

Introduction

Life, Practice, and Promise

I am a practicing sociologist, and this book is about what it is that I practice, what it means, and why it matters. This book is about how the practice finds its way into almost every aspect of life, from headlines in the news to the experience of growing older to the ravages of war, injustice, oppression, and terrorism in the world. It is about things small and large, things simple and things far more complex than what we can imagine.

I practice sociology in many ways. I practice it when I think about how social life works, when I write books, and when I work with people trying to see what is going on in the world and our lives in it. I practice as a public speaker and workshop facilitator to help solve the dilemmas of a diverse and difficult world in which race, gender, sexual orientation, disability status, and other forms of privilege, power, and oppression cast dark shadows over people's lives. I practice when I read the news or turn on the television or go to the movies. I practice when I walk down a street, shop in a market, or sit in a sidewalk restaurant and watch the world go by and wonder what life *really* is all about, what this stream of interconnected people's lives consists of, what knits it all together and what tears it apart, and what it has to do with me.

I practice sociology for many reasons. I practice because there is so much unnecessary suffering in the world and because to do something about that suffering, we need to understand where it comes from. In this sense, practic-

ing sociology has a profoundly moral dimension. I mean ‘moral’ not in the sense of being good instead of bad but in a deeper and broader sociological sense that touches on the essence of what we are about as human beings and what our life together consists of. It is impossible to study social life for very long without coming up against the consequences that social life produces, and many of these consequences do such damage not only to people’s lives but to other species and the Earth itself, that, unless we find ways to deny or ignore reality, we feel compelled to ask, “Why?” And once we ask that question, we need tools to help make sense of where it leads and to imagine how we might go from there toward something better.

We cannot help but be part of the problem, but practicing sociology is a way to also be part of the solution. This not only helps the world but also makes it easier to live in, especially given how crazy a place it can be. It helps to be able to see how one thing is connected to another and, in that, how to find ways to make a difference, however small. We cannot change the world all by ourselves, but we can make informed decisions about how to participate in it and thereby help turn the world toward something better, even if it is in our neighborhoods or families or where we work or go to school.

I would not practice sociology if I didn’t believe something better was possible. I believe that the choices we make as individuals matter beyond our lives more than we can imagine, that things don’t have to be the way they are but that they will not get better all by themselves. We need to do something, and what we do needs to be based on more than hunches and personal opinion and prejudice. We need systematic ways to figure things out, and that is what sociological practice provides.

I also practice sociology because it helps me keep in touch with the essence of my own life in the world, for sociology isn’t simply about some larger world ‘out there.’ It is also about each of us in the world and the connection between the two, which means it can take us toward basic truths about who we are and what our lives are about. I practice sociology as a way to remind myself that for all that we think we know about things, beneath that knowledge is all that we do *not* know, which is good reason to feel some awe.

There are times, for example, when I am amazed that social life works at all, that we are able to live and work together as much as we do, to talk, dream, imagine, fight, and create. There is something miraculous about the simplest conversation, in the sense that we can never get to a core truth

about how it happens. We can contemplate the miracle of things by taking ourselves toward the limit of what we can know. And we can feel the fringe of core truths and how our lives are part of them. So, while my sociological practice is usually about understanding the world, it is also about keeping myself in touch with the unknowable essence of human existence that lies beneath.

Practicing sociology is a way to observe the world and to think about and make sense of it. It is also a way to be *in* the world and *of* the world, to play a meaningful role in the life of our species as it shapes and reshapes itself into the mystery of what is going on and what it has to do with us.

Practice What?

Most people probably have some notion of what I mean by ‘sociology,’ but I doubt that it looks much like sociology as it’s practiced. If you’ve ever looked at a typical introductory sociology text (the only serious glimpse of sociology that most people ever have), you may see sociology as a collection of facts and terms about almost every topic, from the family to economics to politics to crime to religion to the intricacies of conversation. It might remind you of high school social studies, but at a higher level. Looking at all these varied aspects of social life is not by itself sociological, however, because many disciplines examine these same areas. Criminal lawyers, legal scholars, and judges, for example, study crime; economists study economics; political scientists study politics; anthropologists, psychologists, historians, and divorce lawyers study families. But this doesn’t mean they are practicing sociology.

This is why vague definitions of sociology as ‘about’ groups and societies or ‘about’ social life are not of much use. Since few words are as vague as ‘about,’ ‘sociology’ winds up meaning pretty much whatever you want it to mean, which gets close to meaning nothing at all. This makes it easy to think that sociological practice is everywhere, that when the *New York Times* or CNN or PBS or your favorite blog comments on something ‘social,’ they are practicing sociology. It is also easy to think we can learn as much from surfing the Internet as we can through studying sociology. As a result, many sociologists go out of their way to impress upon people that what they do is more than common sense. They are right, of course; it *is* much more than common sense (now I’ve said it, too), but having to convince people that it is more than common sense is a situation that sociolo-

gists have largely brought on themselves, digging a hole with one hand while trying to fill it in with the other.

You also won't find a clear sense of sociology by looking at scholarly journals. It's not that the authors aren't practicing sociology, but that they're so far removed from caring to explain the *essence* of what they are doing that it gets buried beneath layers of data and theory, implicit rather than out in the open. Since most sociologists write primarily for one another, they seem to assume that the question of what sociology really amounts to isn't worth figuring out, much less articulating so that people outside the field can understand it. You could read several years' worth of journal articles without getting a clue as to what makes them all sociological.

For some sociologists, the lack of a clear sense of sociology's definition is not so much a problem as it is the nature of things. There is no one sociology, they argue, but instead a diversity of *sociologies*. It is futile, even presumptuous, to look for a grand narrative that explains everything in one fell swoop. It's old-fashioned, rigid, and overly modernist. Even worse, it won't work.

It is undeniable that sociology encompasses a dazzling collection of ideas and methods and points of interest, and it is undoubtedly true that no theory can explain everything. But if the nature of things is that sociology revolves around many different 'narratives,' *we still have to ask ourselves what it is about these narratives that justifies calling them all sociological*. If we cannot answer that in a reasonably clear and straightforward way, then it's hard to see why anyone would take sociological practice seriously. Without a way to grasp the defining essence of what sociologists do and why they do it, all the research and theory in the world won't amount to much except to sociologists themselves.

That is why I have written this book. The premise for *The Forest and the Trees* is a hypothetical situation I put myself in when I started writing it: if sociology could teach everyone just *one* thing, if it could pass along just *one* central insight, what would that be? Would it be something about the family? About political institutions? About social inequality? About the use of language in social interaction? About conflict theory, exchange theory, functionalism, postmodernism, or any of the other theoretical perspectives sociologists have used over the years? Would it, in short, be some piece of data or a term or a theory from the mountain of data, terms, and theories that fall under the general heading of 'sociology'?

I do not think so, or, at least, I hope not. Far simpler and more powerful is a core idea that serves as a starting point, a gateway opening onto questions that in turn point toward everything else. By itself, such an idea does not explain anything (that wouldn't be the point). Instead, it defines a core view of reality on which sociological practice of all kinds is based, consciously or not, and provides a touchstone for what it means to do it.

When I say that I practice sociology, I refer to that core view, that common ground that joins so many different kinds of work. This book is one practicing sociologist's answer to the hypothetical, the core insight with the greatest potential and promise to transform how we see the world and ourselves in it. This book is about what that core view is and why it matters that we understand it, use it, live it, and pass it on.