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Mary F. Rogers

Excerpt

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## Introduction

What is needed is not the insistence that one see with his own eyes; rather it is that he not explain away under the pressure of prejudice what has been seen.

Edmund Husserl, "Philosophy as a Rigorous Science"

Phenomenology strikes most sociologists as an enigma. Because their acquaintanceship with it derives from social scientists and neopositivistic philosophers, many sociologists view phenomenology as nonscientific or even antiscientific. In that vein also lie beliefs that phenomenology is subjectivistic, intuitive, or esoteric. I aim to undercut those misconceptions by illuminating the fruitfulness of phenomenology for sociologists. That is the first broad purpose of this study.

Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), who laid the foundations of phenomenology, worked during the early twentieth century when the grounds and limits of knowledge were becoming scholarly uncertainties. While he was developing phenomenology, epistemological crises impelled Marxists-Leninists toward the sociology of knowledge, John Dewey toward experimental logic, and Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead toward reconsiderations of the foundations of mathematics and symbolic logic.<sup>1</sup> Husserl's response to the crisis of knowledge represents a philosophy only in the loosest sense.<sup>2</sup> Initially, we grasp more by approaching phenomenology as a set of methods for disclosing our presuppositions about human experience, conceptualizing about human experience, and describing its invariant elements.

The phrase "human experience" hints at Husserl's ambition. He investigated the breadth it implies: thinking, doubting, imagining, remembering, anticipating, meaning, perceiving, verifying, willing. He also treated familiarity and strangeness, habit and taken-for-grantedness, time-consciousness, corporeality, intersubjectivity, the self, and common sense. Those activities, givens, and accomplishments presuppose human consciousness. Most fundamentally, Husserl's phenomenology proffers methods for studying

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human consciousness and its consequences. His phenomenology “hinges upon the acknowledgment of an experiential order, born by consciousness, in which and through which objects, events, and relations achieve their status as features of awareness.”<sup>3</sup> Generically, phenomenology emphasizes the primacy of consciousness.<sup>4</sup>

Phenomenology differs from a “philosophy of internal experience,”<sup>5</sup> since it rejects the dichotomies of interiority-exteriority and subjectivity-objectivity. It also contrasts with speculation, since it examines “things themselves” *only as* they present themselves to consciousness. Devices called “reductions” constitute the methods of phenomenology. Their disciplined use establishes a radical empiricism capable of describing human experience and its invariant features.

Phenomenology also stands distinct from existentialism. Yet the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Paul Ricoeur is sometimes called the “second school of phenomenology.”<sup>6</sup> Husserl’s later studies stimulated the existentialism (or existential phenomenology) that derives from Martin Heidegger, one of Husserl’s students and colleagues. Husserl’s concept *Lebenswelt* (“life-world”) links his phenomenology with existentialism.

In general, existentialists (or existential phenomenologists) emphasize the unique tension between “essence” and “existence” that marks the human condition. They address the conduct of life, particularly choice making, the exercise of responsibility and freedom, and the drive for authenticity. Their work also exhibits a hermeneutical bent.<sup>7</sup> Finally, existentialists are likelier than (other) phenomenologists to treat the moral and political dilemmas human beings inescapably face. Although the existentialist perspective is sociologically relevant,<sup>8</sup> limitations of space and time preclude my discussing it here. Thus I draw on existential phenomenologists only peripherally, focusing instead on Husserl’s phenomenology and its post–World War II development by such scholars as Alfred Schutz, Aron Gurwitsch, Maurice Natanson, and Thomas Luckmann.

Phenomenology is no panacea for whatever philosophical poverty and ambiguity infect sociology. Yet it does offer superior philosophical advantages. The first is its open-endedness. Phenomenological results are not additive; each phenomenologist is a “downright beginner” who must reconstruct other phenomenologists’ findings.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, phenomenology is more a flexible orienting frame than a fixed interpretive scheme. It imposes no specific worldview. “The things themselves” and one’s own perpetual beginnings are the primary resources for arriving at phenomenology. The

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other principal advantage of phenomenology is its encompassing applicability. In principle, every aspect of human experience lies within its scope. Phenomenology can illuminate whatever individuals experience.

Alongside those advantages lie methodological challenges. Doing phenomenology requires taking as little as possible for granted. In fact, phenomenological methods aim at eliminating what the investigator takes for granted so that “things themselves” appear without the distorting influence of presuppositions. The use of phenomenological methods culminates, then, in suspending the presuppositions that make up the “pressure of prejudice” Husserl opposed.

I shall begin by sharing the observations and judgments that led me to phenomenology. In Chapter 1 I examine some classical and contemporary critiques of sociology. Those critiques converge on issues phenomenology clarifies. Thus some long-standing critical tensions within sociology imply that our discipline leans toward phenomenology as a helpful philosophical frame. Chapter 2 focuses on consciousness and constitution, activities at the heart of Husserl’s concerns. Those processes necessitate attention to time-consciousness, identity, objectivity, horizon, typification, and givenness. In Chapter 3 I turn to meaning, experience, and the self in relation to human consciousness. Chapter 4 examines how phenomenologists mesh the ideas of sociality, typification, anonymity, and the “natural attitude.” That chapter treats the *Lebenswelt* or world of everyday life. Of necessity that world is a collective buildup that we all presuppose in all our experiences.<sup>10</sup> In Chapter 5 I discuss phenomenological methods and show how phenomenology relates to empiricism.

On the preceding grounds I undertake a phenomenological critique of ethnomethodology in the second part of this study. Although sociologists often view ethnomethodology as a phenomenological sociology, it bears only a tenuous relationship to phenomenology. Some ethnomethodologists do, however, claim a phenomenological orientation as well as intellectual debts to phenomenologists. Thus a phenomenological critique of ethnomethodology makes sense. I undertake that critique to demonstrate that ethnomethodology departs from its (presumed) phenomenological beginnings and fails to illustrate the sociological application of the phenomenological frame.

In Chapter 6 I survey the origins of ethnomethodology as well as the constructs, major findings, and methodological strictures ethnomethodologists offer. Chapter 7 represents a critical application of the phenomenological frame to ethnomethodological methods, conceptualizations, and analyses.

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In addition, I indicate phenomenological omissions in ethnomethodological interpretations of the common-sense world. Together, Chapters 6 and 7 accomplish the second broad aim of this study.

Chapter 8 gathers together the lessons implied in the preceding chapters. Using “social action” as a focal concept, I specify the necessary dimensions of a phenomenological sociology. I believe such a sociology has implicit roots in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sociology. In fact, it captures the motives our predecessors repeatedly renewed in refusing narrow interpretations of social reality. The idea of a phenomenological sociology is, I maintain, part of our sociological heritage and its loss reflects crucial compromises.

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## 1. The struggle toward critical unity in sociology: a phenomenological resolution?

There would remain for Sammler, while he lasted, that bad literalness. . . . Endless literal hours in which one is internally eaten up. Eaten because coherence is lacking. Perhaps as a punishment for having failed to find coherence.

Saul Bellow, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*

It is simplistic to assume that once an enemy has been identified, those who made the identification are liberated.

Maurice Natanson, *Phenomenology, Role, and Reason*

Philosophy and sociology have long lived under a segregated system which has succeeded in concealing their rivalry only by refusing them any meeting-ground, impeding their growth, making them incomprehensible to one another, and thus placing culture in a situation of permanent crisis.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*

Today Westerners experience a serious rift between knowledge and action.<sup>1</sup> Their experiences commonly suggest that greater knowledge only aggravates the desire for effective, satisfying action. Political knowledge finds few effective outlets; a college education infrequently leads to professional opportunities; insights into institutionalized racism fail to eradicate it; knowledge of the causes of chronic unemployment does not employ its victims. Under such circumstances increased knowledge breeds skepticism, frustration, and a sense of impotence. Vacuous private lives and impoverished public life result.

Modern anti-intellectualism is but one expression of the commonplace judgment that knowledge, after all, fails us. Common-sense experiences imply that knowledge is no substitute for the close social bonds lost to modern social organization and industrial technology. Rather, the knowledge explosion intensifies the senses of finitude and powerlessness. Ultimately,

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most individuals confront a peculiarly modern choice. They may bear the frustrations of knowledge with whatever grace they can muster or they may escape the shallowness of ignorance with whatever diversions they can afford.

Most individuals sidestep an irrevocable or self-conscious commitment to one of those alternatives. Since “dignity is as compelling a human need as food or sex” and knowledge in modern societies commands dignity,<sup>2</sup> acquiring and displaying knowledge remain important to most individuals. Thus whatever their attitudes toward knowledge, individuals pursue it, however unsystematically. Yet the experience of a gulf between knowledge and action persists. Its most acute manifestation is the crisis of legitimacy in Western societies today.<sup>3</sup>

That crisis shapes our self-conceptions, our perceptions of other human beings, and our institutional structures. It stamps our actions, interactions, and reactions. The twentieth-century crisis of legitimacy *rests on* skepticism about the value of reason and the possibility of truth; it *expresses* distrust of the bearers of authority. Our sociological predecessors foresaw the crisis we face. Twentieth-century sociologists have extended their insights, often citing social scientists’ own contributions, whether by commission or omission, to the malaise of Western culture. Their criticisms imply that phenomenology can ease the divisive tensions within sociology and within the world it helps to shape.

### **Sociology and the Crises**

The gulf people experience between knowledge and action concerns the divide between scientific knowledge and everyday action. The knowledge that disappoints people – the knowledge that strikes them as *practically* futile – is scientific knowledge. When their disenchantment with technical knowledge grows, people incline to question the rights of those whose authority rests on claims to superior (i.e., scientific) knowledge. No matter how inchoate, people’s doubts about the worthwhileness of scientific knowledge exacerbate the difficulty of efficiently wielding authority. Authorities then face a crisis that raises their costs or reduces their options. Although “crisis of legitimacy” implies bureaucratic concerns with efficient control, its most serious ramifications are cultural rather than bureaucratic in nature. Specifically, the crisis of legitimacy implies a Crisis of Reason. To the extent that bearers of formal authority symbolize Reason in modern Western societies, doubts about their rights to dominate represent skepticism

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about Reason itself. Reason is threatened with disrepute. Every crisis of legitimacy carries that threat.

Significantly, the knowledge–action gulf also points to a Crisis of Common Sense in modern everyday life. That gulf rests on a pervasive, though subtle, denigration of nonscientific knowledge. It ignores the routine, sometimes striking successes common-sense knowledge generates. Indeed, in modern everyday life common-sense knowledge often goes unrecognized. At best, people assign it a grossly inferior status in relation to scientific or technical knowledge. As they cope with their disappointment in scientific knowledge, then, modern people tend also to repudiate their common-sense knowledge. Ironically, by its very nature that knowledge more often than not leads to effective action in everyday life. Trained to denigrate it, however, people who sense the divide between scientific knowledge and practical action cannot help but experience a woeful gulf between “knowledge” and action. Hand in hand with the Crisis of Reason, then, is a Crisis of Common Sense. At one and the same time people doubt the scientific knowledge our culture emphasizes as a cure-all and overlook or denigrate their common-sense knowledge.

More than a century ago some social scientists foresaw Crises of Common Sense and Reason as long-term consequences of rationalization. They concerned themselves with the effects of bureaucratization, science, and rational action on everyday life. Their analyses not only anticipated cultural crises but also implied the likely utility of phenomenology in reorienting scientific activity and thus alleviating those crises.

I begin with Karl Marx and Max Weber as spokespersons for nineteenth-century social scientists. The spread of Marx’s notions concerning alienation and the social conditioning of knowledge stimulated the Crisis of Reason. His concepts also enabled people to describe the experiences that collectively constitute the Crisis of Common Sense. Here, however, my interest lies with Marx’s observations about the separation of science from practical life, the status of reason, and the effects of bureaucracy on everyday cognition.

Marx held that all theoretical and practical consciousness has reason as its latent foundation. He advocated the “reform of consciousness,” efforts to help individuals understand their own acts of consciousness.<sup>4</sup> Such efforts require recognition of the close but increasingly opaque relationship between science and practical activity. Fundamentally, both scientific and nonscientific activities aim toward rational solutions to life’s mysteries through “human practice *and the comprehension of this practice.*”<sup>5</sup> Marx argued that “one basis for life and another for science is *a priori* a falsehood.”<sup>6</sup> When separated from practical activity, scientific inquiry is liable to misrepresent reality.

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Its object must influence scientific inquiry: “Not only the result but also the route belong to truth.”<sup>7</sup> Neglect of those principles leads to “mystical results.”<sup>8</sup> Science must, then, prove itself practically. “In practice, man must prove the truth, that is, [the] actuality and power . . . of his thinking.”<sup>9</sup> Marx understood the loss of credibility science risks when it contradicts (or appears to contradict) the logic of people’s practical experiences. Yet he regarded such (apparent) contradictions as mere by-products of inappropriate methods of inquiry, not as inevitable consequences of scientific activity.

Marx also implied the likely consequences of the bureaucratization of science and knowledge. He stressed that a bureaucracy is a “hierarchy of information.” Individuals’ positions in a bureaucracy determine the quantity and quality of their information. In a bureaucracy the structure of authority shapes knowledge; bureaucratic rationality molds bureaucratic knowledge.<sup>10</sup> And Marx decried bureaucratic rationality. Stressing the need to distinguish what bureaucracy actually is from how it regards itself, he argued that bureaucracies are “web[s] of practical illusions.” They confuse form with content and vice versa; transbureaucratic purposes become narrow bureaucratic ones.<sup>11</sup> Large-scale organizations create, in other terms, their own (ultimately false) forms of rationality and falsify the practical by spawning illusions about its limits. Marx’s perspective suggests a long-term paradoxical trend: on the one hand a denigration of mundane knowledge, and on the other hand a disparagement of “rationalized” organizations and the knowledge they artificially separate from everyday life. In sum, the “rational” separation of bureaucrats (officials, experts, administrators) from practical people, whose lives largely contradict bureaucratic logic, leads to Crises of Common Sense and Reason.

Weber’s findings about bureaucratization and disenchantment are well known. “Bureaucratic administration means fundamentally the exercise of control on the basis of knowledge” that is technical and continuously supplemented.<sup>12</sup> Bureaucratic knowledge is also “secret”<sup>13</sup> because of the “striving for power.”<sup>14</sup> The conjunction of bureaucratic knowledge, power, and durability leads to disenchantment not only with bureaucracy but also with science and technical knowledge. Weber’s scheme also treats the relationship between legal-rational and charismatic authority. His analyses of charismatic leaders exploiting widespread “distress,” the formation of their discipleships, charismatic domination, and the routinization of charisma account for how social orders contain disenchantment, accommodating themselves to crises of legitimacy.<sup>15</sup> Thus Weber forecasted not only the



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problem of maintaining legitimacy but also bureaucratic “solutions” to that problem.<sup>16</sup>

Marx’s and Weber’s ideas converge on disenchantment as a bureaucratic by-product. In their discussions of bureaucracy, though, they diverge on the topic of rationality. For Weber “rational” meant maximal efficiency and the exercise of control through knowledge.<sup>17</sup> Marx took issue with that narrow a conception. In addition, the two thinkers disagree about the humanistic merits of science. Weber mildly chastised those who demand from science more than “artificial abstractions” and “analyses and statements of facts.”<sup>18</sup> But Marx criticized sciences that artificially abstract from everyday life. In general, Weber viewed disenchantment and crises of legitimacy as consequences of frustrated needs and the structural divide between bureaucrats and other members of society. Although Marx agreed with that judgment, he also emphasized the biases of science that promote bureaucratic sluggishness in the face of Crises of Common Sense and Reason.

Twentieth-century sociologists have further detailed the problems that preoccupied Marx and Weber. During the 1930s, both Karl Mannheim and Robert Lynd propounded ideas reminiscent of Marx’s and Weber’s. Like Marx, Mannheim decried the tendency for exactness to supersede “knowledge of things,” overshadowing the question of which method best suits a problem.<sup>19</sup> Concerned also about the weak philosophical foundations of American sociology, Mannheim stressed the dangers of aphoristically formulating research problems. He hinted that a reflexive element minimizes the play of social factors in research. Lynd focused more on how sociology should enhance culture than on how culture shapes sociology. His concerns included the division of social scientists into scholars and technicians, their concentration in bureaucracies of higher learning, the ahistorical and aphoristical character of American social science, and the loss of “the person” in social-scientific research. Most of all, Lynd’s *Knowledge for What?* pleaded for responsible social science.<sup>20</sup> Lynd believed the social sciences should be “judged by their adequacy in helping man to resolve his difficulties.”<sup>21</sup>

C. Wright Mills provided the most impassioned exposition of the shortcomings of contemporary sociology. In *The Sociological Imagination* he described “grand theory” unable to touch base with concrete reality and abstracted empiricism unable to advance a credible epistemology. Mills accounted for those faults by emphasizing bureaucracy and careerism. Stressing the cultural responsibilities of the social sciences, Mills underscored the importance of the “sociological imagination” in people’s everyday lives.

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What they need, *and what they feel they need*, is a quality of mind that will help them to use information *and to develop reason* in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within them.<sup>22</sup>

The promise of sociology, according to Mills, lies in honoring the “human variety” through interdisciplinary, historical, and comparative studies. Thereby social scientists fulfill their distinctive cultural tasks.

Finally, Mills addressed the perilous status of reason and freedom:

Great and rational organizations – in brief, bureaucracies – have indeed increased, but the substantive reason of the individual has not. Caught in the limited milieu of their everyday lives, ordinary men often cannot reason about the great structures – rational and irrational – of which their milieu are subordinate parts. Accordingly, they often carry out series of apparently rational actions without any idea of the ends they serve, and there is increasing suspicion that those at the top as well only pretend to know. The growth of such organizations, within an increasing division of labor, sets up more and more spheres of life, work, and leisure in which reasoning is difficult or impossible. . . .

Science, it turns out, is not a technological Second Coming. That its techniques and its rationality are given a central place in a society does not mean men live reasonably and without myth, fraud, and superstition. . . .

The increasing rationalization of society, the contradictions between such rationality and reason, the collapse of the assumed coincidence of reason and freedom – these developments lie back of the rise into view of the man who is “with” rationality but without reason.<sup>23</sup>

Thus Mills implied a Crisis of Common Sense and a Crisis of Reason. People feel the inadequacy of their knowledge as well as the need for a “quality of mind” capable of clarifying their worlds and their selves. Instead of promoting that quality of mind, sociologists now *function* within bureaucracies whose rationality stymies the sociological imagination. To that extent their *products* feed extant doubts about the worthiness of reason. Insofar as sociology compromises its promise, then, it aggravates the Crises of Common Sense and Reason.

Mills called for a sociology aware of its responsibilities; a sociology whose language is clear and vibrant; a sociology whose assumptions are explicit and soaked in historical, philosophical, and psychological knowledge; a sociology preoccupied with problems relevant to understanding the human condition rather than with problems easily studied; a sociology that “shuttles between levels of abstraction, with ease and with clarity”;<sup>24</sup> a sociology that fulfills the visions of our predecessors and addresses the needs of our contemporaries.

During the past two decades, the issues Mills raised have continued to spark debate. Mills’s concerns inform the “sociology of sociology,” loosely