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978-0-521-28809-5 - Social Class and the Division of Labour: Essays in Honour of Ilya Neustadt

Edited by Anthony Giddens and Gavin MacKenzie

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# Social class and the division of labour

Essays in honour of  
Ilya Neustadt

edited by

ANTHONY GIDDENS

*Fellow of King's College, Cambridge*

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*Fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge*

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## Foreword

T. H. MARSHALL

Ilya Neustadt was born on 21 November 1915 in Southern Russia, near Odessa. At a very early age his family migrated to Bessarabia, where he went to school. The curriculum appears to have been a comprehensive one including elements both of the social and of the natural sciences. It was largely his wish to develop the latter that led him to embark on a year's course of medicine in Bucharest. It gave him, he says, a lasting interest in biology, but he was not tempted to adopt a medical career. He decided instead to move to the Liège School of Economics, where he obtained his doctorate in 1939 for a thesis on 'International Organisation in Central Europe'.<sup>1</sup> The thesis, a substantial work in diplomatic and legal history, ending with a passionate denunciation of 'the German avalanche', is dismissed by Neustadt today as 'not really sociological'. The most serious rival to the social sciences in his interests at this juncture was music. He was a very promising violinist and for one whole year he combined a full programme at the Conservatoire with the continuation of his political studies. But, although music might well have become his chosen career, he decided otherwise.

It was almost by accident that he turned from politics to sociology. After escaping from Belgium to London, his first intention was to enrol as a graduate student under Harold Laski at the London School of Economics. It so happened that Laski was not available and he was referred instead to Morris Ginsberg, and thus was led to adopt the subject which remained with him throughout his academic career. The thesis for which he was awarded the PhD degree was entitled 'Some Aspects of the Social Structure of Belgium' and was concerned in particular with the distinction between the 'old' and the 'new'

Final corrections were made to this preface on 27 October 1981. With deep regret we have to record that Tom Marshall died shortly afterwards, on 29 November 1981. We should like this book to serve also as a memorial to him.

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middle classes.<sup>2</sup> There followed an interlude in which his most important assignment was to assemble a collection of Russian books in the LSE Library. He remained there until he went as lecturer to Leicester, where his sociological future was finally established.

Neustadt took up his appointment as Lecturer in Sociology in the Department of Economics in Leicester in 1949. His assignment was to teach the sociology special subject of the London External Degree of BSc(Econ). For some three years he discharged these functions single handed, until help came with the arrival of Joe Banks as Assistant Lecturer (who has since returned as Professor) and some three years later with the attachment to the Department of the distinguished German scholar, Norbert Elias. But in these first few years, Neustadt's greatest asset was without doubt the strong support given him by Arthur Pool, the Professor of Economics and Head of the Department to which sociology was attached. The warm welcome he gave to the new arrival helped to win for Neustadt a reaction of benevolent curiosity rather than of suspicion. 'He immediately intrigued us', says Bryan Wilson, one of his first and most distinguished students, 'as much by his own exotic origins as by the mysteries of the subject he was to teach.' He was quite unlike any other member of the faculty. 'He was,' says Wilson, 'by turns highly critical, endlessly time-taking, charming, amusing and irascible.' A tutorial might continue for two or three hours, without regard to the lecturer waiting for a classroom, and studies might be pursued on the lawn, in the pub or in the street. He was always 'exploring ideas, ruminating, in a sense teaching'. Lectures in these early days were a bit unpredictable; a successful lecture was a thrill, both for him and for his audience. It gave full scope to his very individual style in which there was, as he freely admits, more than a touch of the theatrical. The Neustadt image undoubtedly owed a lot to his 'exotic origins', but it would be erroneous to describe him as a 'foreigner'; he was – and at heart still is – a cosmopolitan. This showed itself most obviously in his effortless command of languages. The story is told that once, when somebody asked whether anyone present had read the whole of '*Das Kapital*', Ilya answered quietly: 'I have; in French.' 'Why in French?' 'Because I couldn't find it in Russian.'

If not a 'foreigner', was he an 'eccentric'? In that respect, too, the image is misleading. Eccentricity does not match with the purposeful dedication to a cause that Neustadt exhibited from the first. And you do not lift a university department from the level of nought to a shade short of thirty by eccentricity alone. It requires shrewd, unremitting and determined attention to business of a very practical kind, as Vice-

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Chancellors who have worked with him are willing to testify. In the competition for scarce resources, says Sir Charles Wilson, 'Ilya managed to get at least his share and sometimes more', thanks to 'a useful combination of obsessive determination and charm in his approach to colleagues'. Or, as Sir Fraser Noble put it, 'he encouraged the really bright young people, and he nursed the weaker brothers and sisters and fought like a tiger for their interests'. This might become exasperating at times for a wholly sympathetic Chairman with other matters to attend to. The game was played – and it did have something of the flavour of a game – without malice.

Much of what I have just said applies in particular to the period after which Neustadt had been given the official title of Head of Department (in 1959) and still more so when he became Professor in 1962. It is significant that Neustadt should have chosen 'Teaching Sociology' as the title of his Inaugural Lecture<sup>3</sup> – not the most usual angle from which to launch a professorial dissertation. But he had good grounds for doing so. For teaching was not only something that he did supremely well, but it was also, as used by him, the best way of explaining how the most fundamental principles of his subject could be imparted to his students. John Goldthorpe, seeking to discover the special quality of Neustadt's teaching style, suggests that it might be described as 'sociological good taste'; nothing slovenly, nothing makeshift, no cutting of corners, no jumping ahead before the foundations have been thoroughly grasped. It is probably in the seminar or small group that this method of teaching is most clearly exemplified, by relentless probing and Socratic questioning until in the end out of the teaching of sociology there emerge the principles of sociology, not incidentally but explicitly. Neustadt himself contributed richly to these probing questions, and not only in the classroom. At breakfast, in the garden or out walking, the familiar voice could be heard saying: 'I have a sociological problem.' Never just 'a problem'; always a 'sociological' one, which should imply that he is prepared to say what sociology is and what it is not: it is identifiable.

There is much talk in the Inaugural Lecture about science and its attributes, but it is not suggested that sociology is 'a science' and it would indeed be foolish to start that particular hare. The phrase which seems to me most accurately to express Neustadt's meaning is 'a scientific discipline', and it is precisely in the context of the teaching of sociology that he uses it. It may be said that medicine is not 'a science' but it is scientific, by virtue of being a 'discipline'. What this conveys is well suggested in a phrase used by Elias when he speaks of 'the highly specialised training embodied in the conceptual tools,

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the basic assumptions, the method of speaking and thinking which scientists use'.<sup>4</sup> A discipline of this kind is a means of extending the area of 'detachment' as against the area of 'involvement' (the terms used by Elias in this article), and thus of increasing the possibility of preserving standards of objectivity and scientific integrity in a field in which it is particularly difficult to do so without jeopardising the freedom of the sociological imagination. Neustadt insists on the importance of objectivity, but the last thing he would want to do would be to achieve it by putting his students into an intellectual strait-jacket. His approach to the subject is discriminating. He is the implacable enemy not only of the prostitution of a cheap kind of 'popular sociology' to the advancement of political ends; he is also insistent in warning against other kinds of lapse from true objectivity which, though meritorious in intention, can be dangerous in practice. He cites as one example sociologically oriented fiction, which can be very illuminating if properly reassessed, and as another, the impetuous assaults made on social problems by eager students in their desire to find quick and easy solutions.

It is not surprising that Neustadt should pick on Comte to provide a key to the essential substance of sociology, since Comte is probably the writer into whose works Neustadt has delved most deeply. He found it in the passage in which Comte urges us always to keep in mind the need for 'des conceptions et des études d'ensembles'.<sup>5</sup> Neustadt applies this principle at all levels, wherever it is possible to trace the interdependence of social factors and thus to proceed from analysis to synthesis. The 'wholes' revealed by these studies may be elements in the social structure or they may be taken at the macro-sociological level, as by Comte himself, to refer to total societies or cultures. The approach is further elaborated by a passage in the Inaugural Lecture which shows how closely the substance of sociology is linked with the method. Neustadt writes: 'Among the main methodological tools of sociologists are comparisons of societies, past and present, at different stages of development, and in Leicester, particularly, teaching is centred on such comparisons.'<sup>6</sup> Comparison for Neustadt was not only a method of scientific procedure; it was an all-pervasive style of thought, and an element in his cosmopolitan character.

Nothing can better illustrate the significance of these approaches to sociology, as I have attempted briefly to set them out, than Neustadt's experiences in Africa. They began in 1957 when he was invited to spend a year as visiting professor in Ghana, where the teaching of sociology for the London External Degree was already in train. It was

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while he was there that he conceived the idea of promoting a survey of the economy and the social structure, for which the Census projected for 1960 – the first since independence – was expected to provide invaluable material. Neustadt returned in 1960 and 1962 to join with Walter Birmingham, an economist, and E. N. Omaboe, a Ghanaian demographer, to complete the planning, execution and editing of the research. It was published in two volumes in 1966 and 1967.<sup>7</sup> Neustadt was deeply involved in the whole enterprise and this experience, combined with the effect of living and working in the country and among the people of Ghana, was one by which he was both moved and excited. In addition, he was able to visit other parts of Africa, including an assignment by Unesco to Sierra Leone. Neustadt found in Africa a ready-made sociological laboratory. It was, he has said, as if the processes of social evolution described by Durkheim and Weber were being enacted under one's eyes, but with the motions accelerated. The immediacy of change was, he thought, something that most anthropologists missed, because they had too static a conception of social structure. Neustadt started from change and went on to find out how social institutions and individual personalities could be adjusted to it. As a young man said to him in Accra, when the talk was all about 'political emancipation' and 'responsible citizenship', 'we also want to be *subjectively* independent'.

The outstanding feature of what may be called the legacy of Leicester is undoubtedly the remarkably high proportion of teachers of sociology in British universities whose careers in sociology began in Neustadt's Department in Leicester. This is not just something one can find out if one troubles to look up the figures; it is a familiar part of the academic landscape, and it was achieved in just over 30 years, starting from scratch. The reputation of the department has been not only a British one, but an international one. This is evinced in two ways. First, by its recognition as a port of call for visiting sociologists from abroad; and secondly, by the international flavour of the staff. It is said that there was a period during which the British-born members of the department were in a minority. Neustadt was not – and would never claim to be – the sole source of this reputation, but he was the impresario who made it all happen. And he made a very definite and powerful personal contribution to the teaching of the subject. I am told that once, when asked what kind of sociology was taught in Leicester, he replied: 'There are only two kinds of sociology – good sociology and bad sociology. We teach good sociology.' I take this to mean that if a subject is really well taught, it cannot long remain a 'bad' subject. Good teaching will either expose it or refine

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### *Foreword*

it. Whereas it is all too easy for a 'good' subject to be badly taught. This is the measure of the teacher's power.

The book to which this memoir provides an introduction has been compiled by a selection of writers all of whom may be said to have participated in some way, as colleagues, students or associates, in what I have called the 'legacy of Leicester', and in this spirit it is dedicated to Ilya Neustadt and his Department. The theme chosen to bring the articles together – class and the division of labour – expresses one of his most central interests. At a time when sociology was dominated by the concept of 'social differentiation', Neustadt stressed the importance of the role of the division of labour in social analysis. This approach has the effect of throwing into relief the asymmetrical relations of power in the institutions of industrialised society and thus helps to amplify the treatment of social division as a sociological problem. The subject of the book is therefore both highly relevant to current sociological thinking and wholly suitable to serve as a tribute to Ilya Neustadt and his work.