert Dreyfus and Pierre Bourdieu argue that the study of individuals and society can never be "normal" in the Kuhnian sense because of the relationship between ideal scientific theory on the one hand and human activity on the other. The limitation on "normality," ... lies ... in problems with establishing theories about the social world which parallel natural-science theories; and more specifically, for social science in problems with explaining and predicting social activity using abstract, context-independent elements. The argument is clearer than other arguments about the status of the social sciences and it has wide-ranging consequences for our understanding of what these sciences can and cannot be.

Dreyfus's first step is to make clear what he understands by ideal "theory." He goes back to Socrates, whom he regards as the founder of that unique intellectual activity called theorization. Ideal theory is viewed by Dreyfus as having six basic characteristics that can never be fully realized, but can be approached to varying degrees. Socrates introduced and argued for the first three of these when he said that a theory must be (1) explicit, (2) universal, and (3) abstract. It must be explicit because a theory is to be laid out so clearly, in such detail, and so completely that it can be understood by any reasoning being; a theory may not stand or fall on interpretation or intuition. Second, a theory must be universal in that it must apply in all places and all times. Third, a theory must be abstract in that it must not require the reference to concrete examples. Descartes and Kant supplemented Socrates' three criteria with two more. A theory must also be (4) discrete, that is, formulated only with the aid of context-independent elements, which do not refer to human interests, traditions, institutions, etc. And it must be (5) systematic; that is, it must constitute a whole, in which context-independent elements (properties, factors) are related to each other by rules or laws.

Finally, modern natural science has added further a criterion of ideal theory: that it must be (6) complete and predictive. The way a theory accounts for the domain it covers must be comprehensive in the sense that it specifies the range of variation in the elements, which affect the domain, and the theory must specify their effects. This makes possible precise predictions. Today, it is especially this last criterion which is the hallmark of epistemic sciences. We will see that even disciplines like biology, which are not completely epistemic and depend on context-dependent theory, have ways of approaching the ideal of prediction that do not appear available to social science disciplines.

The six criteria characterize an ideal type of scientific theory. The argument that follows is not dependent on scientists – natural or social – ever really succeeding in constructing ideal theory. The argument also does not ignore the fact that context-dependence is known, not only in social science, but in natural science, too, for example in evolutionary biology (see the section below on science of the second order). The argument only requires that the theories, which approach this ideal, do not refer to shared basic interpretations, metaphors, examples, etc.; i.e., that they are context-independent and predictive. The difference between predictive and nonpredictive theory is so consequential that it would be better not to use the same term to denote the two. In other words, if we choose to call one of the two "theory," the other should be excluded from this designation. In the argument that follows, the term "theory" refers to predictive theory. We will see that even though prediction requires special preconditions and is relatively rare even in parts of the natural sciences, prediction is the criterion which most clearly helps us distinguish between natural and social sciences.

Just as ideal natural science explains and predicts in terms of context-independent elements which can be abstracted from the everyday world – mass and position in physics, for example – the study of society, insofar as it attempts to follow natural science, must also abstract such elements from the context-dependent activities of human beings in order to subsequently explain and predict those activities in terms of formal relations (rules or laws) between the abstracted elements. It is on this basis that Noam Chomsky seeks out general syntactic elements and formal

transformational rules for explaining everyday speech, and that Claude Levi-Strauss abstracts the exchange of objects between individuals and groups and formalizes their role in social interaction.
Dreyfus and Bourdieu argue that this approach, which has been successful in many parts of the natural sciences, cannot succeed in the study of society. The reason, says Dreyfus, has to do with the central importance of context in human social life:
Insofar as the would-be sciences [social sciences modeled upon the natural sciences] follow the ideal of physical theory, they must predict and explain everyday activities, using decontextualized features. But since the context in which human beings pick out the everyday objects and events whose regularities theory attempts to predict is left out in the decontextualization necessary for theory, what human beings pick out as objects and events need not coincide with those elements over which the theory ranges. Therefore predictions, though often correct, will not be reliable. Indeed, these predictions will work only as long as the elements picked out and related by theory happen to coincide with what the human beings falling under the theory pick out and relate in their everyday activities.

Dreyfus's point is that the phenomena, which a theory selects as relevant via the theory's logic, are not necessarily identical with those phenomena selected as relevant by those people covered by the theory. Dreyfus states further, that this is the case because the context is excluded, the very context in which human beings select those everyday phenomena, whose regularities the theory attempts to explain and predict. The key question is: why does the exclusion of context cause the theory to collapse?
If Dreyfus is right he has identified a fundamental paradox for social and political science: a social science theory of the kind which imitates the natural sciences, that is, a theory which makes possible explanation and prediction, requires that the concrete context of everyday human activity be excluded, but this very exclusion of context makes explanation and prediction impossible.

[Excerpted and modified from Bent Flyvbjerg's *Making Social Science Matter: Why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.]

CONTEMPORARY INDIA

A Sociological View

Satish Deshpande

VIKING

VIKING
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For my parents
Ushabai
(née Prabhavati Gurunathrao Kulkarni)
and
Nageshrao Sheshgirirao Deshpande

CHAPTER ONE

Squinting at Society

There are very few jokes about sociologists, as Peter Berger confesses in the opening sentence of his famous *Invitation to Sociology*. As a sociologist, I have always regretted this fact, specially since there are plenty of jokes about our exalted cousins, the economists, and even our more modest siblings in psychology and anthropology have got their share. If forms of humour are one indicator of what matters to society, sociologists and sociology clearly do not.

Though it cannot soothe our injured egos, there happens to be a good reason for the unimpressive public image of our discipline. Other disciplines have the advantage of being perceived as obviously complex subjects requiring specialized knowledge—economics is a good example. But this perception also extends to seemingly less complex subjects that are distanced from everyday life, like exotic cultures or the history of our own or other societies. Sociology is unique among the social sciences for the extent to which its subject matter appears to overlap with the content of everyday life. Everybody is involved in social relationships and institutions; everyone has first-hand experience of social values and norms. Small wonder, then, that sociology fails to inspire awe and is often equated with common sense.

There is nothing specially tragic about this fate: it is shared, more or less, by all disciplines unable to promise access to a well-paid job or to social prestige. But it is indeed ironic—in fact, doubly so—that

sociology of all disciplines should be confused with common sense.

The first irony is in the pejorative intent of this equation, which implies that common sense is something simple and self-evident. This is a big mistake, for common sense is really quite a profound and powerful phenomenon. In ordinary language, the phrase usually refers to knowledge or skills acquired 'naturally', i.e, *without being taught*. This may be true in the physical world, where there are some skills that are at least partly untaught or unteachable—like riding a bicycle, for example. But there are no untaught skills in the social world, where society teaches us everything we know, except that, sometimes, it also erases the signs of its teaching. It is precisely this kind of social knowledge—the kind that we are taught to regard as untaught—that sociologists refer to as 'common sense'. Common sense is a vitally important social institution because it supplies the cement that holds up the social structure. That is why the term has a special status in sociology, being used as an abbreviation for a whole range of shared, socially inculcated values, attitudes and habits of thought with which we make sense of our world. (To remind the reader of this special usage, I am converting the phrase into a single word.)

Commonsense is pre-judice in the strict sense—it is 'always already' in place and hard at work long before we make any conscious judgements. It pre-organizes our perceptions in such a way that a large part of the social world is taken for granted and allowed to sink like an iceberg below the surface of our consciousness, leaving only a small part for our explicit attention. Normal social life would be impossible if we and the others whom we interact with did not share a common set of assumptions about the world. That is why interacting with those who don't have commonsense—small children or mental patients, for example—is often stressful, though it can also be quite refreshing.

In their essence, these ideas about commonsense are far from new and quite respectable—'from good family', as we say in India. Three branches of the family tree are particularly relevant because they provide a sense of the different ways in which the notion of commonsense (or something like it) has been considered important in sociology.

One line of descent can be traced back to the German philosopher of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), and those who brought his ideas into sociology, specially in the US: the underrated theorist, Alfred Schütz, who earned his living as an insurance company executive in New York; the Chicago philosopher, George Herbert Mead, widely influential through his lectures, though all his books were published posthumously; Mead's student, Herbert Blumer who taught sociology at Berkeley (and in his younger days played football for the Chicago Bears); and, more recently, the immensely popular academic writers, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann.

Practised under various labels—phenomenological sociology, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology—this perspective highlights the fact that the social world, a human construct, has infinite possible meanings which cannot be exhaustively described by the rational methods of natural science. Human actions and communication are based on a shared set of 'background understandings' which are never, and can never be, fully spelt out.[1] We interact by exchanging symbols that convey much more than their literal meaning; human communication is inevitably 'indexical' in that it necessarily depends on what remains unsaid, just like a pointing finger (the index finger, as it is called) always refers to something beyond itself. Thus, phenomenological sociology approaches commonsense with utmost respect, seeing it as an immensely powerful toolkit for encoding and decoding meaning that everyone acquires unknowingly.

Another branch of its intellectual family tree links commonsense to the Italian Marxist thinker and revolutionary, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), who was also perhaps the first to use the term in this particular sense. Journalist, theorist of the factory councils movement, cultural critic, general secretary of the Italian Communist Party, and Member of Parliament, Gramsci spent the last decade of his life in

Mussolini's fascist prisons where his already fragile health was irrevocably destroyed; he died at the age of forty-six in a Rome clinic, six days after his jail term expired. Much of Gramsci's intellectual legacy is contained in the thirty-three 'Prison Notebooks' smuggled out of his room during the funeral arrangements and sent to Moscow by diplomatic bag. Gramsci is a key figure in Marxist thought because he makes the difficult transition from the world of the founders of Marxism—whose faith in the imminent collapse of capitalism seemed justified by the trend of historical events (like the European revolutions of 1848, the Russian Revolution of 1917, or the Great Depression of the 1920s and 1930s)—to the world we inhabit, where such faith can no longer be sustained.

The effects of this transition can be seen in Gramsci's notion of commonsense, which he describes as the 'philosophy of the non-philosophers', the uncritically adopted conception of the world that ordinary people inherit from their socio-cultural environment. Embodied in popular language, religion and folklore, commonsense is a chaotic collection of contradictory beliefs and attitudes; but the prevailing power structure imposes a partial coherence on it by highlighting some elements and marginalizing others. Thus modified, it serves to bind the moral conduct of individuals to the norms of the social groups they belong to, and bends these norms themselves towards the dominant ideology. In this way, it helps to legitimize the power structure by securing the passive (and occasionally the active) consent of the broad mass of people. But because of its contradictory contents, the coherence imposed upon commonsense is always vulnerable to subversive reformulation. Gramsci's notion of commonsense rescues the Marxist theory of ideology from its earlier reliance on a crude mixture of coercion and 'false consciousness'. Since contemporary capitalism cannot be overthrown by swift armed insurrections, ideology becomes the decisive battleground on which a protracted 'war of position' must be fought to recast commonsense and give it a new, radical coherence.

A third branch of the family tree connects commonsense to the

contemporary French anthropologist and sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (born 1930, died 23 January 2002). Influenced by both phenomenology and Marxism, Bourdieu's early ethnographic work in the Kabylia region of Algeria in the 1950s and 1960s was intended to be 'fieldwork in philosophy', part of an attempt to construct a 'theory of practice'. Bourdieu's version of commonsense is his notion of the 'doxa', or that portion of our world that seems so self-evident that it is silently accepted—because it 'goes without saying', and because we are not aware that things could possibly be otherwise. The doxa is the sphere of socially invisible unanimity that precludes both ortho-doxy and hetero-doxy: unlike them, it refuses to recognize the presence of other opinions and hence the possibility of dispute.

The concept of doxa is part of Bourdieu's attempt to solve the age-old agency-structure riddle in social theory—how to explain the co-presence of both free will and institutional constraint in the actions of ordinary people? He suggests that the doxa helps reconcile structure and agency by prompting people to freely choose what they are in fact forced to choose; the self-evident sense of 'proper limits' that it instils allows the individual to 'mis-recognize' objective structural constraints as active subjective choices. While doxic commonsense helps maintain order in pre-capitalist, 'traditional' societies with 'enchanted' social relations and a 'good faith' economy, its grip weakens during the crisis-ridden transition to the disenchanted world of modern capitalism and the 'callous cash' economy.

These three views of commonsense—from phenomenology (how is it that we know so much more than we can ever explain?); Marxist social theory (how do people consent to a social order that treats them unjustly?); and ethnography (how do people's subjective choices come to mesh so well with their objective constraints?)—expose the power and scope of this vastly underrated social institution. Indeed, it is an institution so central to social theory that sociology could well be described as the critique of commonsense. My favourite among the many possible definitions of the discipline, this description also

highlights the second irony inherent in the popular perception of sociology as commonsense on stilts.

For to think thus is to confuse a science with the object of its inquiry, which is a bit like mistaking a geologist for a rock. But such analogies are misleading because they conceal the complexity of the relationship between commonsense and sociology. Geologists need not worry about rocks shaping their minds, whereas sociologists must constantly worry about commonsense doing precisely that. And there is no simple or permanent solution for this anxiety.

It is easy to forget, given its connotations in everyday language, that commonsense is not simply a fancy term for the simple-minded naïvetes of other people. No one is immune: indeed, one could say that to live in society is to live in commonsense. It is said that Archimedes offered to lift the earth if given a big enough lever and a place to stand. But there is no Archimedian vantage point—no 'place to stand'—outside the world of commonsense from where we can practise a pure and scientific sociology. As social scientists now recognize, the previous search for 'value neutrality' is a mirage, because the social sciences are themselves a product of the society they wish to analyse, and they cannot but be influenced by the environment they inhabit. So, rather than think in terms of an unattainable ideal—value neutrality—it is better to accept the potential for bias and try to describe its possible sources as carefully and completely as possible. Unlike the traditional approach where the social scientist retreats behind a professional mask of faceless anonymity, this approach requires the foregrounding of all the aspects of research that used to be considered 'backstage' features: the researcher's personal identity and background, the conditions in which the research was carried out, and so on. At the same time, attempts to ensure a bias-free methodology are also intensified—but they are now contextualized by the realization that our efforts to transcend commonsense are always partial and provisional.

The main advantage that commonsense offers to sociologists is that it is not a single seamless monolith that engulfs all of society in

the same way at the same time. Every epoch, social group or specific context produces its own sense of what is self-evidently right or wrong, what goes without saying. This all-important fact—that commonsense is not the same in all times and places, or for all people—provides a wedge with which we can prise open its closed circuits of meaning. We can study the effects of commonsense by switching perspectives: by looking at the world from the viewpoint of differently placed persons or groups, or even by imagining a world different from the one we inhabit, much as writers and artists do. It is thus possible to analyse one kind of commonsense by consciously locating oneself within another kind, using the contrast to trace the outlines of what would otherwise be very difficult to see. But this is not easy and it certainly does not come naturally—it demands constant, disciplined effort, something like the *riyaaz* required of classical musicians. 'Sociology' is the name, among other things, of precisely this kind of *discipline*.

There is a second foothold that commonsense provides for those wishing to scale its otherwise smooth and slippery walls. This is the fact that it is always implicated in power relations. The most effective and durable forms of domination in society are ultimately based on commonsense; conversely, a significant portion of popular commonsense leans in the direction of power. It is important to recognize, however, that the mutually supportive relations between power and commonsense are neither inevitable nor permanent—they are context-driven. More importantly, commonsense also contains much that is hostile to the dominant order and provides the potential for resistance and rebellion. Nevertheless, we can take advantage of the power-commonsense correlation by using the former to unveil the latter. Just as Anil Kapoor's character in the 1980s hit film *Mr India* is normally invisible but shows up in red light, commonsense can be made visible in the light of power relations.

Positioning sociology as a critique of commonsense exposes us to the risk that we will begin to think of commonsense as something that is necessarily wrong or false, something always in need of correction. This is a temptation to be resisted. The point about commonsense is

that it represents our *unexamined* and often *unconscious* beliefs and opinions. What is objectionable here is not necessarily the content of beliefs and opinions, but that they are arrived at unthinkingly, through habit, ignorance or oversight. The goal of critique is to convert 'pre-judice' into 'post-judice', so to speak. *After* we subject commonsense to rational scrutiny, we may find that it contains values and norms we cherish and wish to defend; or we may find that it harbours deceptions that distort our perspective on the world; or we may find both to be true simultaneously, or even that it is difficult to decipher what is going on. Sociology may or may not be helpful in this 'after' state, but its main mandate is to help us break out of the 'before' state of unawareness. The Greek philosophers believed that an unexamined life was an uncivilized one; sociology helps us to identify and interrogate the unexamined aspects of our lives.

If 'commonsense' is an abbreviation for the transparent pane of unexamined prejudices through which we normally view the world, 'sociology' is an abbreviation for the abnormal gaze that tries to focus on both this pane as well as the world beyond it. Figuratively speaking, therefore, sociologists need to cultivate a sort of double vision, a squint. To split a phrase that describes a squint-eyed person in colloquial 'Bihari'—among the richest of the many hybrid languages invented in contemporary India—good sociologists must always strive not only to 'look London' but also to 'see Paris'.

This book invites you to practise 'squinting' at Indian society. It surveys the careers of ideas and institutions like modernity, the nation, caste, class and globalization in the half-century since Independence. At the same time, it tries to make visible and subject to scrutiny the commonsense that surrounds not only these ideas and institutions but also past and present efforts to study them. It invokes 'the sociological imagination' to illuminate the sites where personal biographies intersect with a larger social history. It hopes, above all, to instil a sense of wary respect for all that seems self-evident, and to whet the appetite for self-questioning. In short, this book explains why it is cool to be cross-eyed, and shows you how to 'see double'.

The peculiar predicament of Indian sociology

Thus far we have spoken of sociology only in its global, or more accurately, its universal-Western avatar. But as with all the cultural sciences, this universalism is never quite complete, and the discipline has a somewhat different look in non-Western and specially ex-colonial contexts like India. It is important to address these differences for they influence the stance of the discipline and impart a particular flavour to its commonsense.

The dictionary defines a predicament as a 'difficult, perplexing or trying situation', and there are three special aspects to the one that afflicts Indian sociology. They are closely related and together shape the distinctive profile of the discipline: first, the ambivalent image that sociology inherits from the colonial era; second, the disciplinary consequences of the twinning of sociology and social anthropology that is peculiar to India; and third, the persistent anxiety about the Indian-ness (or lack thereof) of Indian sociology.

In the course of its re-establishment as a discipline in independent India, sociology seems to have fallen between economics and history. Both these latter disciplines were gifted enormous energy and momentum by the nationalist movement. Economics—commensurate with its global status as the dominant social science of the capitalist era—was seen as the discipline providing the cutting edge to the case against imperialism. In keeping with the requirements of modern nationalism, history was given the responsibility of (re)constructing the past of the emergent nation. Most important, both disciplines could easily carry over their agendas into the post-independence era. Economics, of course, became the mainstay of Nehruvian socialism and the premier language in which the modern nation was articulated. History took up the task of writing a retroactive biography of the nation, rescuing various regions, classes and movements from the condescensions of colonialist historiography.

In sharp contrast, sociology seems to have inherited a profoundly ambiguous and disabling self-identity. This was a direct consequence

TABLE D
Distribution of Distance from Family Home to Place of Current or Last Residence
By Caste Group and Generations

	0-100 km	*100-500 km*	*500-1000 km*	*1000 + km*	*Abroad*	*Total*
SC/ST						
GEN-1	92.3 (12)	7.7 (1)	0	0	0	100 (13)
GEN-2	95.7 (22)	4.3 (1)	0	0	0	100 (23)
GEN-3	64.9 (24)	27.0 (10)	8.1 (3)	0	0	100 (37)
ALL	79.5 (58)	16.4 (12)	4.1 (3)	0	0	100 (73)
LINGAYAT						
GEN-1	100 (9)	0	0	0	0	100 (9)
GEN-2	93.8 (15)	6.3 (1)	0	0	0	100 (16)
GEN-3	89.8 (44)	10.2 (5)	0	0	0	100 (49)
ALL	91.9 (68)	8.1 (6)	0	0	0	100 (74)
BRAHMIN						
GEN-1	84.6 (11)	7.7 (1)	7.7 (1)	0	0	100 (13)
GEN-2	64.5 (20)	22.6 (7)	9.7 (3)	3.2 (1)	0	100 (31)
GEN-3	49.4 (44)	25.8 (23)	13.5 (12)	4.5 (4)	6.7 (6)	100 (89)
ALL	56.4 (75)	23.3 (31)	12.0 (16)	3.8 (5)	4.5 (6)	100 (133)
ALL CASTES						
GEN-1	91.4 (32)	5.7 (2)	2.9 (1)	0	0	100 (35)
GEN-2	81.4 (57)	12.9 (9)	4.3 (3)	1.4 (1)	0	100 (70)
GEN-3	64.0 (112)	21.7 (38)	8.6 (15)	2.3 (4)	3.4 (6)	100 (175)
ALL	71.8 (201)	17.5 (49)	6.8 (19)	1.8 (5)	2.1 (6)	100 (280)

Note: Cells show percentage shares, with number of persons in brackets. Where more than one place of residence is involved, the farthest place with at least one year's stay is taken. All distances are in kilometres from Hubli-Dharwad, or the family home.
Source: Compiled from Field Data.

Notes

1. Squinting at Society

1. To establish this point, ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel conducted a controversial set of 'breaching experiments' in which his graduate students at the University of California in Los Angeles deliberately breached the implicit social contract by refusing to use their commonsense and requiring their unsuspecting interlocutors to explain themselves 'fully'. These experiments had to be quickly abandoned because they turned mundane conversations into traumatic events and brought even close relationships to the brink of breakdown.
2. This in essence is the model of nationalism attributed to Bankim Chattopadhyaya in Partha Chatterjee's well-known work (1986). Variations on this basic theme can be found strewn all over the history of Indian nationalism even to this day.
3. The phrase in quotes is the title of a famous book by Daniel Lerner.
4. It is interesting to note that M.N. Srinivas began his career in India in the 1950s with the opposite view—that is, by advocating the cause of participant observation as a much neglected method contrary to the popularity of survey research (Srinivas 1994:14-18). At the end of the century, the shoe would certainly seem to be on the other foot. It would not be easy to cite even five survey-based or quantitatively-oriented studies that have had a major impact on Indian sociology during the last fifty years.
5. I do not mean to imply that anthropology has no contribution to

Sociological insights are valuable to anyone concerned with action in society. But this action need not be particularly humanitarian. Some American sociologists today are employed by governmental agencies seeking to plan more livable communities for the nation. Other American sociologists are employed by govern mental agencies concerned with wiping communities of hostile nations off the map, if and when the necessity should arise. Whatever the moral implications of these respective activities may be, there is no reason why interesting sociological studies could not be carried on in both. Similarly, criminology, as a special field within sociology, has uncovered valuable information about processes of crime in modem society. This information is equally valuable for those seeking to fight crime as it would be for those interested in promoting it.

...

Social work, whatever its theoretical rationalization, is a certain *practice* in society. Sociology is not a practice, but *an attempt to understand*. ... Sociological understanding can be recommended to social workers, but also to salesmen, nurses, evangelists and politicians—in fact, to anyone whose goals involve the manipulation of men, for whatever purpose and with whatever moral justification.

This conception of the sociological enterprise is implied in the classic statement by Max Weber, one of the most important figures in the development of the field, to the effect that sociology is "value-free." ... Certainly the statement does not mean that the sociologist has or should have no values. In any case, it is just about impossible for a human being to exist without any values at all, though, of course, there can be tremendous variation in the values one may hold. The sociologist will normally have many values as a citizen, a private person, a member of a religious group or as an adherent of some other association of people. But within the limits of his activities as a sociologist there is one fundamental value only—that of scientific integrity. Even there, of course, the sociologist, being human, will have to reckon with his convictions, emotions and prejudices. But it is part of his intellectual training that he tries to understand and control these as bias that ought to be eliminated, as far as possible, from his work. It goes without saying that this is not always easy to do, but it is not impossible. The sociologist tries to see what is there. He may have hopes or fears concerning what he may find. But he will try to see regardless of his hopes or fears. It is thus an act of pure perception, as pure as humanly limited means allow, toward which sociology strives.

... The good spy reports what is there. Others decide what should be done as a result of his information. The sociologist is a spy in very much the same way. His job is to report as accurately as he can about a certain social terrain. Others, or he himself in a role other than that of sociologist, will have to decide what moves ought to be made in that terrain. We would stress strongly that saying this does not imply that the sociologist has no responsibility to ask about the goals of his employers or the use to which they will put his work. But this asking is not sociological asking. It is asking the same questions that any man ought to ask himself about his actions in society. Again, in the same way, biological knowledge can be employed to heal or to kill. This does not mean that the biologist is free of responsibility as to which use he serves. But

when he asks himself about this responsibility, he is not asking a biological question.

...

It is gratifying from certain value positions ... that sociological insights have served in a number of instances to improve the lot of groups of human beings by uncovering morally shocking conditions or by clearing away collective illusions or by showing that socially desired results could be obtained in more humane fashion. One ... might cite the use made of sociological studies in the Supreme Court decision of 1954 on racial segregation in the public schools. Or one could look at the applications of other sociological studies to the humane planning of urban redevelopment. Certainly the sociologist who is morally and politically sensitive will derive gratification from such instances. But, once more, it will be well to keep in mind that what is at issue here is not sociological understanding as such but certain applications of this understanding. It is not difficult to see how the same understanding could be applied with opposite intentions. Thus the sociological understanding of the dynamics of racial prejudice can be applied effectively by those promoting intragroup hatred as well as by those wanting to spread tolerance. And the sociological understanding of the nature of human solidarity can be employed in the service of both totalitarian and democratic regimes. ... But the image of the sociologist as social reformer suffers from the same confusion as the image of him as social worker.

...

Sociology has, from its beginnings, understood itself as a science. There has been much controversy about the precise meaning of this self-definition. ... But the allegiance of sociologists to the scientific ethos has meant everywhere a willingness to be bound by certain scientific canons of procedure. If the sociologist remains faithful to his calling, his statements must be arrived at through the observation of certain rules of evidence that allow others to check on or to repeat or to develop his findings further. It is this scientific discipline that often supplies the motive for reading a sociological work as against, say, a novel on the same topic that might describe matters in much more impressive and convincing language.

...

The sociologist, then, 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 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 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 his operations qua sociologist. Nor does the sociologist claim that his frame of reference is the only one within which society can be looked at. For that matter, very few scientists in any field would claim today that one should look at the world only scientifically. The botanist looking at a daffodil has no reason to dispute the right of the poet to look at the same object in a very different

manner. … As a scientist, the sociologist will have to be concerned with the exact significance of the terms he is using. That is, he will have to be care ful about terminology. This does not have to mean that he must invent a new language of his own, but it does mean that he cannot naively use the language of everyday discourse. Finally, the interest of the sociologist is primarily theoretical. That is, he is interested in understanding for its own sake. He may be aware of or even concerned with the practical applicability and consequences of his findings, but at that point he leaves the sociological frame of reference as such and moves into realms of values, beliefs and ideas that he shares with other men who are not sociologists.

…

Sometimes, it is true, the sociologist penetrates into worlds that had previously been quite unknown to him—for instance, the world of crime, or the world of some bizarre religious sect, or the world fashioned by the exclusive concerns of some group such as medical specialists or military leaders or advertising executives. However, much of the time the sociologist moves in sectors of experience that are familiar to him and to most people in his society. He investigates communities, institutions and activities that one can read about every day in the newspapers. Yet there is another excitement of discovery beckoning in his investigations. It is not the excitement of coming upon the totally unfamiliar, but rather the excitement of finding the familiar becoming transformed in its meaning. The fascination of sociology lies in the fact that its perspective makes us see in a new light the very world in which we have lived all our lives.

…

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 favorable for the development of sociological perspective.

…

We will not be far off if we see sociological thought as part of what Nietzsche called “the art of mistrust.” …

Let us take one … example. In Western countries, 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 behavior that is

engaged in prior to marriage under the rather misleading euphemism of "courtship," one finds 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 so 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, he will look beyond the immediately given and publicly approved interpretations. Contemplating a couple that in its turn is contemplating the moon, the sociologist need not feel constrained to deny the emotional impact of the scene thus illuminated. But he will observe the machinery that went into the construction of the scene in its nonlunar 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 demeanor 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." The way in which public officials and newspapers … speak about "social problems" serves to obscure this fact. 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 naive to concentrate on crime as a "prob lem" 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 foreman to get his men to work more efficiently or of the line officer to get his troops to charge the enemy more enthusiastically need not be problematic at all to the sociologist (leaving out of consideration for the moment the probable fact that the sociologist asked to study such "problems" is employed by the corporation or the army). The sociological problem is always the understanding of what goes on here 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.

…

We would contend, then, that there is a debunking motif inherent in sociological consciousness. The sociologist will be driven time and again, by the very logic of

his discipline, to debunk the social systems he is studying. This unmasking tendency need not necessarily be due to the sociologist's temperament or inclinations. Indeed, it may happen that the sociologist, who as an individual may be of a conciliatory disposition and quite disinclined to disturb the comfortable assumptions on which he rests his own social existence, is nevertheless compelled by what he is doing to fly in the face of what those around him take for granted. In other words, we would contend that the roots of the debunking motif in sociology are not psychological but methodological. The sociological frame of reference, with its built-in procedure of looking for levels of reality other than those given in the official interpretations of society, carries with it a logical imperative to unmask the pretensions and the propaganda by which men cloak their actions with each other. This unmasking imperative is one of the characteristics of sociology particularly at home in the temper of the modem era.

[Excerpted from Peter L Berger's *Invitation to sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*, New York: Anchor Books, 1963.]

From **C. Wright Mills (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*, New York: Oxford University Press.**

The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise. To recognize this task and this promise is the mark of the classic social analyst.

…

No social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history and of their intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey. Whatever the specific problems of the classic social analysts, however limited or however broad the features of social reality they have examined, those who have been imaginatively aware of the promise of their work have consistently asked three sorts of questions:

(1) What is the structure of this particular society as a whole? What are its essential components, and how are they related to one another? How does it differ from other varieties of social order? Within it, what is the meaning of any particular feature for its continuance and for its change?

(2) Where does this society stand in human history? What are the mechanics by which it is changing? What is its place within and its meaning for the development of humanity as a whole? How does any particular feature we are examining affect, and how is it affected by, the historical period in which it moves? And this period—what are its essential features? How does it differ from other periods? What are its characteristic ways of history-making?

(3) What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society and in this period? And what varieties are coming to prevail? In what ways are they selected and formed, liberated and repressed, made sensitive and blunted? What kinds of 'human nature' are revealed in the conduct and character we observe in this society in this period? And what is the meaning for 'human nature' of each and every feature of the society we are examining?

…

Perhaps the most fruitful distinction with which the sociological imagination works is between 'the personal troubles of milieu' and 'the public issues of social structure'. This distinction is an essential tool of the sociological imagination and a feature of all classic work in social science.

Troubles occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relations with others; they have to do with his self and with those limited areas of social life of which he is directly and personally aware. Accordingly, the statement and the resolution of troubles properly lie within the individual as a biographical entity and within the scope of his immediate milieu—the social setting that is directly open to his personal experience and to some extent his willful activity. A trouble is a private matter: values cherished by an individual are felt by him to be threatened.

Issues have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of his inner life. They have to do with the organization of many such milieux into the institutions of an historical society as a whole, with the ways in which various milieux overlap and interpenetrate to form the larger structure of social and historical life. An issue is a public matter: some value cherished by publics is felt to be threatened.

Often there is a debate about what that value really is and about what it is that really threatens it. This debate is often without focus if only because it is the very nature of an issue, unlike even widespread trouble, that it cannot very well be defined in terms of the immediate and everyday environments of ordinary men. An issue, in fact, often involves a crisis in institutional arrangements, and often too it involves what Marxists call 'contradictions' or 'antagonisms'.

In these terms, consider unemployment. When, in a city of 100,000, only one man is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the man, his skills, and his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million men are unemployed, that is an issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual. The very structure of opportunities has collapsed. Both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals.

...

Consider marriage. Inside a marriage a man and a woman may experience personal troubles, but when the divorce rate during the first four years of marriage is 250 out of every 1,000 attempts, this is an indication of a structural issue having to do with the institutions of marriage and the family and other institutions that bear upon them.

Or consider the metropolis—the horrible, beautiful, ugly, magnificent sprawl of the great city. For many upper-class people, the personal solution to 'the problem of the city' is to have an apartment with private garage under it in the heart of the city, and forty miles out ... on a hundred acres of private land. In these two controlled environments—with a small staff at each end and a private helicopter connection—most people could solve many of the problems of personal milieux caused by the facts of the city.

But all this, however splendid, does not solve the public issues that the structural fact of the city poses. What should be done with this wonderful monstrosity? Break it all up into scattered units, combining residence and work? Refurbish it as it stands? Or, after evacuation, dynamite it and build new cities according to new plans in new places? What should those plans be? And who is to decide and to accomplish whatever choice is made? These are structural issues; to confront them and to solve them requires us to consider political and economic issues that affect innumerable milieux.

In so far as an economy is so arranged that slumps occur, the problem of unemployment becomes incapable of personal solution. … In so far as the family as an institution turns women into darling little slaves and men into their chief providers and unweaned dependents, the problem of a satisfactory marriage remains incapable of purely private solution. In so far as the overdeveloped megalopolis and the overdeveloped automobile are built-in features of the overdeveloped society, the issues of urban living will not be solved by personal ingenuity and private wealth.

What we experience in various and specific milieux, I have noted, is often caused by structural changes. Accordingly, to understand the changes of many personal milieux we are required to look beyond them. And the number and variety of such structural changes increase as the institutions within which we live become more embracing and more intricately connected with one another. To be aware of the idea of social structure and to use it with sensibility is to be capable of tracing such linkages among a great variety of milieux. To be able to do that is to possess the sociological imagination.

Each of these answers embeds the notion of critique within the sociological perspective. The first is simply asserted as a disciplinary bias about the value of the sociological perspective. The second and third answers will be explored further below through some illustrations of what it means to think sociologically, a specification of sociology's "double critique," a heuristic overview of three traditions within sociology and a discussion of some implications for teaching sociology. (For a more detailed treatment of these ideas, see Buechler 2008.)

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

Students often bring a profoundly nonsociological consciousness to our classrooms. Rooted in common sense, taken-for-granted assumptions, they often see their world as an a-historical, naturally occurring phenomenon in which people bear full responsibility for their circumstances. In C. Wright Mills's (1959) language, they perceive a world of private troubles rather than public issues. Compared to this consciousness, even the most basic insights of the sociological perspective provide a critical angle on the social world. Here are some of those insights.

Society is a Social Construction

Social order is not God-given, biologically determined, or naturally predestined. It rather begins with intentions that motivate people to act in certain ways. When many people with similar goals act in concert, larger social patterns or institutions are created. Goal-driven action creates, maintains, and transforms social order over time. Put succinctly, society is a human product (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

Society may arise from goal-driven actions, but the resulting institutions take on a life of their own. They appear to exist independently of the people who create and sustain them. They are experienced by people as a powerful external force that weighs down on them. When this external force becomes severe enough, people are likely to lose sight of the fact that society is a social product in the first place.

The value of the social constructionist premise is this dual recognition. On one hand, society is a subjective reality originating in the intentions of social actors. On the other hand, it becomes an objective reality that confronts subsequent generations as a social fact that inevitably shapes *their* intentions and actions—and so it goes. Understood this way, the idea that society is a social construction is at the heart of the sociological perspective.

Society is an Emergent Reality

Another premise of sociology is emergentism. This clarifies sociology's distinctive level of analysis. Psychology analyzes the individual, even if it acknowledges that individuals belong to groups. Sociology examines social ties and emergent processes rather than individual elements. Emergentism recognizes that important social facts (Durkheim 1895) only appear when individual elements are combined in particular ways to create qualitatively new realities.

Sociology thus specializes in the social level of analysis that emerges when elements are combined to create emergent realities. Emergentism also implies that when we try to understand elements outside of their context, it is at best a simplification and at worst a distortion. The parts derive meaning from their relationship with other parts, and the sociological perspective is fundamentally attuned to such relationships.

Society is an Historical Product

Thinking historically is a crucial part of the sociological imagination (Mills 1959). Seeing society as an historical product means recognizing that we cannot make sense of the present without understanding the past. Historical knowledge of past social conditions provides crucial comparisons. Without such benchmarks, it is impossible to understand what is genuinely new. Without a historical referent for comparison, sociology becomes clueless about understanding

social change. Historical knowledge also provides the raw material for categories, comparisons, typologies and analogies that are crucial to understanding both present and possible future worlds.

The concept of emergentism applies here because the importance of seeing relationships between elements also applies chronologically. If we look at society at only one point in time, we sever it from its past and its potential futures. Its very meaning arises from these relationships; to ignore them is to distort even a static understanding of society at one point in time. Consider the difference between a photograph and a film that presents a succession of images. We can learn something from the still photo, but its meaning often changes dramatically when we see it as one of a series of interrelated, dynamic images.

Society Consists of Social Structures

Social structures are products of human purposes, but they acquire an objective reality and become a powerful influence on human action. Consider how physical structures like buildings shape our action. We almost always enter buildings through doors; in rare cases we might do so through windows, but walking through walls is not an option. Social structures are less visible and more flexible than buildings, but they also channel people's actions because they make some actions routine and expected, others possible but unlikely, and still others all but impossible.

Social structures are often depicted as powerful forces weighing down upon the individual. In this image, structures constrain freedom of choice and behavior. This, however, is a one-sided view. Structures are constraining, but they are also enabling. These established patterns of social organization make many actions possible in the first place or easier in the second place. Without preexisting social structures, we would have to do everything "from scratch" and the challenge of sheer survival might overwhelm us. The trick is thus to see social structures as simultaneously constraining and enabling social action (Giddens 1984).

Society Consists of Reflexive Actors

People in society are aware of themselves, of others, and of their relationships with others. As reflexive actors, we monitor our action and its effects on others. We continue, modify or halt actions depending on whether they are achieving their intended effects. According to one school of thought, we are literally actors because social life is like a theatrical performance in which we try to convince others that we are a certain kind of person (Goffman 1959). To stage effective performances, we must constantly be our own critic, judging and refining our performances. Reflexivity thus means that when we act, we are conscious of our action, we monitor its course, and we make adjustments over time.

To stage such performances, we must undergo socialization. Along the way, we acquire a language that provides us with tools for reflexive thinking. We also acquire a self. To have a self requires that we first have relationships with others. Through those relationships, we imaginatively see the world from their perspective, which includes seeing ourselves as we imagine we appear to them. It is this ability to see ourselves through the perspective of others—to see ourselves as an object—that defines the self. Reflexive action only becomes possible with a self.

Society is an Interaction of Agency and Structure

Social structures and reflexive actors are intimately connected. Karl Marx once said that people make their own history (recognizing agency), but under circumstances they do not choose but rather inherit from the past (acknowledging structure). Agency and structure are thus dialectically related; each conditions the contours of the other as we make our own history in circumstances we inherit from others.

The close connection between structure and agency has led one theorist to reject the

notion of structure altogether because it implies something that exists apart from agency. Giddens (1984) thus talks about a *process* of structuration. In this view, actors use preexisting structures to accomplish their goals, but they also recreate those structures as a byproduct of their actions. The intentions of actors may thus be individual, but the consequences of their actions are social because achieving individual objectives reproduces (and sometimes transforms) the social forms and cultural rituals used to achieve such objectives.

Society Has Multiple Levels

Sociologists often distinguish between macro- and micro-levels of society. When we look at the macro- level, we may include millions of people organized into large categories, groups, or institutions. The macro-level is the "big picture" or "high altitude" perspective in which society's largest patterns are evident and individuals are invisible. When we look at the micro-level, we may examine no more than a dozen people interacting in a small group setting. Here, the role of particular individuals is very prominent, and larger social patterns fade into the background.

Some of the best sociology involves understanding not only structure—agency connections but also micro—macro links. Every macro-structure rests on micro-interaction, and every micro-interaction is shaped by macro-structures. While often distinguished for analytical purposes, the micro- and macro- levels of society are one interdependent reality rather than two separate things.

Society Involves Unintended Consequences

Although much action is goal-directed, it always has consequences that social actors neither intend nor anticipate. This principle recognizes the complexity of the social world and the limits on our ability to control it. It says that despite our best efforts, the effects of social action transcend their intended path and spill over into unexpected areas.

A related idea is the distinction between manifest and latent functions. Manifest functions are outcomes people intend. A latent function is an outcome that people are not aware of; it can complement but it often contradicts the manifest function. The distinction is crucial to sociological analysis. When we observe behavior or rituals that seem irrational, pointless, or self-defeating, it is time to begin looking for latent functions. What we will often find is that "irrational" behavior is crucial to sustaining the identity and cohesion of the group that performs it. Good sociology thus requires a bi-level analysis attentive to people's intentions but also to how action moves in unintended directions or serves purposes beyond people's conscious awareness.

No attempt to capture the sociological perspective in a small number of themes can be complete, but few would deny that these are central to the discipline. When set alongside the "common sense" of many of our students, these themes provide an inherently critical angle of vision on everyday assumptions. We now turn to a deeper exploration of the connections between thinking sociologically and thinking critically.

SOCIOLOGY'S DOUBLE CRITIQUE

This final theme brings us to the core of my argument and merits more extended discussion. Last but not least, thinking sociologically means looking at the social world in a critical way.

Students often equate "critical" with "negative." To be critical is often seen as being harsh, unfair, judgmental, or mean-spirited. In sociological language, however, "critical" means something else. Doing sociology in a critical way means looking beyond appearances, understanding root causes, and asking who benefits. Being critical is what links knowledge to action and social change. Being critical in the sociological sense rests on the profoundly *positive* belief that we can use knowledge to understand the flaws of the world and act to correct them.