

Introduction to Sociology Readings -- Peter Berger Invitation, C. Wright Mills The Promise, Mulcahy Why Study Sociology (from Intro Presentation Assignment)

Invitation to Sociology

Credit: *Invitation to Sociology* by Peter Berger.

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It can be said that the first wisdom of sociology is this: things are not what they seem. This is a deceptively simple statement. It ceases to be simple after a while. Social reality turns out to have many layers of meaning. The discovery of each new layer changes the perception of the whole.

Anthropologists use the term "culture shock" to describe the impact of a totally new culture upon a newcomer. In an extreme instance such shock will be experienced by the Western explorer who is told, halfway through dinner, that he is eating the nice old lady he had been chatting with the previous day--a shock with predictable physiological if not moral consequences. Most explorers no longer encounter cannibalism in their travels today. However, the first encounters with polygamy or with puberty rites or even with the way some nations drive their automobiles can be quite a shock to an American visitor. With the shock may reflect not only disapproval or disgust but a sense of excitement that things can really be that different from what they are at home.

The experience of sociological discovery could be described as "culture shock" minus geographical displacement. In other words, the sociologist travels at home--often with shocking results. People who like to avoid shocking discoveries, who prefer to believe that society is just what they were taught in Sunday school, who like the safety of the rules...should stay away from sociology. People who feel no temptation before closed doors, who have no curiosity about human beings, who are content to admire scenery without wondering about the people who live in those houses on the other side of that river, should probably also stay away from sociology. And people whose interest is mainly in their own conceptual constructions will do just as well to turn to the study of little white mice. Sociology will be satisfying, in the long run, only to those who can think of nothing more entrancing than to understand things human

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.

A few examples of the way in which sociology "looks behind" the facades of social structures might serve to make our argument clearer. Take, for instance, the political organization of a community. If one wants to find out how a modern American city is governed, it is very easy to get the official information about this subject.... However, it would be an exceedingly naive person who would believe that this kind of information provides a rounded picture of the political reality of that community. The sociologist will want to know also the constituency of the "informal power structure." When sociologists study power, they "look behind" the official mechanisms supposed to regulate power in the community.

Let us take one further example. In Western countries, and especially in America, it is assumed that men and women marry because they are in love. 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.

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 the discipline, to debunk social systems. 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 comfortable assumptions, is nevertheless compelled to fly in the face of what is taken for granted.

The Promise (of Sociology)

Credit: Excerpted from *The Sociological*

Imagination by C. Wright Mills. Originally published in 1959

The first fruit of this imagination--and the first lesson of the social science that embodies it--is the idea that the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period, that he can know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in his circumstances. In many ways it is a terrible lesson; in many ways a magnificent one. We do not know the limits of man's capacities for supreme effort or willing degradation, for agony or glee, for pleasurable brutality or the sweetness of reason. But in our time we have come to know that the limits of 'human nature' are frighteningly broad. We have come to know that every individual lives, from one generation to the next, in some society; that he lives out a biography, and that he lives it out within some historical sequence. By the fact of his living he contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of this society and to the course of its history, even as he is made by society and by its historical push and shove. 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... 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.

...Sociological Imagination is the capacity to shift from one perspective to another--from the political to the psychological; from examination of a single family to comparative assessment of the national budgets of the world; from the theological school to the military establishment; from considerations of an oil industry to studies of contemporary poetry. It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self and to see the relations between the two. Accordingly, to understand the changes of many personal milieux (situations/social locations) 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.....

Why Study Sociology?

Credit: Excerpted from **Professor Savino Mulcahy**

What is sociology?

Sociology is the scientific study of human social relationships and structures. Like biologists and other natural scientists, sociologists work by sets of rules through which they evaluate arguments and evidence generated by research. Sociological techniques are quite diversified and include computer simulations, survey research, as well as participant observation. Styles among sociologists vary from strictly scientific to more humanistic, and from applied to theoretical.

Sociology involves the observation and explanation of human behavior in a wide variety of areas. In addition to the specialties of social psychology, political sociology, or economic sociology, which have obvious ties to other social sciences, sociologists study such things as race relations, social stratification, the family, the community, ethnic minorities, sex roles, drugs, crime, population, leisure, sport, aging, mass media, developing nations, organizational structure, language and communication, social movements, and group dynamics.

Is sociology for you?

If you are actively concerned about the world you live in and want to do something constructive and useful in it - whether in law, business, education, medicine, urban or rural planning, etc. - sociology provides an excellent means for understanding how "the system" works. Whether you want to change society radically, modify it, preserve it as it is, or restore it to a bygone era, you benefit greatly from first understanding what the structure of system is, how social order is maintained, and how social change can be affected. Sociology can give you some of that knowledge and can further help you acquire the analytic tools to develop it on your own. Sociology can help individuals develop a mindset that explores beyond the circles that many often travel in.
