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The problem of mundanity

Sociology has not of late dreamt Comte's dream. Few persons entertain the thought, particularly in the embarrassing presence of linguistics and, until recently, economics, that sociology is or could become the Queen of the Social Sciences. Indeed, for some, sociology's claim to presence in the court, let alone any sort of title, often seems precarious. The complexity of social affairs, the infiltration of values, and the impoverished character of the methods of theoretical analysis are but a few of the reasons advanced to dampen sociology's pretensions. Nevertheless, from both the point of view of practitioners within the discipline and critics without, sociology's aspiration to the throne, while possibly amusing, is understandable. That is to say, what is of issue generally is the extent to which sociology has or can realize itself as a rigorous science. Whether or not sociology ought to envision itself as responsible to the idea of science is essentially undisputed.

Yet, that ambition, which has marked sociology since its inception, is not beyond question. Specifically, it is possible to render problematic not merely the adequacy of sociology *qua* science but the primordial matter as to whether or not it is a science which sociology ought to be. Instead of asking to what extent does sociology approximate the conventional model of a science, we may ask whether it is science which sociology ought to approximate. Such a question, however, retains the integrity of the basic phenomenon to which sociology addresses itself: it merely renders the method of address problematic. It is possible to go one step further. Not only may we question the utility or desirability of sociology's methodology, we may inquire into the very nature of sociology's phenomenon as well. Specifically, sociology may be examined for the extent to which its subject matter is properly conceived.

As is obvious, perhaps, such questions are possessed of peculiar properties. They are 'radical' questions in that they cannot be resolved by an appeal to the normal operating procedure of the discipline to which

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they are put. Whether or not sociology's phenomenon ought to be A or B and whether or not its foundational methodology ought to be X or Y is not amenable to answer or solution in the same way that questions formulated within the confines of sociology's 'normal paradigm' are resolved (Kuhn 1970). They cannot be answered within the normal paradigm because it is precisely the normal paradigm which is under consideration.¹ 'Radical questions' are radical in that they question the taken for granted foundations of the discipline from within which they are asked. The primordial questions of 'What is the phenomenon?' and 'How is it to be approached?' are asked on a bridge unsecured at either end: a bridge, moreover, which traverses an abyss whose walls are sheer paradox. An example of the perplexities that can be encountered by 'radical' questioning is furnished by considering the peculiar consequences of a global polemic against sociology's phenomenon, and the method through which it is investigated. In one sense there is an 'argument' or critique; and yet in another there is none. The conventional sense of a critique dissipates when an entire discipline is comprehensively challenged – from its conception of its subject matter to the conception of its method – because then one is not so much offering a challenge as formulating an alternative discipline (Scheffler 1967: 82; Shapere 1964: 391).² If there is disagreement with respect to both method and phenomenon, and if the disagreement is on a global level as opposed to the particular, then the structural conditions which provide for the possibility of 'rational' debate and communication are nullified.³ Unlike disputes which may occur 'within' a particular discipline and which call for particular remedy or reform, a radical critique of the sort we have described demands an alteration of a discipline's foundation in such a fashion that the discipline is no longer recognizable to itself. To ask of sociology that it alter its phenomenon and fundamental methodology is to ask sociology to cease to be what it now takes itself to be.

These paradoxes and perplexities are but a taste of things to come. Our investigations depart from a perspective which is, for the most part, profoundly and necessarily alien to the current presuppositions and practices of sociology. Our investigations are alien to the practices and presuppositions of sociology – or at least strive to be alien – because it is these very foundational presuppositions and practices which comprise our inquiry's central concern. We seek to move outside the space (Spencer 1982) of conventional sociological discourse in order to focus upon and learn how sociological inquiry or any mode of inquiry is constituted through the use of primordial suppositions and sustained

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through practices of reasoning which treat those suppositions as incorrigible (Gasking 1965) givens.

Foundational suppositions and practices are ordinarily not the focus of sociological or everyday inquiry because they are constitutive of the very possibility of inquiry. From 'within' inquiry, the assumptions are often so deeply taken-for-granted and the practices applied so subtly that inquirers regard them as given, unalterable and self-evident. Sociology's ambition to be a science is but an expression of its deep, one might say naive, commitment to a network of suppositions and practices, which, I propose, ought first and foremost comprise a topic of study. But to embark on such a study requires first that we gain distance from, and, in this sense, become alien to, sociology's aspiration to be a science.

The strangeness of sociology as a science

In order to provide a sense of the strangeness of sociology as science, it is necessary to try to transcend the limitations of conventional Western thought which accords to the sciences a peculiar sort of primacy or privileged status. Toward this end, I want to present a conversation between two strangers to the world. Let us call them transcendental strangers or, perhaps, 'transcendental anthropologists'. One stranger, the 'Student', has been assigned the task of doing an anthropological analysis of the world. The other stranger, the 'Mentor', is a thesis supervisor or something of the sort. They speak on the occasion of the Student's return.⁴

Student: Mentor, as you know, my task was to do an anthropology of man. When I reached the world, I was not sure how to begin. My methods were unformulated; my phenomenon unclear. After a period of drift and turmoil, I stumbled upon practitioners of 'science'. They were many in number and diversely situated over the earth. For hundreds and hundreds of years, they as a body had been engaged in acquiring knowledge of the world. They had an immense accumulation of factual material organized under the auspices of theoretical frameworks and an immense variety of technical practices for securing factual materials. (Imagine an inventory of all the conventional virtues attributed to the sciences.) Indeed, they even had what they called 'social sciences', whose specific concern was an elucidation of the 'social world', and they had accumulated a vast literature reporting the results of their endeavors. I found that my task had been done in principle. Therefore, I have duplicated the literature, and I propose that our concerns are being cared for. Here, then, is the *American Sociological Review*, *American Journal of Sociology*, *Public Opinion Quarterly* . . . *Rules of Sociological Method*, Weber's . . .

Mentor:⁵ Incredible! You have committed the most peculiar of errors. If I

understand you correctly, you have taken a procedure indigenous to the world and used it as a means of producing descriptions of the world. If that is what you have done, then you have misconceived your task. Do you not see that the procedures you refer to as the 'social sciences' are integral features of the world you set out to examine? Have you not used as a resource what well might have been the phenomenon? These journals that you present, aren't they the stories that story-tellers tell?

Student: But it wasn't just any story they were telling. You must recognize, Mentor, that the scientists had developed special ways of analyzing the world so as to produce 'stories', as you call them, which were superior to any which had hitherto been produced. The stories, unlike those of the 'layman', were compiled in accord with the most rigorous of criteria – criteria which assured that were others to examine the world, they, too, would tell the same story. They were concerned with the degree of correspondence between their stories and the referent of the stories; and they took great caution in the preparation of the stories so as to assure correspondence or, at least, to assure that there would be public ways of ascertaining whether the stories were correct. (Imagine an extended inventory of all of the ideals of scientific inquiry.) True, the stories were stories; but they were, as the scientists said, 'objective' and unequalled in their accuracy.

Mentor: I am not doubting what you say. But when I hear you recount what you were told, I hear only a description of how scientists talk so as to lay claim to having produced definitive stories of the world. That is, I hear what you say as a description of activities which go on in the world under the name of science. You, too, should have heard the claims in that way. That way of talking, that way of reasoning, was not to be taken over by you as your own way of talking, your own way of reasoning. That was the phenomenon. The activities in which the scientists engaged, the claims that they made, the ideals under whose auspices they claimed to have operated – all these are in-the-world, and thus at least part of what you should have attended to in your investigations.

Student: You mean, Mentor, I failed in my task because I trusted the sciences when I should have been far more critical. I should have determined, for example, whether indeed the sciences actually satisfied the criteria they posed for themselves and if, in fact, their descriptions were, as they say, empirically verifiable? Is that what you mean when you say I should have attended to the sciences as a phenomenon?

Mentor: No, I mean nothing of the sort. Your task was not to 'debunk' the world, not to reveal its faults, and not to see if the sciences were, in fact, what they made themselves out to be. It was not your task to find out whether the sciences and their accumulated products were 'right' or 'wrong', 'true' or 'false', 'correct' or 'incorrect'. Your task did not call for an evaluative concern because such evaluative concerns are themselves features of the sciences in particular and the world in general. Such evaluations are of interest only in the ways in which they are carried out by members in-the-world. Similarly, the notion of truth, the system of logic, the fact-finding and theorizing practices of the sciences are of no interest in ways other than as phenomena. And if such practices are claimed to be superior to those employed by what you have called 'laymen', then those claims

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are of equal interest as a phenomenon – and only as a phenomenon – for they, too, are in-the-world.

Student: I think I now see your point, Mentor. I should not be seduced by worldly practices and worldly reason for they are in the world. Worldly reason and worldly practices are what I have come to study and they therefore cannot provide me with answers. But given what you have said, is it not the case that even if I turn to study worldly practice and reason that I nevertheless fall prey to yet deeper and more subtle worldly practices? If I study worldly practice in all its forms, do I not become like worldly members in that I suppose a structure, an orderliness or even a disorderliness or structure in the first place, and that I seek in some fashion to explain, describe or 'know' that order? Members of the world often cast themselves in that relation to what they regard as 'nature' or 'social facts' or 'reality'. Thus even in deciding to study worldly practice and reason in the most comprehensive sense possible I seem to participate in a worldly structure nevertheless. And Mentor, if I somehow abandon or transcend this last structure through which I cast myself over and against 'the structure of worldly practice and reason', if I abandon all worldly practice, reason and structure so as to treat them as in-the-world, am I not left without a place to stand, so to speak? In depriving myself of this last resource, do I not thereby deprive myself not only of a topic, but the possibility of any topic? And if I . . .

Mentor: I see you have understood me well. Let us postpone the answers – if there are answers – for another time.

The Student represents the conventional social sciences: his initial naivete is the naivete of the social sciences. As the Mentor points out, the study of worldly activities and the use of science can in some sense be seen to be at odds with one another simply because science is a worldly activity. From the near-radical⁶ perspective of the Mentor, the use of science by a transcendental anthropologist is akin to a conventional anthropologist's use of, say, the descriptions of activities proffered by tribal elders or produced by oracular methods as a means of providing a description of the people under consideration. Presumably, for the conventional anthropologist the descriptions offered by the tribal elders are part and parcel of the tribal life which the anthropologist wishes to describe.⁷ They have no particular primacy over any other aspect of the order of activities they describe. Analogously, from the standpoint of a transcendental anthropological concern with socially organized activities, the theoretical and technical practices which comprise 'science' would not be resources, they would be instances of worldly practice and reason.

As a consequence of this re-orientation, empirical analysis, theoretical explication and even logic itself are rendered problematic, but without a concern for a corrective. Indeed, even the remedial self-concern which is characteristic of the sciences is rendered a feature of doing science. That

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is, the sciences' reflexive concern with themselves, explication of their foundational assumptions, examination of the relation between 'actual' practice and ideals and so on, are accorded the status of phenomena. Furthermore, given the Mentor's perspective, even the 'reflexive' sciences such as the social psychology of psychology, the sociology of sociology, of knowledge and of science are rendered integral features of science with no particular primacy or privileged ontological status *vis-à-vis* the order of affairs which they explicate.

As the Student's concluding questions and the Mentor's reluctance to answer them indicates, the development of the perspective of a transcendental or radical anthropology generates a number of extraordinary problems. For example, a radical disengagement from worldly reason and worldly practice is *not* assured by taking a 'step back'.⁸ To be sure, the recommendation to conceive of science as worldly practice and worldly reason turns the sciences into 'topics' and expands the domain of worldly practice. The addition of yet another topic, as distinctive and reflexive as it may be, however, is an implicit acceptance, reiteration and reaffirmation of a network of formal relations and suppositions in which a 'subject', 'knower' or 'inquirer', is once again constructed and juxtaposed to what is variously known as the 'object', 'out there', 'reality' or 'social facts'.⁹ Insofar as the schema of formal relations and the discursive space which it creates is reproduced, the transcendence intimated by the Mentor is not so much an escape from the house of commonsense as it is a change of floors, for the formal structures which provide for the possibility of a topic, remain unexamined and, indeed, unnoticed.

Sociology becomes mundane

Thus far, we have attempted to provide a sense of how sociology's patterning of itself in the image of the sciences is strange. We have proposed that instead of embracing science – and thereby being co-opted by worldly reason and practice – sociology might well have approached worldly reason and practice with a naivete which would have made what is now a resource of sociology into a topic (Garfinkel 1967; Zimmerman and Pollner 1970). But the program which relinquishes the 'privileged' status conventionally accorded to the sciences demands a radical transformation of the entire sense of the phenomenon. It is not merely a matter of adding yet another substantive concern to the list of topics already surveyed by the social sciences. Indeed, there already are sociologies of sociology, of science and of knowledge. In proposing that

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the sciences and worldly reason be rendered topics in their own right, the radical perspective has a vision of a phenomenon which transcends that which ever could be considered by the sciences even if the sciences do, in fact, exhibit a reflective concern with themselves. The phenomenon includes the very work whereby reflective and analytic concern; theorizing and analysis; observation and inquiry; the pursuit of truth and objectivity and the recognition of error and subjectivity; and a concern with and conjectures about the nature of reality in everyday and scientific contexts are constituted as intelligible possibilities. This work is not accessible within the space (Spencer 1982) of conventional inquiry for the work constitutes the space of conventional inquiry.

Sociology, like the rest of the sciences, and, for that matter, like all modes of inquiry, is directed to the explication and analysis of a world whose 'thereness' is essentially non-problematic. It is precisely in and through inquiry's preoccupation with a world already there that the network of assumptions and practices through which the thereness of the world is created is disattended. Inquiry gains a world but loses the work of worlding. For radical inquiry, by contrast, the phenomenon *par excellence* is not the world *per se* but worlding, the work whereby a world *per se* and the attendant concerns which derive from a world *per se* – truth and error, to mention two – are constructed and sustained.

Almost at its inception, sociology accepts and enters into a network of assumptions and concepts – an ontological space – which severely circumscribes what it might entertain as a phenomenon. Specifically, in entering the space in which a 'knower', 'inquirer', or 'subject' (in corporate or individual form) is conceptualized as striving to 'know', 'understand', or 'observe' what is variously designated as 'social facts', 'nature', or 'reality', the construction of that very ontological space is lost as a phenomenon. These conceptual distinctions, the assumptions from which they derive and the reasoning which they cultivate are precluded as topics for they comprise the space within which sociology will naively dwell. We may gain a deeper sense of how sociology comes to forfeit these assumptions as phenomena if we consider the moments at which sociology decides to employ these assumptions as resources.

In their rudimentary stages the social sciences often know themselves as a distinctive mode of inquiry by reference to practical inquiry, that is to say, the investigations carried out by the 'man in the street'. In turn, practical inquiry's recognition of itself as practical depends on the availability of contrasting alternatives, one of which is scientific inquiry. The two modes of inquiry are in this way dialectically dependent upon

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one another for the reflexive sense of themselves.¹⁰ The presumed superiority of scientific inquiry requires reference to a perfectly matched inferiority of practical inquiry. When, for example, 'underlaborer'¹¹ philosophers of science, such as Earnest Nagel (1961), explicate the superiority of science, they do so by reference to the relatively impoverished character of practical investigations.¹² Thus, for instance, when the virtuosity of science's systematical nature is displayed, it is displayed in contrast to the more or less chaotic character of commonsense knowledge. The strengths of science are established by contrast to the weakness of alternative modes of inquiry. Because of the dialectic which obtains among modes of inquiry in order for them to be recognizable as distinctive and differentially valued modes, scientific and practical inquiry are cast into essentially competitive roles (Zimmerman and Pollner, 1970). The emergence of science casts its now-to-be-seen alternatives into the role of would-be aspirants in the race toward definitive knowledge of the particular domain to which the science is addressed.

We can get a sense of the essentially competitive relation between sociology and commonsense investigation from Durkheim's (1951) consideration of the potential uses of officially imputed causes of suicide (cf. Atkinson 1978). 'It seems natural to profit by this already accomplished work,' Durkheim speculates, for the official compilations, 'apparently show us the immediate antecedents of different suicides' (p. 148). But Durkheim's optimistic conjectures are short lived:

what are called statistics of the motives of suicides are actually statistics of the opinions concerning such motives of officials, often of lower officials, in charge of this information service. Unfortunately, official establishments of fact are known to be often defective even when applied to obvious material facts comprehensible to any conscientious observer and leaving no room for evaluation. How suspect must they be considered when applied not simply to recording an accomplished fact but to its interpretation and explanation! To determine the cause of a phenomenon is always a difficult problem. The scholar requires all sorts of observations and experiments to solve even one question. Now, human volition is the most complex of all phenomena. The value of improvised judgments, attempting to assign a definite origin for each special case from a few hastily collected bits of information is, therefore, obviously slight. As soon as some of the facts commonly supposed to lead to despair are thought to have been discovered in the victim's past, further search is considered useless, and his drunkenness or domestic unhappiness or business troubles are blamed, depending on whether he is supposed recently to have lost money, had home troubles or indulged a taste for liquor. Such uncertain data cannot be considered a basis for explanation for suicide.

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Moreover, even if more credible, such data could not be very useful, for the motives thus attributed to the suicides, whether rightly or wrongly, are not their true causes (pp. 148–9).

According to Durkheim, the lay member is incompetent to determine the motivation of any particular suicide. Further, the motives, whether correctly assessed or not, are not the true causes of suicide. The lay member of the society is an incompetent investigator of specious circumstances. The lay member is naive with respect to the procedural aspects of investigation as well as to what it is that ought properly be investigated in the first place.

The naivete attributed to the lay member is not an incidental feature of the social sciences. The distinctiveness of the sciences requires reference to that which the sciences are not. The contrast is absolutely vital to the sense and possibility of a social science. Why, after all, should not ordinary talk about the social structures be adequate accounts of those structures? The answers to these questions and the idea of science itself turn upon the sciences' capacity to reveal modes of practical inquiry as essentially unable to arrive at 'universally valid truths' or at the structure of 'nature as it truly and objectively is'. Indeed, the notion of 'nature as it really is in and of itself', that goal toward which the sciences presumably converge, is itself invidiously juxtaposed to the now-to-be-seen vulgarity of the practical man's regard for nature. The idea of a social *science*, in short, is essentially dialectic. Its formulation as a *modus operandi* in the world is established by reference to what it is not and, because part of what it is not are the practices of the practical man, the idea of science is imbued with irony. The sciences, in the way in which they are what they are, make reference to the inadequacy of alternative modes of addressing the world.

In precisely what respect are the practices of the practical man portrayed as inferior to those of the sciences? The fact that they are both modes of inquiry should alert us to the major dimensions of the invidious contrast. Specifically, commonsense and scientific inquiry are cast in competitive relations with respect to their ability to discern and describe 'real', 'factual', or 'objective' structures of a particular domain. The nature of the competition is clearly articulated in Durkheim's (1938) *The Rules of Sociological Method*. As will be recalled, sociology is given the vision of its possibility by declaration of a factual order which is social and hence not within the province of psychology or biology, and a social order which is factual and hence demanding of methods of inquiry able to retrieve and make observable 'real' (as opposed to specious or

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imagined) structures. The lay member's grasp and observation of these social facts is hopelessly infused by *a priori* concepts, argues Durkheim.

At the moment when a new order of phenomena becomes the subject matter of a science, these phenomena are already represented in the mind not only by rather definite perceptions but also by some kind of crudely formed concepts. Before the first rudiments of physics and chemistry appeared, men already had some notions concerning physicochemical phenomena which transcended mere perception, such as are found, for example, mingled in all religions. The reason for this is that thought and reflection are prior to science, which merely uses them more methodically. Man cannot live in an environment without forming some ideas about it according to which he regulates his behavior. But, because these ideas are nearer to us and more within our mental reach than the realities to which they correspond, we tend naturally to substitute them for the latter and to make them the very subject of our speculations. Instead of observing, describing, and comparing things, we are content to focus our consciousness upon, to analyze, and to combine our ideas. Instead of a science concerned with realities, we produce no more than an ideological analysis. To be sure, this analysis does not necessarily exclude all observation. One may appeal to the facts in order to confirm one's hypotheses or the final conclusions to which they lead. But in this case, facts intervene only secondarily as examples or confirmatory proofs; they are not the central subject of science. Such a science therefore proceeds from ideas to things, not from things to ideas (Durkheim 1938: 14).

As realities *sui generis*, the social structures are demanding of a methodology which will mirror their features. The objectivity of the world *qua* objectivity requires objective procedure. It is at this point that practical investigations are found wanting – precisely because of their dialectically discovered practicality. That is, they are wanting because while they are concerned with the world – they do, for example, concern themselves with the causes of suicide as evidenced by the availability of the statistics whose utility Durkheim dismisses – they are infiltrated with prejudices and practicality. Practical inquiry fails because of an imperfect methodology; that imperfection being constitutively revealed when lay inquiry is considered under the auspices of the idea and ideals of science. Sociology as a science was to remedy these faults so as to be able to objectively explicate the order of affairs, 'social facts', which were only erroneously or subjectively analyzed and known by lay members.

The grounds and the terms of the implicit competition between the sciences and practical inquiry is furnished by the notion of the 'world'.¹³ The sciences, like the modes of inquiry to which they are juxtaposed, are conceived as mutually oriented to an essentially objective nature. The substantive content of the world varies from discipline to discipline, of course, but in each instance the world is conceived to have an existence