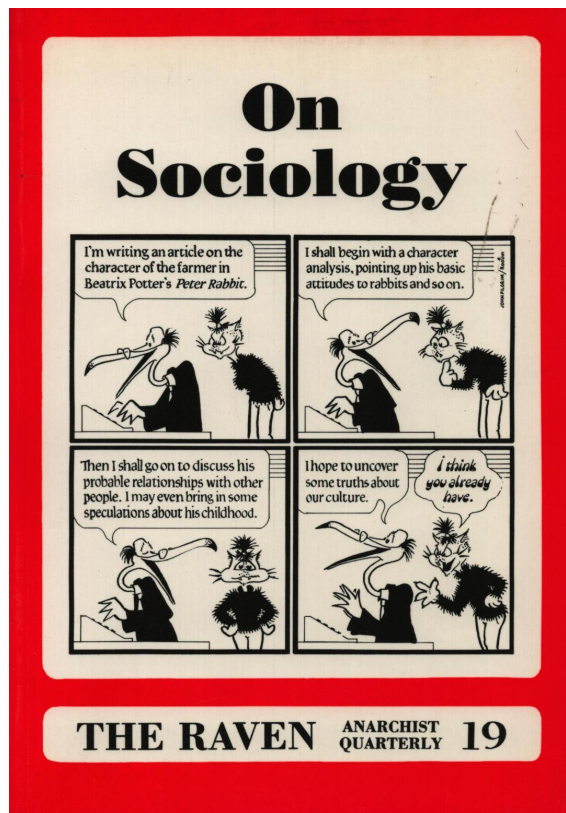


# The Raven: Anarchist Quarterly 19

On Sociology

Various Authors



July - September 1992

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# *John Pilgrim*

## Anarchists and Sociology

Peter Berger, in his entertaining introductory book *Invitation to Sociology*,<sup>1</sup> noted that there were few jokes about sociologists and one at a party would have to get his or her attention the hard way just like everyone else. That was in 1962. Today the partying sociologist defensively describes himself as a geographer, an anthropologist, or even as an economist, in order to avoid ritual abuse about Marxist revolutionaries and jokes about demonstrators as 'sociology students doing their practicals'. The headlines of 1968, and the television success of Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man*, seem to have fixed a stereotype from which few, even anarchists, are immune. "That mild and cautious discipline, sociology, has" in the words of Ian Carter, "acquired a kind of diabolism".<sup>2</sup>

Writers for *The Sun*, for *The Daily Express* and similar inheritors of the old fascist cry 'Down with intelligence', pursuing their perennial quest for hate figures, love this caricature. It is rather more surprising to find it among anarchists, not only because of some clear correspondence between the founders of sociology and the early anarchist thinkers, but because many who are now among sociology's leading academics published some of their early work in Colin Ward's *Anarchy*. If sociology was simply 'Marxist crap' or 'support for a conservative *status quo*' then one might reasonably ask why *Anarchy* published Stan Cohen, Laurie Taylor, David Downes *et al* in the first place.

Well partly it was that the parallels between anarchist and sociological thinking were continuing. There was, though, a further reason. Colin Ward was concerned with 'practical anarchism', with action in society, and sociological insights and findings are valuable to anyone so concerned. They are, or should be, particularly of interest when anarchist and sociological diagnoses still upset people right across the political spectrum who have a vested interest in keeping things as they are. That the scientific discipline so often supports the ideology should be a matter we should celebrate, rather than reacting like a bunch of Tory backbenchers faced with the necessity of reconsidering received ideas.

One polemic that arrived during the preparation for this issue contained ten assumptions about sociology, seven wrong and three debatable. Interested readers can find similar assumptions on the following page under the heading 'What they say about sociology'. This generalised hostility is, on the face of it, odd. No one condemns history as a discipline because Norman Stone is a fan of Margaret Thatcher, or because Eric Hobsbawm is a Marxist. It is taken for granted that their ideological positions will affect what facts they select as important and on that basis we may or may not choose to avoid their books, but we *do not condemn the pursuit of history*.

Sociology with its emphasis on testable knowledge of the associational facts of human life, its tendency to upset received ideas, its concentration on an historically informed analysis of

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Berger, *Invitation to Sociology*, Penguin, 1962.

<sup>2</sup> Ian Carter, *Ancient Cultures of Conceit*, Routledge, 1990.

the present, is more vulnerable. The Greek colonels banned it as Marxist, Stalin condemned it as 'bourgeois ideology', Margaret Thatcher found the questions it asked to be too revealing for her comfort. When we find this unlovely group (not to mention Norman Tebbit) united in their condemnation of an area it is worth asking why. What have they to gain? Or to fear?

The late Ronald Fletcher, in defence of sociology against those who wanted it limited in universities and banned in schools, pointed to part of the answer:

Sociology is needed as a sound basis for any well considered social and political reform. Now, as always from its inception, sociology seeks knowledge and understanding for the making of a better society: in which the promised benefits of ingenuity and inventiveness can be secured while the threats of [human] evil and tendencies toward dehumanisation can be avoided. Sociology is for understanding - and for use; an intellectual effort towards knowledge - for living; it is here that its essential educational value lies.<sup>3</sup>

Twenty six years ago, writing in *Anarchy*, I quoted O. R. McGregor to the effect that those who want change must be sociate, as well as numerate and literate. I was much attacked at the time for trying to hand the conduct of our lives over to experts, by those who, possessing 'The Truth' did not want to bother with evidence or argument. The record and legacy of Margaret Thatcher's regime are a sufficient refutation of that attitude. It is no coincidence that sociology is recovering popularity as the appalling effects of the smothering of evidence and the faking of figures during her 'reign' become obvious.

*Raven 19* looks at the sociological enterprise and points to a few of the many parallels with anarchist thinking. Errico Malatesta, a man as suspicious of scientific priesthoods as of political leaders, can sum up. What he says about science in general could equally well apply to the social sciences, and isn't a bad maxim for anarchists in general.

To the *will to believe*, which cannot be other than the desire to invalidate one's own reason, I oppose the *will to know*, which leaves the immense field of research and discovery open to us ... I admit only that which can be proved in a way which satisfies my reason - and I admit it only *provisionally, relatively*, always in the expectation of new truths which are more true than those so far discovered. No *faith* then in the religious sense of that word.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ron Fletcher, *Sociology: Nature, Scope and Elements*, Batsford, 1980.

<sup>4</sup> *Malatesta: Life and Ideas* edited by V. Richards, Freedom Press, 1965.

## A Note on Contributors

**Harold Barclay** was until recently Professor of Anthropology at the University of Alberta. he has written a number of times for *Freedom* and *The Raven* and is the author of *People Without Government and Culture: The Human Way*, both of which are stocked by Freedom Bookshop.

**Angus Calder** is Reader in Cultural Studies at the Open University in Scotland. The author of *Revolutionary Empire* (Dutton) and *The People's War* (Cape), his paper on Samuel Smiles was specially prepared for this issue of *The Raven*.

**Michael Duane** is the former headmaster of Risinghill Comprehensive and lecturer in Adult Education. Now retired, he is a regular contributor to *Freedom* and *The Raven*, and is the author of *Work, Language and Education in the Industrial State* (Freedom Press).

**John Ebbrell** is a former sociologist "who gave up in despair with the onset of post-modernism". He is currently engaged in writing a book on Bakunin's sociology.

**Ronald Fletcher**, who died while this issue was in preparation formerly held Chairs of Sociology at York, Reading and Essex. A specialist in the development and history of sociology, his previously unpublished paper on Comte's relevance to the modern world was sent to us just before his death.

**David J. Lee** of Essex University is co-author (with Howard Newby) of *The Problem of Sociology* (Hutchinson), still the best available introduction to the discipline. His feature essay on the need for a science of society and the perils of untempered relativism was specially written for this issue of *The Raven*. We are particularly grateful to him for giving so much time, so freely, to this particular project.

**C. Wright Mills**, former Professor of Sociology at Columbia and guru of revolting '60s students, remains a controversial figure. However, *The Sociological Imagination* is still one of the landmarks of sociology, while *The Marxists* remains compulsory reading for anyone interested in finding a critical path through that particular intellectual maze. His projected book on the anarchist tradition had not reached any written form before his early death and attempts by his colleagues, while interesting, did not reach the critical standards he had set.

**Robert Nisbet**, Professor of History and Sociology, is a writer whose anti-state bias has often led to his being classed as a political conservative. Those who do so must have been surprised at his *Social Philosophers*, with its 60-odd page celebration of anarchism and its relevance for the modern world. His *Sociological Tradition* is a fascinating discussion of the basic ideas of sociology which has a number of interesting things to say about anarchism. Both books are highly recommended.

**John Pilgrim** is a former lecturer in sociology who has contributed over the years to *Anarchy*, *Freedom*, *Peace News* and *The Guardian*. He wrote a pioneering essay on the political implications of science fiction and is one of the few sociologists to have had a record in the Top Ten.

**Laurie Taylor** holds the Chair of Sociology at York and writes regularly for *New Statesman & Society*. he was a co-ordinator of the National Deviancy Symposium and, like most of its members,

wrote for *Anarchy*. We would like to thank him for allowing us to reproduce his memoir of Ron Fletcher and modern sociology which first appeared in *New Statesman & Society*.

**Nicolas Walter** is a journalist who has contributed to the anarchist press for more than thirty years, and wrote the pamphlet *About Anarchist* (1969). He has also been active in the peace movement and the humanist movement, and he has run the Rationalist Press Association for eighteen years. His most recent books are the first complete edition of Alexander Berkman's classic *The BolsheVik Myth* (1989) and an authoritative account of *Blasphemy Ancient and Modern* (1990).

**Colin Ward** is the author of some twenty books about anarchism and related subjects, a columnist for *New Statesman & Society*, and was editor for ten years of that remarkably influential Freedom Press publication *Anarchy*. UnChaired, unDoctored, indeed unMastered and unBachelored, he is an example to us all.

# What they say about sociology

"The intervention of sociology in modern affairs tends to propagate a form of anarchism... based on observational research." (Alex Comfort, *Authority and Delinquency*)

"How sociology justifies injustice" (headline in *Freedom*)

"Sociology's essential concepts and implicit perspectives place it close to philosophical conservatism." (R.H. Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition*)

"Non-subjects like sociology" (*Times* leader)

"The political philosophy most consistent with sociology [is] anarchism." (Professor Stanley Cohen, *Visions of Social Control*)

"The social sciences seek to con people into an acceptance of the world as it is." (Brian Bamford, *Freedom*)

"Marxist crap" (Tony Gibson, *Freedom*)

"Sociology is divided between those who are intimately related to computers and those who study the theories of dead Germans." (Peter Berger, 1976)

"Sociology, Social Work, Socialism... it's all the same thing isn't it?" (Tory councillor reported in *The Guardian*)

"Sociology is spending \$50,000 to find the way to a whore house." (American equivalent to above Tory councillor, quoted by R.K. Merton in *Social Theory and Social Structure*)

"Sociology is about demystification... it is therefore also subversive." (Bob Mullen, *Sociologists on Sociology*)

"Sociology is a bibliography in search of a discipline." (Anon, quoted in Lee and Newby, *The Problem of Sociology*)

"Sociology is a unitary science whose field is the study of the forms of association and their interconnections within social systems as wholes." (Ronald Fletcher)

"Sociology as a unified discipline is fast disintegrating and perhaps that's a good thing - allowing new interdisciplinary things to emerge. There's an anarchist sentiment for you." (Stuart Hall, Professor of Sociology Open University)



# *C.W. Mills*

## **The Vision of Sociology**

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. To recognise this task and this promise is the mark of the classic social analyst. It is characteristic of Herbert Spencer - turgid, polysyllabic, comprehensive; of E.A. Ross - graceful, muckraking, upright; of Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim; of the intricate and subtle Karl Mannheim. It is the quality of all that is intellectually excellent in Karl Marx; it is the clue to Thorstein Veblen's brilliant and ironic insight, to Joseph Schumpeter's manysided constructions of reality; it is the basis of the psychological sweep of W.E.H. Lecky no less than of the profundity and clarity of Max Weber. And it is the signal of what is best in contemporary studies of man and society.

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. Whatever the specific problems of the classic social analysts, however limited or however broad the features of social reality they have examined, those who have been imaginatively aware of the promise of their work have consistently asked three sorts of questions:

1. What is the structure of this particular society as a whole? What are its essential components, and how are they related to one another? How does it differ from other varieties of social order? Within it, what is the meaning of any particular feature for its continuance and for its change?
2. Where does this society stand in human history? What are the mechanics by which it is changing? What is its place within and its meaning for the development of humanity as a whole? How does any particular feature we are examining affect, and how is it affected by, the historical period in which it moves? And this period - what are its essential features? How does it differ from other periods? What are its characteristic ways of history-making?
3. What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society and in this period? And what varieties are coming to prevail? In what ways are they selected and formed, liberated and repressed, made sensitive and blunted? What kinds of 'human nature' are revealed in the conduct and character we observe in this society in this period? And what is the meaning for 'human nature' of each and every feature of the society we are examining?

Whether the point of interest is a great power state or a minor literary mood, a family, a prison, a creed - these are the kinds of questions the best social analysts have asked. They are the intellectual pivots of classic studies of man in society - and they are the questions inevitably raised by any mind possessing the sociological imagination. For that 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. *Back of its use there is always the urge to know the social and historical meaning of the individual in the society and in the period in which he has his quality and his being* (our italics).

That, in brief, is why it is by means of the sociological imagination that men now hope to grasp what is going on in the world, and to understand what is happening in themselves as minute points of the intersections of biography and history within society. In large part, contemporary man's self-conscious view of himself as at least an outsider, if not a permanent stranger, rests upon an absorbed realisation of social relativity and of the transformative power of history. The sociological imagination is the most fruitful form of this self-consciousness. By its use men whose mentalities have swept only a series of limited orbits often come to feel as if suddenly awakened in a house with which they had only supposed themselves to be familiar. Correctly or incorrectly, they often come to feel that they can now provide themselves with adequate summations, cohesive assessments, comprehensive orientations. Older decisions that once appeared sound, now seem to them products of a mind unaccountably dense. Their capacity for astonishment is made lively again. They acquire a new way of thinking, they experience a transvaluation of values: in a word, by their reflection and by their sensibility, they realise the cultural meaning of the social sciences.

From C. Wright Mills *The Sociological Imagination*, Oxford University Press, 1959

# *John Ebbrell*

## **Structure and Change: the Central Sociological Problem**

"Man makes his own history" wrote Marx, "but he does not make it out of wholecloth, he makes it out of the material at hand." In this phrase Marx encapsulated the tension between structure and agency that is common to sociology, to the many varieties of Marxism, and to anarchism. The view that human conduct is almost totally shaped by common norms, that action follows and is determined by institutional patterns, was dominant at the very time that Rosa Parkes, tired and fed up, decided she would not give up her seat to a white person, and sparked off the Montgomery bus boycott. The "oversocialised conception of man" Dennis Wrong called it<sup>1</sup> and presumably people like Talcott Parsons would have regarded Rosa Parkes' action as an unfortunate departure from pattern maintenance.<sup>2</sup> Certainly it was a rare enough victory for an individual agent within a social structure that did indeed do much to enforce the powerlessness of the American Black.

The founding fathers of sociology, Comte, Marx, Weber and Durkheim, developed the now commonplace view that men were held and sustained within the confines of their social environment. Like Kropotkin and Bakunin they saw that the pattern of people's lives had their causal explanation in the structure of society. Once outrageous, this view had become received wisdom by the '50s and perhaps was given its most extreme formulation by Andrew Hacker when he wrote:

There is no point in discussing power unless one explores the sources of that power. This needs to be stressed because there is strong reason to believe that the institutional structure determines the behaviour of the men who hold positions in it. Put it another way, it does not really matter who the office holders are as individuals; anyone placed in such an omce would have much the same outlook and display much the same behaviour.<sup>3</sup>

This is part of a discussion of America's corporate elite but does contain within it the germ of the anarchist idea that no man is good enough to be trusted with power over any other man. Structure is seen as the main determinant of behaviour and is defined, as the pattern of roles, behaviours and patterns that exist independently of a given individual or group. It must include history because, as Peter Berger has noted: "our lives are not only dominated by the inanities

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Wrong, 'The Oversocialised Conception of Man' in *Sociological Theory* edited by Coser and Rosenberg, Macmillan, 1964.

<sup>2</sup> Talcott Parsons, *The Social System*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Hacker, 'Power to do What?' in *The New Sociology* edited by Irving Horowitz, Oxford University Press, 1965.

of our contemporaries but by those of people long since dead"<sup>4</sup> The past therefore is part of the social structure. It is one of the constraints with which the individual has to deal and affects his expectations of the present. We don't individually create the society around us any more than we create the rules and conventions governing the language we use.

This determinist view was not just a sociological convention of the 1950s, it was also an anarchist, or at least a Bakuninist convention of 100 years before. "Socialism is based on determinism" he wrote, "whatever is called human vice and virtue is absolutely the product of the combined action of nature and society. Nature creates faculties and dispositions which are called natural, and the organisation of society develops them, or on the other hand halts or falsifies their development. All individuals ... are at every moment of their lives what nature and society have made of them."<sup>5</sup> In other words for Bakunin, as for the founding fathers of sociology, the individual is the product of society. Bakunin characteristically goes further than even the most determinist of sociologists describing the individual as "absolutely and inevitably determined" in another extract.

This rather depressing view was received wisdom in the early 1960s and appeared to give the impression that individual initiative in social change was all but impossible. Sociology at this time was double damned. On the one hand Tory councillors, *Daily Telegraph* readers and suchlike regarded it as radical because it challenged their conventional wisdom. The refutation of beliefs that the 1944 Education Act had created equality of opportunity, or that poverty had been abolished, created just as much adverse reaction among those unwilling to question their assumptions as earlier suggestions that delinquent behaviour or 'crime' was a cultural product and not a function of original sin. Although Marxism was marginal to sociology at this point the discipline has a 'left wing' reputation among the lay public simply because it tended to show that 'what everybody knew' was, in fact, often wrong.

At the same time the study of sociology tended to have a conservatising effect because it seemed that active attempts at social change were a waste of time. "The enemy of revolution is the necessity to modify cultural patterns as a whole" Comfort had argued and the result, as he warned, could tend "a sort of sociological Fabianism". So Parsonians on the one hand, with their Durkheimian emphasis on social order through pattern maintenance, through to Marxists who took the view that 'no social order ever disappears before all the productive forces for which there is room have been developed' all seemed to be minimising the role of human agency in human affairs. From Marx right across the political spectrum to Talcott Parsons a consensus developed which saw people as mindless infinitely manipulable products of social structures.

Bakunin though, like Marx faced with a similar problem, had written himself a part in the social drama having pointed to the determinism inherent in man as a product of society and he did acknowledge that the relationship was interactive but saw this as "a case of society acting upon itself by means of the individuals comprising it".<sup>6</sup> Here again Bakunin belongs with the founders of sociology. To see people as totally determined is to ignore the ambiguity that lay at the heart of Marx between people as products of society and as makers of history. It is to ignore the Weberian idea of social action and the element of choice within it. Bakunin, Marx, Weber and Freud all felt "that the determinisms to which they pointed could, if grasped, be used as the

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<sup>4</sup> P. Berger, *Invitation to Sociology*, Penguin, 1966.

<sup>5</sup> G. Maximoff, *Political Philosophy of Bakunin*, Free Press, 1953.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

means by which men could liberate themselves from social constraint. Theirs was a sociology of choice as well as of constraint and order.”<sup>7</sup>

The problem lay in the fact that, as Dahrendorf had shown, *homo sociologicus* was itself a construct resulting from the human capacity for reflexive thinking. Thus because people do things for reasons it is argued that they are capable of choosing and pressing for different institutions. The emphasis should be that people achieve change rather than it being something they suffer willy nilly. This is a stance with which many anarchists will sympathise, indeed it is a part of Malatesta’s criticism of Kropotkin, that he was a determinist whose position came close to denying free will. ”Science stops where inevitability ends and freedom begins”<sup>8</sup> is good polemic but, like the post-functionalist voluntarism in sociology, really begs the question. While it brings an element of self direction back into human affairs it tends to ignore, or at least play down, the extent to which the concepts and thoughts of the agents are themselves a product of history and socialisation.

## A Case History: The East End

A look at racism in the East End of London is illuminating here. Immigration was a fact of life and the East End ‘the point of arrival’ for Flemings, Huguenots, Irish, Jews and Pakistanis, none of whom was particularly welcomed ... and ... whose arrival occasioned considerable acrimony”<sup>9</sup>. The Huguenots seemed to have been more welcomed than most and assimilation appears to have been rapid, but not so rapid as to avoid ‘direct action’ by journeyman weavers against wealthier masters in the eighteenth century. These riots, annual events for some years, seem to have been class rather than ethnically based but continued a tradition of conflict (started with riots against Flemings and Italians) from which the area has rarely been free to this day.

Ethnically based trouble reappeared With the Irish and in this respect it is worth noting Frank Parkin’s observation that *in all known instances* where racial, religious, linguistic or even sex characteristics have been used for exclusion purposes the group in question will have been ”*at some time defined as inferior by the state*”.<sup>10</sup> In other words, a structure of statutes and laws (and concomitant attitudes) dating back to the fifteenth century created a background for closure against the Irish while the increasing poverty of Ireland and increasing wealth of England made sure they kept coming. Structural factors then created both hostility and necessity.

The Jews, though, who arrived in large numbers at the end of the nineteenth century, not only had a pre-existing history of exclusion and re-admission to contend with (i.e. they had previously defined as an alien group whose desirability varied according to circumstances) but they arrived at a time when anti-alien feeling was on the boil. Then, as now, there was bad unemployment and a severe housing shortage. ”Harried and hustled all over Europe” Chaim Bermant notes, ”they arrived in a situation where the Jews had been scapegoated for everything from cholera to the Ripper murders and were greeted with less than enthusiasm by the organised working class”. ”We wish you hadn’t come” Ben Tillet is reported as saying, while wealthier and established Jews feared for their precarious status and allowed this fear to overcome their sense of ethnic identity

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<sup>7</sup> D. Atkinson, *Orthodox Consensus and Radical Alternative*, H.E.B., 1971.

<sup>8</sup> V. Richards, *Malatesta: Life and Ideas*, Freedom Press, 1965.

<sup>9</sup> Chaim Bermant, *Point of Anival*, Eyre & Methuen, 1975.

<sup>10</sup> F. Parkin, *Marxism and Class Theory*, Tavistock, 1979.

to the point of supporting the egregious Arnold White, Evans-Gordon and their xenophobic campaigns.

The situation was ripe for scapegoating and groups like the British Brothers League, supported by a lobby of Tory MPs (then as now with a natural predilection for this sort of activity) used multioccupancy, homelessness, high rents, sweating, real or assumed undercutting and other structural problems resulting from free market capitalism to mount a campaign against 'destitute aliens'. What followed was classic group closure with aristocrats, trade union leaders and Tory lobby running a mass local campaign that put the Aliens Restriction Act on the statute book. It also appeared to convince large sections of the indigenous population that group closure (the restriction of access to resources and opportunities to a limited circle of eligibles, and usually entailing the singling out of certain social or physical attributes as a basis for that exclusion) was a suitable response to structural problems caused by the free market economy. Of course, the very passing of the Aliens Act does illustrate that structure can be an enabling as well as a constraining force.

The Act was also an interference with the free market economy as a result of anti-Jewish agitation in the East End. It could be considered as having a class basis in that Jews were thought to be sympathetic to socialism and anarchism, and unionised Jewish workers had supported the 1899 Dock Strike. The latter appears to have had some effect in lessening xenophobia and it could be said that here there was a choice of class identity over ethnic identity - in other words that agency was more important than structure. Against this it could be argued that structural features of a capitalist economy were creating consciousness of a common class position.

In truth reactions were mixed. Jews and trade unionists, not to mention Jewish MPs, vacillated between class and ethnicity. The passing of the Aliens Act can be seen on the one hand as an example of agency bringing about social change in the face of a structure bent on maintaining a 'free labour market', or as a result of a structure which included a tradition of scapegoating and hostility going back at least four hundred years and arguably to the thirteenth century expulsions. The structural context for East End Jews included the English traditions of anti-semitism and general xenophobia. Charles Dilke may have pointed to inherent evils in the structure of capitalism being the real problem. The *Royal Commission on the Aliens Question* may have dismissed all the accusations against the aliens, but these agencies were operating against the weight of structural factors plus the other agencies exacerbating racial conflict who were part of the structure for the new arrivals.

The primary structures were as follows:

1. Problems resulting from the economic structure like the need for a reserve army, the necessity to compete with machinery, and the benefits for some employers of exacerbating ethnic conflict to inhibit solidarity.
2. Geographical concentration at the point of arrival of 'perfect strangers' without religious, linguistic or colonial links to mitigate hostility.
3. A long-standing tradition of xenophobia in England generally and of violent expression of this in the East End.
4. A repressed and exploited native population fearing the worsening of their already appalling condition.

5. Lack of adequate countervailing power to combat xenophobic agents and structures and make common cause with immigrants.
6. The ambivalent attitude of unions, both rank-and-file and leaders.
7. An emerging class consciousness and internationalism.

In summary, then, the xenophobic agencies were operating with massive support from structural factors. Agents making for ethnic harmony could find little structural support, for international class solidarity, insofar as it existed, was itself suspect to the point of being seditious. Which returns us to the centre of the debate about structure and agency and illustrates the relative nature of the concepts. For the immigrant the merging class culture of the East End was part of the structure, perhaps-one of the few welcome parts of the structure, that he encountered. For the Member of Parliament who regarded all unions as, to coin a phrase, 'the enemy within' that very consciousness was an undesirable agent of change.

The history of the East End demonstrates that the free-will/ determinist argument is in the end simplistic. 'The determinists are correct in that primary socialisation sets out language patterns, much of our basic behaviour and to some extent the way we think. For example, a culture where they say 'I took the child for a walk' will have a different attitude to authority to another where the construction has to be 'I went with the child for a walk'. This, though, is not determinism but structuration. Behaviour patterns are strongly indicated but they can be rejected or modified. The key to the relationship between the individual human agent and the determining effect of social structure is history, as Marx, Weber and Bakunin clearly saw. It has been best expressed for the modern reader by Philip Abrams who significantly was both historian and sociologist:

The two-sidedness of society, the fact that social action is both something we choose to do and something we have to do, is inseparably bound up with the further fact that whatever reality society has is an historical reality, a reality in time. When we refer to the two-sidedness of society we are referring to the ways in which, in time, actions become institutions and institutions are in turn changed by action. Taking and selling prisoners becomes the institution of slavery. Offering one's services to a soldier in return for protection becomes feudalism. Organising the control of a large labour force on the basis of standardised rules becomes bureaucracy. And slavery, feudalism and bureaucracy become the fixed external settings in which struggles for prosperity or survival or freedom are then pursued. By substituting cash payments for labour services the lord and peasant jointly embark on the dismantling of the feudal order their great grandparents had constructed.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> P. Abrams, *Historical Sociology*, Open Books, 1982.

***Professor Spratt***  
**Human Groups and Morality:**  
**An Anarchist View?**

This point about groups having standards and spontaneously generating them in the course of the interacting which is the basis of their existence at all, is important from another point of view. Because members of groups conceive of the standards of their groups as outside them individually, because they can be put into words and communicated to a stranger or to a new member, and because they can be a matter of reflection and discussion, one easily gets the idea that they really do come somehow or other from the outside. The individual may have intentions of his own which conflict with the standards of his group and he feels 'coerced'. The standards may, indeed, arouse such reverence that their origin is attributed to some supernatural being. This ... does not happen in smaller groups ... but it does happen in the larger ones of which we are all members. When group standards are thought of as something apart from the interacting of the group members we tend to think of them as somehow 'imposed' upon them. This gives rise to the notion that man is naturally unsocial, and that lawgivers or moralists must come along and rescue him from his nasty brutish ways. *This is nonsense. The generation of, and acceptance of standards which regulate conduct and preclude randomness is ... a pre-requisite of social intercourse. It is not imposed from outside upon it.* (Our italics)

***Human Groups, Penguin, 1969***



*David J. Lee*

## Unreason and Uncertainty in the Practice of Sociology

*When I crossed the frontier I thought:  
More than my house I need the truth  
But I need my house too. And since then  
Truth for me has been like a house and a car  
And they took them*  
Bertold Brecht

I am grateful to *The Raven* for giving me this opportunity to comment on some aspects of the current state of sociology in Britain. For one thing, sociologists always jump at a chance to explain themselves and their discipline. My main concern, however, is with the curious situation which has developed over the last decade or so. These have been the years of the 'conviction politician', advocating and implementing so-called 'free market' or neo-liberal doctrines which I and most of my colleagues in the sociology profession view as fundamentally unsound. Most of us, too, believe that the application of these doctrines to the problems of contemporary Britain has been extremely misguided and we find ourselves contesting many of the empirical claims made by those in charge. The politicians, in their turn, curl the lip derisively whenever a television interviewer mentions the very word 'sociology' to them. For them, sociologists epitomise, along with education specialists, the 'loony left punditry' which they love to deride, claiming, as Norman Tebbit once put it, that 'the chap in the pub with common sense' knows better.

### The Problem of Sociology

The purpose of a special issue like this is to be as informative as possible and so, with apologies to those who already know or think they know, I shall begin by explaining what sociology is about. It is often vaguely identified as the study or science of 'society' - a fairly useless definition. Margaret Thatcher would, I imagine, be surprised to hear that as a sociologist myself, I have absolutely no quarrel with her famous assertion that "There is no such thing as society..."<sup>1</sup> The everyday word 'society' partly describes, partly obscures a set of very familiar experiences we all have and which become more and more puzzling the more we think about them.

The type of experiences I have in mind include the ones we often refer to as being under 'social pressure'. Very diverse examples can be given. We come under social pressure the minute we are born, even beforehand. Social pressure makes us toilet trained, speak, say, English rather than

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<sup>1</sup> She added: "there are only people and families". This is wrong: there is the Conservative Party for a start, a

French, answer to a particular name, think of ourselves as male or female, adopt agnosticism, Anglicanism, Islam... and so on. Not all the pressures are immediately obvious ones like parents, families, friends, etc. Some of the most important influences in any upbringing come in fact from dead people. Not just the ones who write books but the ones who through countless actions built a particular way of life: created, say, the Great British Breakfast and 'good manners', or fought for the vote, free education and health provision.

We are often tempted to think of society as a 'thing' because, of course, it so often does seem to have a life of its own. For example, I was brought up fearing the pantheon of gods called 'Times'. My parents married during the Depression. I grew up during the Second World War and after. Would 'Times' be good now the war was over or would they be bad again? 'Times' resembled the weather. Politicians forecasted them rather badly but they couldn't be controlled. On the whole, though, 'Times' did get better while I was young and we had optimism and the Welfare State. Recently 'Times' have been behaving very oddly. A set of regimes which seemed immovable collapsed. Nearer at home the 'welfare consensus' I grew up with collapsed too and people began to talk about Bad Times again. Without the certainties and optimism of my youth I feel changed inside my head. This feeling, however, must be ten times worse for this years graduates who have studied hard in the expectation of a good job and every vacancy heavily oversubscribed. Obviously there is no such thing as society, but there is also no such thing as the self-contained person either - a point Margaret Thatcher was less ready to admit.

Sociology, then, has the extremely difficult task of identifying and explaining 'the forces exerted by people over each other and over themselves' (Elias, 1970), how these forces grow out of individual actions but at the same time constitute the conditions by which individual actions are shaped. Apart from 'society' there isn't a single word to describe all that, though personally, I am very happy to use a term coined by Emil Durkheim, arguably the founder of sociology as an academic discipline, who spoke of the 'collective consciousness'.<sup>2</sup> That makes our work an extension of social psychology where, instead of being concerned with the individual mind, with basic processes of memory, cognition and learning, and so on, we are on a different level of analysis, studying the myriad ways and forms through which minds affect each other.

However, I'm afraid many of my colleagues will already begin to feel they want to get off my bus. Part of the difficulty of introducing the discipline convincingly is that it does not offer a unified cumulative body of theory and research like some others do. Rather like psychology, it is still divided into a number of research traditions or schools of thought'. 'Collective consciousness' is a term some sociologists don't like at all. Indeed, to join the discipline is like trying to join in a rowdy argument already in progress. One can describe fairly precisely what the argument is about but the chances of hearing one voice at a time or predicting how it will be resolved are fairly slim. Indeed the noise seems to be getting worse because the older traditions have split or cross-red with others. New ones are still being invented. This gives plenty of opportunities to charlatans and also to various critics and enemies who want to make the whole thing look like a waste of time. Below, I want to warn about these voices. Sociology isn't a waste of time and we should ask why its critics, especially in politics, are so anxious to do it down.

The main internal argument in sociology, sometimes referred to as the Structure/Action debate, takes for granted that the relative orderliness of society arises unplanned out of the count-

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reality *sui generis* as she found out shortly after.

<sup>2</sup> This phrase has often wrongly been taken to mean that Durkheim subscribed to a group mind theory. He wrote:

less actions of individuals but that also the relationship is at the same time a two way one: no person is an island. Given that so-called human 'nature' is not the same everywhere, a point which many non-sociologists find hard to take, the problem is to explain how the two processes fit together. There is a bewildering variety of answers, but in practice, the disunity is a stimulus rather than an obstacle if one spends one's time researching substantive issues - education, say, or race relations, or the family. It would no doubt make my article more readable than it is going to be, in fact, if I spent time describing this work. However, there is a very good book by Gordon Marshall recently published which does the job much better than I could. Anyone who wants to know what research sociologists get up to will probably find it a more user-friendly introduction than the average A-level text (Marshall, 1990). Marshall's point is that sociology has had a much better track record of prediction and analysis over the years than its detractors say.

What I think deserves attention here, not merely because it is fundamental but also because it is topical, is the question of the relationship between sociology and what one writer recently has called 'the curse of common sense'. Common sense told us that the earth was flat, that iron ships could not float and that people could not fly (J. Eatwell *Observer*, 26 April 1992, p.28). It is the fount of unimaginativeness and it is very British to have common sense. Sociology, I am pleased to say, is rarely common sense but in that case what sort of sense (if any) is it? I apologise if, in answering the question, the discussion gets a little abstruse in places. Despite that, I am going to be talking about something desperately relevant to us all. We are back to Mr Tebbit and the chap in the pub.

## **Is sociology 'scientific'?**

Anyone unfamiliar with the condition of sociology might have expected sociologists to defend themselves from the Chingford Skinhead by claiming that they practice a rational, even *scientific* academic discipline whose methods and findings, compared with the fumbblings of 'common sense', constitute a more dependable form of knowledge which should be correspondingly respected. After all, we respect astronomers' assertions that the earth goes round the sun and not vice versa, despite what the chap in the medieval tavern thought. But no, the claim that sociology should be a science are, in fact, routinely questioned in the discipline itself.

In Britain this internal critique of sociology takes both a philosophical and a political form. The sociological community has, of course, always included a large and diverse group who are skeptical on philosophical grounds about the scientific pretensions of the subject, both here and elsewhere. They tend to share the so-called 'relativist' conviction that objectivity in social research is impossible and that its findings cannot be free of subjective meanings and values. They also argue that the accumulation of factual evidence to arbitrate between different subjective perspectives is out of the question. Far from being scientific 'facts', the findings of empirical sociology merely constitute an extra account or 'story', which is no more or no less a form of knowledge than the 'lay' accounts given by the subjects of the enquiry (including, of course, the chap in the pub). In any case, there are many alternative 'stories' within sociology itself: the fail-

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"The collective mind is only a composite of individual minds. But the latter are not ... closed off from one another. They are in perpetual interaction through the exchange of symbols; they interpenetrate one another." As a result there has become a need to understand the hidden forces which determine how this interpenetration occurs and develops, forces which individuals themselves are typically unaware. See Thompson K. (1982) for a valuable account of this.

ure to accumulate a unified body of theory belies any remaining scientific pretensions sociology may have.

These claims seem to be borne out by the political critique recently mounted by a few members of the profession who have rocked their colleagues with their sudden enthusiasm for free market politics and types of social theory. As they see it, the indifference or hostility of most sociologists to 'neo-liberalism' is not the result of rational conviction at all but the product of an unexamined left-wing consensus in sociology. Even the best British sociological work manifests a bias against capitalism in general and business in particular (Holton and Turner, 1989; Marsland, 1987; Saunders, 1989, 1990). If these writers are to be believed, the attitude of sociologists to politics shapes what they think they 'know', whereas in a social *science* the reverse should be true: knowledge ought to shape political preferences.

Recently, the political and philosophical attacks have begun to converge, despite their apparent differences in origin. Philosophical 'relativism' in sociology always carried a political message: that accepted truth about society emerges out of clashes of interest and struggles for power, rather than from debate and rational conviction. In the late sixties it acquired a certain radical 'chic' as a stick with which to beat the conservatism of the Anglo-American sociological establishment, some members of which had been caught dressing up Cold War conclusions as value neutral social science and Cold War activities as value neutral research (see for example the collection of essays edited by Colfax and Roach, 1971). So by the time the New Right 'enlightenment' was under way, the weapons by which it attacked sociology were already forged and could be turned against their inventors. In Britain, this moment was symbolised for many of us when Keith Joseph, hitting sociology in a tender spot, demanded that the Social Science Research Council drop the word 'science' from its title. Simultaneously, within the discipline, a new generation of so-called 'post modernist' sociologists began to declare a plague on all houses. Post-modernists claim that the transitoriness and uncertainty of modern life have made it impossible to have any fixed rules about what is rational or what knowledge is. In the words of a recent account, they believe that "The quest for truth is always the establishment of power" (Turner, 1990, p.5). Meanwhile, precisely this maxim was being practiced in British political life as the Government suppressed, massaged or manufactured official statistics on the economy, on education training, unemployment, poverty and so on.

We thus seem to have a disturbing choice. Either British sociology must indeed be corrupt and/or incapable of objective judgement, as the various dissidents inside it imply; or else the convictions and actions of those politicians and academics who disparage the 'rational knowledge' claims of current sociological expertise are themselves demonstrably irrational and dangerous.

## **Confessions of a GP sociologist**

Despite all this I want to defend the unfashionable idea that sociology should be, indeed substantially *is*, a rational, objective and empirical activity, to which the term science can legitimately be applied. And I want especially to highlight the consequences of rejecting such a project for the discipline. My theme really does have considerable practical significance for what kind of politics and society we will have in future. The developments within and without sociology which I have described suggest to me an alarming, possibly growing undercurrent of Unreason, which touches more than the internal troubles of the British sociology profession. Of course, people

will quite properly go on arguing about the precise philosophical grounds on which sociological method rests. But to throw out the very idea of a scientific sociology is to provide an entry for ignorance and extremism.

In saying this I do not write as a professional philosopher of social theory but as what I sometimes call a 'GP sociologist'. Much of my career has been spent in the front line where sociology meets the lay world: researching empirical matters relating to employment and education; teaching introductory sociology to a heterogeneous bunch of undergraduate and adult students; and as co-author of an introductory textbook that has apparently reached a fairly wide readership (Lee and Newby, 1983). All of these 'lay' groups - research contacts, new students, new readers - very reasonably share the same difficulty. They want to be told exactly why they ought to take sociology seriously.

The days have long since gone when in reply we could simply blind them with philosophy or admit, with proud embarrassment, that sociologists themselves do not take it seriously, ho, ho, ho. As the post-Thatcher generation becomes adult, the doctrines one used merely to read about in the library have become the ground rules and assumptions of everyday life, especially in Essex. In their first sociology seminar more and more new students tell me that life is a struggle for the survival of the fittest and competition is always benign in its effects. Capitalism has brought technical progress and universal affluence so class doesn't exist any more. If people are poor or unemployed it is their own fault. The Welfare State made people lazy and trade unions were responsible for our current economic woes. Above all, private enterprise always gives the most efficient service. Taxes spent on the Health Service will simply go to immigrants. These statements are treated as self-evident 'common sense'. If I think otherwise it is because I am tiresomely left wing not because sociology is or will ever be 'scientific'.

To justify the challenge which sociology offers to a whole range of such taken for granted ideas is a difficult task in part because I myself do not think that current sociological research and teaching is as rigorous or as free from suppressed prejudices of both the right and left, as it might be. However, we do not conclude from the beastly behaviour of certain footballers that football itself is a game without rules. Similarly doing 'sociology' is not necessarily the same as 'what sociologists do'. It is up to my colleagues to defend for themselves each individual piece of work they carry out. My main concern here is to suggest that the general scientific aspirations of sociological method are possible and desirable.

We are, of course, too easily seduced by a particular view of scientific knowledge - the so-called 'positivist' conception - which identifies science with certainty (Keat and Urry, 1982, Ch. 1). To possess this certainty, it is said, knowledge must take the form of an agreed body of theory expressed as objective general laws; these laws, in turn, must have been established through the detached observation of 'facts'. I am certainly *not* renewing the case for some new kind of positivism here, for the positivist picture of how science actually works is no longer recognisable even in a discipline like physics. Although natural science has given rise to the modern technological outlook, in which knowledge is judged by whether it 'works', even much of *that* is speculative and uncertain and we are coming to understand the tragic uncertainty of a technology that appears to 'work' in the short term at the price of destroying the future. Fundamental science itself however, is constantly making yesterday's certainties into today's uncertainties and the more we know about ourselves and our relation to nature the more we become aware of what we do not, indeed can never know. As far as the social world is concerned, certainty is what is offered by dogma and blind faith, not by reason or science. In so far as people accept any of the latter

without question, their beliefs *may* not, in the end, be wrong but they are certainly irrational. Scientific knowledge, then, cannot be equated with certainty.

To associate 'science' with universal 'laws' and incontrovertible facts is also extremely misleading as well as limiting, for by no means all of the 'proper' sciences exhibit these features. The controversies in medical research over the causes of heart disease, which are more like empirical sociology than experimental physics are a case in point. Yet medical research is generally considered to be 'scientific'. Some sciences, too, such as astronomy or geology deal with unique phenomena that have to be studied in terms of their particular history. Indeed, historical studies rather than physics offers a better paradigm for the scientific aspirations of the sociologist. (I am prepared to argue, though historians might shudder, that sociology *is* a branch of history).

Contrary to positivist doctrine, then, I believe that whatever advantages scientific procedures possess actually depend on the systematic use of \*un\*certainty. Once this is recognised, the supposed objections to scientific sociology become arguments in its favour.

## 1. Being objective and being certain

Can there really be objectivity in the study of social relationships? As I have myself already argued, society is not an observable object but a psychic complex of subjective interests, viewpoints, perspectives and meanings. From this, relativists infer that scientific detachment is impossible in sociology. After all, sociologists themselves are part of society and have their own beliefs and values which motivate their research and contaminate their findings.

The implications of this need thinking about. If it were strictly the case that the subjective behaviour and experiences of others could not be studied objectively, it would be very difficult to see how, even on a mundane level, we could understand' each other and co-operate or communicate at all. Everyone would be locked into a private subjective world from which there would be no escape and it would be impossible for me to understand what any one else was doing. Human life would be solitary not essentially social as it in fact is.

In any case one should not talk about 'subjective' meanings without examining the nature of 'subjectivity' a little further. There is actually no such thing as wholly subjective thought and action because we all use concepts and language which we have learned from others. Without them one could not even monitor one's own behaviour, still less 'think'. What is more, the very possibility of having a perspective of one's own which can be described as different from that of others presupposes concepts and meanings which act as a common or shared reference point for comparing different outlooks. Thus, as Durkheim observed, a concept is not my concept but collective and impersonal. In that sense a concept is not subjective but objective. In the end, too, it must reflect some of the reality of life around us and with the aid of reason it is often possible to work out some aspects of what that reality is like. Beyond the private ideas of the individual, then "there is a world of absolute ideas according to which he (*sic*) must shape his own..." (Durkheim, 1976, 437).

I think we can go further than that, though. Arguably, the most basic of the concepts we learn from society are the notions of error and falsehood, which is, to quote Durkheim again, "the first intuition of the realm of the truth" (*ibid*). Personal and daily life revolves around the possibility of independent truth on one hand and mistakes and lies on the other. I am not of course claiming that in practice we always find it either easy or possible to reach 'the truth'; still less that there is some

kind of incontrovertible or 'absolute' Truth. On the contrary, the pages of philosophical debate about positivism have convinced most people that progress in knowledge consists of eliminating false beliefs rather than in 'proving' particular statements to be immutably certain and true. Proof in that sense is never possible. Truth is not, in fact, an object or a content of a belief at all but an *attribute* of how we have arrived at it. It makes perfectly good, objective sense to distinguish what Brecht, in a memorable phrase called 'telling the truth as we find it', from lies, propaganda, sales talk, what we read in the *Sun* and so on. The distinction of the false from the true in this sense, is essential for routine dealings with others and for a host of practical decisions. The chap in the pub needs the truth every time he buys a round and is given change. He also expects the 'account' to be consistent and logical and suspects the barman's motives or sanity if it is not. Why should sociology be different? We do not have to suspend everyday notions of truth and logic simply because what we are checking is a page of unemployment statistics rather than the bill for some drinks.

If truth and logic are common sense, however, common sense does not always make use of them. When we check a bill it makes sense to be skeptical about its truth and accuracy. But in many important areas of everyday life, including love, politics and religion, people do not keep up a skeptical rational attitude to their beliefs. Somehow we are very willing to take many things on trust because we think them 'common sense' or want to believe what we are told. Disciplined scientific study, however, entails being skeptical all the time, building systematic *uncertainty* into the knowledge gathering process, whatever is under investigation. Of course, when sociology asks people to put their cherished beliefs about society and their fellow human beings 'on hold' in this way it cannot expect to be popular. But that is not a good reason for saying that sociology cannot be objective in principle.

## 2. Established facts or objective evidence?

It can also be argued, however, that objectivity requires 'established facts' if we are to arbitrate between alternative beliefs. In sociology we do not have such facts because, unlike the natural world, the social world cannot be directly observed. The raw material of what sociology studies is not social behaviour itself but its description. These descriptions might be peoples' own accounts of 'what is (or was) going on' or they might be official statistics and other administrative fact-gatherers' accounts. Failing either of these, sociologists produce their own descriptive raw material through their reports on participant observation, through surveys and so on. But there can never be direct observation of the 'facts' of social behaviour itself because *all* of these materials are interpretations which impose a meaning on what is 'observed'.

The most celebrated discussion of 'social facts' in sociology is Durkheim's *Rules of Sociological Method* which for years has been pilloried as the manifesto of arch-positivism in sociology. However, Durkheim specifically rejected the fashionable positivism of his time (1964, xl) and arguably, the procedures he commended, though often ambiguous, were a great deal more subtle and fertile than generally acknowledged.<sup>3</sup> Of course, in so far as Durkheim really *was* talking about observing social *facts* he was on dangerous ground. An 'established fact' is as impossible as an 'incontrovertible truth'. *No* science works with facts but with information and evidence of

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<sup>3</sup> The problems of ambiguity include the use of the English word 'facts' as a rather stark translation of the French word 'fait', which can also mean 'act, activity or accomplishment'.

varying quality, which is quite a different matter. Even in natural science we cannot just 'observe the facts': the content of information is relative to the observer's situation and is the product of interpretation. Descartes' famous illustration of this is still one of the best: at certain times of the year the sun looks as if it is bigger than at other times. But Durkheim himself wrote that "observation is suspect until it is confirmed by reason" (Durkheim, quoted in Gane, 1988, p.133-4).

Admittedly, Durkheim's position is full of tensions which still beset us and we should not seek to minimise the difficulties which the scientific interpretation of social facts faces. However, once again, the situation is one with which everyone is already familiar. Descriptions, rather than facts are the raw material on which a great deal of everyday decision taking is successfully based. We are all quite used to the idea that accounts are 'subjectively valid' in the sense that they have a meaning that is valid to the author of the description - as, for example, when the barman, perhaps in all sincerity swears I gave him a fiver, not a tenner; when a man tells his wife he loves her; or when government politicians talk of economic recovery. We do not, however, immediately conclude that all such descriptions are equally complete, still less *correct*. Correct description implies a rational relationship between the description itself and the evidence (not fact) given by independent experience. Someone can *describe* to the manager how they saw me give the barman a tenner; the wife can find a letter from the husband's mistress; we can check the politician's use of statistics or find out too late that the party we voted for was wrong about an economic recovery after all.

It is worth reminding ourselves too, that many descriptions that are perfectly valid from the subjective viewpoint of the individual can also be described as *incorrect* from the subjective viewpoint of the individual. The barman's belief that it is easy to cheat customers may soon result in his getting the sack. The erroneous belief that an economic recovery is under way may nonetheless reinforce political support for economic policies that are guaranteed to ensure that recovery cannot happen. Beliefs that a charismatic leader offers the solution to a nation's problems can lead to the very opposite: enormous suffering and humiliation for its people in total war. In short, there is scope for treachery in many types of social dealings. Surely, then, the fact that sociology's raw material consists of descriptions enhances rather than lessens the case for seeking independent objectively valid evidence?

The point is a commonplace of legal procedure. Indeed, doing empirical sociology is not altogether unlike the way crimes are supposed to be solved. Detectives should be trained to treat all statements and clues, not as 'facts' but as 'evidence': that is equally suspect descriptions which need to be systematically cross checked. Moreover, in order to convict a suspect, the court itself requires certain standards of information and argument in the case brought before it. True, as we well know in Britain, detectives and lawyers often cut corners, make mistakes or become corrupt and as a result an innocent person gets convicted. This does not mean we cannot distinguish the rules of evidence and their use from their absence. On the contrary, the exposure of scandals, the fact that it is possible to talk about an *incorrect* conviction is sincere testimony to our belief in the importance of these rules. Deliberate perversion of standards of objective justice is both the all-too-prevalent hallmark of authoritarian rule and also the reference point of opposition to it.

The methodological problems of evidence in observing social conditions have long been familiar to historians who are faced with the further difficulty that, as E.P. Thompson puts it "You cannot interview tombstones". Furthermore:



'Data' is not just 'out there to be harvested', it is not a finite quantity but rather an organic and infinite growth. Its quantity and quality will depend very considerably on the simple techniques by which it is collected (Macfarlane, 1978, p.22)

Thus in history too, interpretation and fact are by no means independent. However, this must never be taken to mean that historical enquiry cannot be *disciplined* by the presence or absence of appropriate evidence. It means that to be gathering evidence is itself to be immersed in a process of rational enquiry - of corroboration or contradiction by alternative sources, internal logical coherence, inherent probability and so on. These in turn are subject to the cut and thrust of rational debate. The alternative debate is the history of smears and whitewash, the 'official history' which denies the atrocities and war crimes, leaving a later generation to its sense of betrayal when it discovers the facts of what *really* happened in their name. Elsewhere, we argued that: "In the end sociology may, like history, offer few certainties and indeed be little more than constructive speculation", nevertheless, to quote Thompson again, "We must reconstruct what we can". Sociology, warts-and-all is better than no sociology at all if we are to develop a real understanding of the 'human condition' (Lee and Newby, 1982, p.343).

Unfortunately, as T.S. Eliot once put it, "human kind cannot bear very much reality" and trouble comes when people prefer the certainties of blind faith rather than the uncertainty of rational enquiry. It is, therefore, worth considering what it means to reject the possibility of objective evidence and empirical research in sociology. My fear as I write this is that in Britain the discipline (for it still is that) is threatened by a descent into unreason from both within and without. Not all devotees of the current fad for 'so-called' post modernism in sociology are crude relativists but as a movement post modernism is openly hostile to sociological research as I have understood it during most of my career. I have colleagues who are prepared to argue that the modern ideal of rationality has offered a false promise and that consequently standards of rationality themselves are not absolute (cf. Smart, 1992, p.181). The sight of these scholars making use of inferential reasoning to defend such a view might be somewhat comic for their position implies that I can 'win' my side of the debate by shooting them all. But alas, such 'solutions' are found all too frequently in real life to make this a laughing matter. What disturbs me about some of the latest writings are the admiring references to authors with Nazi associations: Nietzsche whom the Nazis adapted for their own seizure of the truth on the route to power and Heidegger, a known collaborator (Rockmore, 1992).

In the present political climate, attacks on the very idea of social science strike me as either irresponsible, dangerous or both. Waves of irrational but uncontested 'evidence' impinge on every household through advertising, television and in the majority of newspapers where distortion and opinion are routinely presented as news. The point is not that people are necessarily brain-washed by this material but that only the most muted protest is or can be raised against it. As a result, what post modernist philosophers seek to prove is becoming taken for granted common sense: that all information is equally prejudiced or 'biased'. At the same time, the availability of evidence about the condition of people is under assault and not even a matter of which the people themselves are generally aware. Libraries and universities which act as public storehouses of evidence have been starved of funds. Information about the activities of the state and its agencies has become, at the hands of those elected to protect it, less rigorous in form and more difficult and more expensive to obtain. Only the flimsiest ministerial acknowledgement of the need for independent standards in the gathering of official data has been given (*Guardian*, 14.12.1991).

If sociologists and other social *scientists* do not defend the idea of objective enquiry and impartial evidence, who will? Racist beliefs really do not have the same validity as the sociology of racism. Mrs. Thatcher's claims that everyone, even the lowest paid, had benefitted from her economic miracle did not have the same truth value as the rather different carefully documented conclusions of poverty researchers during the eighties (Townsend, 1991). This clash of claim and counter claim was not just power play and subjective meaning. And frankly, much of the 'common sense' talked in the pub during the eighties has become a curse. It was just plain *wrong* and as a result people are suffering.

### 3. Lack of unified theory

There is one remaining major objection to the idea of sociology as science, an objection which seems to be rather different from those discussed so far. As I indicated, the discipline is replete with theories and concepts reflecting the ongoing influence of rival 'schools' of sociological thought. This is largely because its history is one of attempting to come to terms with the entirely novel *political* problems posed by the so-called 'twin revolutions' of modernisation: industrial capitalism in economic life and secularisation and democracy in political life (Giddens, 1971, Introduction). So far-reaching were these problems that the range of new ideologies which evolved in response were obliged to speculate beyond the normative questions of modern politics to the substantive issues of the nature of the social bond itself. The result was the assortment of rival sociologies still found today. Theoretical sectarianism is thus the result of profound differences in political values. The continuing failure wholly to detach sociological theory from its political origins means to many observers that the explanatory project of scientific sociology has failed, not least because it means that there is no body of unified and cumulative theory as in a 'proper' science.

I have a lot of sympathy with this criticism as far as it goes because as Mullins has pointed out recently, a great deal of so-called 'sociological theory' today is not theory at all but a mish-mash of political ideology, intellectual history, critiques, philosophy and taxonomy - especially in Britain (Mullins, 1990). People achieve spectacular careers as sociologists simply on the basis of writing abstract books about other people's abstract books and never, say, having to knock on a door with a questionnaire. 'Theory' has inevitably become a sub-specialism too and the two typically seem to proceed independently. Among other things this sets a bad example to students, who are further encouraged to think that 'anything goes' in sociological analysis. As I see it, the only theory worth considering in sociology is theory developed out of dealing rigorously with an empirical problem and there is rather too little of that at the moment.

Nevertheless, aspiring to develop a wholly *unified* body of grounded theory in the manner of some of the natural sciences can lean too far in the opposite direction and once more measure the claims of scientific sociology against an inappropriately positivist model of what science is all about. The disunity of theoretical explanations in sociology is in fact another example of what appears to be a weakness but is really a strength. The current overweight of ideology and philosophical critique, is certainly regrettable but controversy between rival theoretical traditions is in itself beneficial because it throws a critical light on the conclusions which individual investigators draw from their findings and it helps to clarify the proper concerns of the discipline.

Furthermore, we cannot assume, like the natural sciences, that what holds in one part of the social world will also hold in another. Of course society is a tissue of incompatible meanings and points of view and this is the only general account that can be given of it. Sociological explanations thus depend on the ability to enter into alternative perceptions which differ from our own. So the object of theory in sociology is not the construction of a body of unified propositions but, on the contrary, to add to the diversity of perspectives available to the discipline to interpret the complexities of the social world. This is not just a question of 'inventing' but the genuine revelation of significant new classes of information. The latest major and long overdue addition to the list of individual sociologies, namely feminist sociology, illustrates this creative aspect of theoretical heterodoxy perfectly. The invisibility of women and of gender differences, even in the sociological research of twenty years ago now seems truly staggering. With the growth of gender research whole new areas of historical and contemporary knowledge have developed. Precisely because they typically have been germinated by some political struggle, then, both old and new schools of theory represents a new 'discovery' in so far as each reveals a new 'meaning' out of all the separate meanings which constitute the social world as it is.

There are two constant dangers, however, in the close link between politics and a social science. The first is that one particular brand of theory will claim a privileged route to the truth. For truth in sociology can only emerge if it remains more than the sum of its various 'isms'. The second danger is that the certainties of some external political outlook will acquire enough power to suppress independent scholarship altogether. Though always around, both of these dangers seemed less remote fifteen years ago than they do now.

## **Individualism and sociological theory**

A huge social experiment has been imposed on British society since 1979 and the neo-liberal 'conviction politicians' who have masterminded it see themselves as having won an *intellectual* as well as a political argument thereby discrediting a whole range of 'experts' and progressive cognoscenti - among whom sociologists figure prominently. In this section I want to show that this supposed 'achievement' rests on the very objections to a *science* of society that I have been contesting here. It uses them to deflect social science criticism away from the anti-rational and anti-human elements in the 'free market' panacea.

To accuse free-market liberals of anti-humanism and anti-rationalism may seem rather strange. Liberalism is usually thought of as the arch-champion of freedom and rationalism in the conduct of business and social affairs. In practice, however, even sympathetic critics consider its rationalism to be strictly limited (cf. Barry, 1987, pp.29-31). Its leading philosopher, David Hume, argued that reason can only be the 'slave of passion'. Its conception of reason is thus little more than what Hume's famous friend, Adam Smith, called 'prudence', or enlightened self-interest, the distinguishing 'virtue' of the man of business. Moreover, liberals have always been opposed, admittedly not without some justification, to "the man of system [who] ... seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as he can arrange the pieces on a chess board ... " (Smith, 1910, emphasis added).

The anti-humanism implicit in classic liberal doctrines is the result of a paradox, namely that considerable authoritarianism is needed to remove political and institutional resistances and establish a supposedly 'unplanned' market order. Once such an order has been established, more-

over, people have to accept the impersonal and often capricious rule of what Smith called the 'hidden hand' of the market. The justification given is that an unplanned order will lead to the benefit of society at large even if particular individuals suffer, say, bankruptcy, unemployment, loss of amenity or whatever. Is this any different morally from Stalin sacrificing peoples' lives to 'historical inevitability'?

What is most interesting of all about modern neo-liberal thought, though, is the way it has embraced arguments of the kind criticised in previous sections of this article. This is partly due to a quirk of intellectual history. The ideas of Smith and Hume were a major influence on the neo-classical economics of the so-called Austrian School. The School combined these, however, with certain antipositivist tendencies in Continental philosophy which laid great stress on the limitations and subjectivity of knowledge. The mix of these two tendencies are especially evident in the highly influential work of F.A. Hayek. Though mostly published in the nineteen forties and fifties, Hayek's writings have in turn had an acknowledged impact on the think tanks of the British New Right, on Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher, on so-called 'anarcho-capitalists' and on self-styled neo-liberals within the sociology profession itself. Of course, other writers have been extremely influential in this context too, but it would be quite inappropriate, at this stage of my paper, to provide a thoroughgoing sociological critique of all such work and the intellectual and political programme based on it. A few observations about Hayek will, I think, serve to reveal the central point I wish to make.

Hayek was reluctant even to use the term 'social sciences' except with the disinfectant of inverted commas (e.g. 1948, 57). He was especially critical of what he calls 'scientism' which is analogous to what I have referred to as 'positivism', i.e. the slavish imitation of the generalising natural sciences in social theory and research. Now, some of the targets of Hayek's anti-scientism seem to me entirely justified and his description of them as an 'abuse of reason' completely correct. I share his objection to many forms of behaviourist psychology and his hostility to the early positivism of Auguste Comte. Comte, by the way, coined the word sociology but unlike the author of a companion article in this volume, I think Hayek is wrong to think Comte's spirit still lurks around modern sociology. I have no quarrel, however, with Hayek's distrust of the idea of 'social engineering', whether it is carried out by sociologists, other social scientists, or the revolutionary vanguard of the proletariat. Most readers of this journal, I imagine feel the same.

Clearly, then, Hayek was not against the use of reason or science as such. He merely resented their application to social affairs. After all, he had dogmas of his own which he presents as self-evident. So in fighting 'scientism' in the social sciences he unnecessarily restricted their scope and their potential role in policy formation. At the same time he made his own social theory inaccessible to rational or empirical challenge. The result was an extremely seductive and dangerous set of writings that resurrect all those contradictions in nineteenth century liberal thought against which classical sociology successfully struggled.

Hayek can be seen as a forerunner of both relativism and postmodernism in contemporary social theory. Indeed, the general affinities between the neo-liberal and the post-modernist critiques of 'objective' sociology have been openly acknowledged (Turner, 1990, p.11). Both attack the preoccupations of the mainstream traditions of sociological enquiry and its traditional 'scientific' aspirations and methods. Both have a common starting point, namely, the assertion that unlike natural phenomena, social phenomena result from individual human actions and human action, in turn, depends on knowledge and belief.

However, Hayek ended up with Austrian neo-classical economics, rather than a chaotic struggle of political wills as post-modernists do. He argued, rightly, that the knowledge which has produced society's rules and institutions is dispersed among countless actors and cannot be concentrated in the mind of a single individual - which is why we can neither possess nor impose on society itself principles which presuppose the knowledge of all the particular circumstances which in that society the chief could know' (Hayek, 1978, 269). He and his followers have thereby been led, wrongly, into the unsustainable doctrine of so-called 'methodological individualism'. This simply means the view that it is apparently illegitimate to talk (as most society allegedly does) about entities like the nation, the state, organisations, or classes as if they were given objects or 'wholes' or 'more than the sum of their parts'. Instead, "... the disciplines which deal with the results of conscious human action must start from what men think and mean to do ..." (Hayek, 1955, 32).

The influence of this way of reasoning, as we noted above, even reached Britain's first *woman* Prime Minister! Alas, however, reasoning that rejects 'society' as a given object on the grounds that it is constituted only by processes and parts is unstoppable. It would lead us also to the rejection of 'the individual', 'man' or 'people' as objects of study, too. These are also constituted by processes and parts: today, for example, we are aware that the human personality comprises several different modes of being and that brain chemistry plays a part in the operation of what we like to call the individual mind. Hayek's arguments could thus *be* used to justify the very behaviourist 'scientism' he wants to avoid and leave us only with the fundamental particles of physics as allowable objects of study.

Why, in any case, should we start from 'what men think and do'? Hayek's detailed reason is interesting: it is that "that the individuals which compose society are guided in their actions by a classification of things or events according to a system of sense qualities and of concepts which has a common structure and which we know because we too are men" (ibid.). This is the so-called 'hermeneutic' argument which says that explanation in the social sciences is based on intuitive understanding of the meaning of individual actions. I have already indicated what I think is wrong with it. Compare Hayek's statement with the claim, which I described above, that the 'structure' of classifications and rules Hayek talks about has to be studied as a collective entity with its own properties which individuals find ready made.<sup>4</sup> Here you have the essential reason why few sociologists accept Hayekian liberalism in theory or practice and why they deny that it has won any sort of intellectual argument.

On the contrary, it is full of ignorant contradictions. Hayek always waxed angry at those critics of liberalism who accused it of portraying individuals as *homo economicus*, that is, simply as isolated bundles of rational selfishness. He was quite right about this because liberalism has always exploited a downright inconsistency which first appeared in the work of Adam Smith. For alongside his 'individualist' account of society as the product of individual action and self-interest; Smith attributed 'virtue' (including the prudence of the 'man' of business) to upbringing and the pursuit of other's approval (Macfie, 1967). That is, he takes what 'men' think and mean to do as the starting point of his explanations. But he also regards thought and action as the result of an already constituted way of life. This contradiction reappeared time and time again in nineteenth century liberal thought. That latter-day advocate of economic individualism and

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<sup>4</sup> Hayek in effect conceded Durkheim's point in a crucial footnote which totally undermined the drift of his argument. See Hayek, 1955, footnote 53, p.214.

laissez-faire in business, John Stuart Mill, wrote a famous essay arguing how women were prevented by upbringing and not nature from excelling in business. True to this same inconsistency, Hayek's individuals are miraculously inculcated with language, a sense of gender, duty and legality and above all 'a common structure of concepts'. Liberalism old and new is thus a social theory which is 'sociologically ignorant' for it offers no solution to what, at the beginning of the article, I called the Structure/Action problem: i.e. what is the *relation* between patterns of order and upbringing and the thoughts and action of people - roughly half of whom happen to be women though Hayek never noticed.

Hayekian neo-liberalism is not merely ignorant, however. It also offends against the precept of Karl Popper that a non-dogmatic theory should be capable of being 'falsified'. That is it should specify empirical conditions which if found in the real world would mean that the theory was wrong. This account of science oddly enough, Hayek cited approvingly in his own monograph on the philosophy of the social studies. In the same volume, however, he contrasted the inevitable 'subjectivism' of these disciplines with the 'objectivism' of natural Science and argues, like any good relativist, that what they study is not 'facts' but beliefs and other mental events (Hayek, 1955). "This means, he argues, there is a stark contrast between scientific laws and interpretative theories. The latter require a 'technique of reasoning', which has reached its highest development in economics, but which 'can no more be disproved by facts than logic or mathematics' (1948, 73).

This last statement presumably explains why there was very little systematic empirical research in Hayek's output and 'facts' when they appear are always quoted in verification of an assertion. All this might not matter except that these same unfalsifiable theories do lead to very definite real world political conclusions. There are frequent and unsubstantiated references in neo-liberal thought and politics to the self-equilibrating orderly character of competitive markets. These assertions are wholly protected by Hayek's philosophy of science from Popper's falsifiability criterion and from empirical testing. The 'scientism' of the sociological fieldworker, or of those who want to know how economic institutions actually operate, is clearly beneath Hayek. His followers have thus found themselves arguing about whether they themselves are talking about the abstract 'perfect market' of neo-classical theory or real markets as they happen in practice (Barry, 1987, pp.32ff).

Those who have devoted considerable attention, through surveys, case studies, documentary and statistical research to the question of how markets really do work and what consequences they have (e.g. Fevre, 1992) have not in my view produced findings which are encouraging for the advocates of Hayekian free market doctrine. But of course, all that work can, if necessary be dismissed, as contaminated with left-wing political assumptions. (The same can be and has been done, where necessary, with inconvenient sociological findings in other fields such as those Marshall describes in the book I recommended above).

On the basis of unscientific dogma, then, Hayek's British disciples have used a major industrial country for the most blatant piece of social engineering in its post war history, one which has been far more audacious than the modest interventionism of the Keynesian era. This engineered privatisation of the common wealth has arguably unleashed such forces of deprivation and materialism, competitiveness and egoism that I fear chaps in the Basildon pubs will soon begin to bellow for more authoritarian solutions to the chaos which this experiment in 'freedom' has created. Common sense will then be a curse indeed.

## Conclusions

I have argued that the much rehearsed uncertainties of sociology, so often the occasion for despising it, are actually the reason that it is 'scientific' and remains an endlessly fascinating and necessary activity, even a way of living in society. Unfortunately, sociologists always face a central difficulty. Human beings are extraordinarily resistant to the rational investigation of the familiar. Even in the study of the natural world, reason prevailed only with difficulty against dogma and superstition. In the study of ourselves and our relationships with others, the very idea of rational dispassionate analysis readily encounters resistance, ranging from outright repression and outrage, through indifference, to intellectual obstructionism of the kind represented by both neo-liberal and post modernist attacks on traditional sociology. Consequently, it is the peddlars of certainty that we need to fear.

Seeking and telling the truth as we find it is not just an everyday activity but a deeply political necessity in an uncertain world - as Brecht made clear in the poem quoted at the head of this article. This is I suspect an extremely important matter for the readers of this journal. When asked to write about the condition of sociology for *The Raven*, my attention was drawn to a remark by a much respected former colleague to the effect that "the political philosophy most compatible with sociology is anarchism" (Cohen, 1985). I was not entirely sure I agreed. It should be implicit in what I have said that sociology should not think of itself as compatible with any political philosophy but a resource of information and rational debate on which the makers of political philosophies fail to draw at everyone's peril. Moreover, some so-called 'anarchism' seems to me little different in principle from the neo-liberal outlook which I have been castigating.

It would be wrong to leave it at that, however. The bulk of anarchist writing, as I understand, it has gone beyond the simplification that equates liberty with licence. It struggles rather with the difficult problem that lies behind the socialist tradition, namely, that the happiness, rights and freedom of one individual can in the end only be enjoyed by seeking to promote the welfare of others. Moreover, if sociology has been at odds with the dogma of free markets, political economy and *laissez-faire*, it has also tussled with the great totalitarian dogmas of the modern age. I have in mind not just fascism but the kind of determinist Marxist practice which equated knowledge, not with the results of independent scholarship but with the historical consciousness of the proletariat, as embodied in the will of the Party. In the event, neither the collectivist state nor unregulated individualism have delivered the freedom which they once promised to alienated humanity. So I end with Durkheim's profound if somewhat enigmatic remark that 'liberty is the product of regulation'. Can anarchism show us how regulation can be achieved and liberty respected at the same time? If so there would be good sociological grounds for believing that its moment as a political philosophy had come.

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## ***Robert Nisbet***

# **Social Authority and Political Power**

It would be false to think of this distinction between social authority and political power as one resting solely in conservative thought. The distinction began there, but it spread widely. Later the anarchists were to make strong use of it. For them the problem of power in modern society took on much of its intensity from the enormous enhancement that the (French) Revolution had given the idea of the state. 'Democracy is merely the state raised to the nth power' wrote Proudhon, echoing Bonald whom he admired ... Proudhon was profoundly interested in localism and in the multiplication of centres of authority in society as a means of restraining the mass-based centralism that he could see developing and which a mere change of economic system alone would not, he thought, significantly alter. The pluralism and decentralisation which are such striking aspects of nineteenth century anarchism - from Proudhon to Kropotkin - both stem from a vivid sense of the distinction between social authority, which is by anarchist definition multiple, associative, functional and autonomous, and the political power of the state, which is, no matter how 'democratic' at root, bound to become centralised and bureaucratised unless offset by the authorities resident in localism and free association.

From *The Sociological Tradition*, Heinemann, 1967

# *John Pilgrim*

## **Change or Acceptance: human nature and the sociological perspective**

### **The Two Traditions**

The renewed debate over sexual equality we have seen over the last thirty years had shown clearly that the argument is a special case of the general discussion of the nature of human nature, the extent to which it is determined and, if so, whether by inherent biological factors or by our experience within and of particular environments. Basically the two positions are the conservative, which clings to the idea that change is difficult or impossible because human nature is fixed one way or another; and radical, which holds that it is variable according to experience, culture and events.

The two orientations don't totally break down on disciplinary lines. There are social determinists, particularly among Marxists, quite as rigid as some biologists. There are biologists who reject genetic determinism and sociologists who appeal to biology. There are voluntarists, Marxists among them too, whose belief in the efficacy of individual action places them close to eighteenth century rationalism. There are anarchists in both camps and right along the spectrum in between. Indeed, we might almost characterise the polarities as Bakuninist (social determinist), and Stirnerite (voluntarist). However, Bakunin's extreme social determinism sits uneasily with his beliefs in the efficacy of individual action, and shows that the situation is far from simple. Representatives of different disciplines, with apparently opposed interests, can find themselves occupying the same ideological platform. The difference is between two modes of thought, two attitudes that fundamentally say either "whatever is best and if it isn't there is nothing we can do about it" or that say "whatever made things this way, doesn't *have* to continue - a different world isn't impossible".

The gender debate is an excellent example. The conservative position, illustrated by the Genesis myth of man's dominion over woman (and everything else) has sought to explain gender role differentiation in both biological and functional terms. It can be regarded as the latest manifestation of the Great Chain of Being: the idea that the universe has a natural order impossible to violate, with humanity at the top of the animal kingdom but with women necessarily just a little below men.<sup>1</sup> Whether put forward by biological or social scientists this attitude ultimately rests on biology and the relative immutability of genetic codes.

The other main tradition operates from the basis that in human beings learning has largely replaced 'instinct', except for simple reflex actions, and finally rests on the plasticity and demonstrable diversity of human nature. Such a view more easily allows for social change, although

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<sup>1</sup> O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, Harper, 1965.

there is debate over how much change is possible and how quickly it can take place. The social determinist viewpoint is a continuum and the role of the human agent in promoting change is an ongoing debate. However, the sociological outlook views gender roles as culturally shaped. Inequality between the sexes is then seen as resulting from socially constructed power relationships.<sup>2</sup>

## A Sociological Perspective

This cluster of views sees gender as a social and cultural construct connected with biological sex but not coterminous with it. It argues that while all known cultures use biological sex as one criterion for the ascription of gender, no two cultures seem to agree on the content of a gender role. Yet each tends to believe that its own definitions of gender correspond to the biological duality of sex.<sup>3</sup> In each society, therefore, the physical differences between men and women are mediated by culture and social structure, and elaborated so that the sexes are ascribed masculine and feminine personalities, and roles which are learned rather than genetically inherited.

Cultures as close as the Mediterranean, notes Peter Worsley,<sup>4</sup> differ greatly from Northern Europe in the extent to which gender difference is an organising feature of the culture, while Mead's classic (if much criticised) study of three New Guinea societies show strong differences from ourselves, and from each other, in their definitions of masculine and feminine.<sup>5</sup> Two of these societies showed little gender differentiation within the culture but were opposite to each other in their expectations of what was normal, while the third, the Arapesh, had marked gender differentiation but reversed conventional Western notions of what constituted male and female temperament. Among the Arapesh, then, men approximated to our feminine role expectations while women came close to Western ideas of a male gender role.

The details of Mead's work are regarded as rather overdrawn nowadays, but the range of variation she described is in keeping with more modern work. Anne Oakley, for example, uses George Murdoch's own *Cross Cultural Survey* data to attack his argument that biology largely determines the sexual division of labour and cites a number of other societies in which biology appears to have no influence on women's roles. She also makes the point that in biological terms the range of physical variation is so great that "difference between the sexes are often no more significant than those between individuals" and she goes on to point out that male and female genital morphologies cannot be described as distinct: "they exist as a continuum ... and are thus ... a reminder not of the biological polarity of male and female, but of their biological identity".<sup>6</sup>

She attacks the conservative sociologist Talcott Parsons' biologically based explanation of gender roles as "ethnocentrically biased and providing as validating myth for the domestic oppression of women".<sup>7</sup> This is an interesting illustration of the earlier point that divisions about human nature reflect mental sets rather than scientific evidence. So C. Wright Mills, a radical sociologist whose essay *The Darling Little Slaves*<sup>8</sup> took a social learning view of gender, was to

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<sup>2</sup> Haralambos, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, Bell & Hyman, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Oakley, *Sex, Gender and Society*, Temple Smith, 1972.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Worsley, *The New Introducing Society*, Pelican, 1987.

<sup>5</sup> M. Mead, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*, 1963.

<sup>6</sup> Anne Oakley, op cit.

<sup>7</sup> Anne Oakley, *Housewife*, Allen Lane, 1974.

<sup>8</sup> C.W. Mills, *Power, Politics and People*, Oxford University Press, 1963.

say elsewhere of Talcott Parsons that "the particular view of society it is possible to dig out of Parson's texts is of rather direct ideological use ... such views ... are associated with conservative styles of thinking and tend to legitimate stable forms of domination".<sup>9</sup>

## Biological Determinism

This Parsonian attitude, that biological differences lie at the root of gender inequalities, has been bitterly attacked in the past by Mary Wollstonecraft<sup>10</sup> and by John Stuart Mill.<sup>11</sup> In recent years it received a fresh boost from the work of ethologists, animal behaviourists and others seeking to utilise the Darwinian tradition to illuminate human behaviour and explain human differences. The result is a justification of the *status quo* without parallel since the heyday of the Social Darwinists. The latter jumped from observation of plants and animals (misreading Darwin along the way, as Kropotkin correctly pointed out), to prescriptive statements about human societies to arrive at a rationalisation of *laissez faire* capitalism. Well, as Steven Rose pointed out, all political philosophies ultimately appeal to human nature'. Even Bakunin's conviction that human nature is largely a social creation,<sup>12</sup> a view he shared with Marx, rests on a view of human nature as a social variable.<sup>(1)</sup>

Biological determinism, though, as Steven Rose says, "draws its ideology principally from Hobbes and the Social Darwinists ..."<sup>13</sup> and in sociobiology even derives cooperation and altruism from an underlying competitive mechanism. "Sociobiology" he goes on, "drawing its principles directly from Darwinian natural selection, claims that tribalism, entrepreneurial activity, xenophobia, male domination and social stratification are dictated by the human genotype during the course of evolution".<sup>14</sup> Biological determinists use varying combinations of genetic endowment, naturally selected disposition and competitive evolution to arrive at their reductionist position, but all tend to make the same logical error of moving from descriptions of the animal kingdom to a suggestion of inevitability for human beings.

Thus Lorenz's "built-in aggression", Ardrey's "territorial imperative", Dawkins' "selfish gene" all posit behaviour patterns determined by genetic endowment but fail to make the connection between gene and actual behaviour in human beings. Imaginative attempts to get over this difficulty by the use of analogy and metaphor, terms like 'investment', 'strategy' and 'coyness' serve to humanise animal behaviour but ultimately are forms of word magic which explain nothing. They are in fact a revival of instinct theory in a modern guise and to this writer at least it was somewhat astonishing to find an advocacy of this highly conservative outlook in *The Raven* number 6 and 16, and in the 16th January issue of *Freedom*.<sup>(2)</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> C.W. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, Oxford University Press, 1959.

<sup>10</sup> M. Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Women*, Everyman, 1927 and 1977.

<sup>11</sup> J.S. Mill, *The Subjugation of Women*, Everyman, 1977.

<sup>12</sup> See for example chapters 16 and 17 of the anthology *Bakunin* by Maximoff, Free Press, 1953, and 'Man, Society and Freedom' in *Bakunin on Anarchy* by S. Dolgoff, Allen & Unwin, 1973.

<sup>13</sup> S. Rose et al, *Not in Our Genes*, Pelican, 1984.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>(1)</sup> Bakunin was particularly prescient here. It is impossible to read chapters 16, 17 and 18 of the Maximoff volume and not be struck by how little modification would be required to fit his observations on the interrelationship between human beings and society into a mid twentieth century text of sociology or social anthropology.

<sup>(2)</sup> Brian Morris's discussion of weaknesses in the sociobiologists position can be found in *Raven* 9 and Harold

In an attempt to bridge the gap between gene and behaviour, that improbably named pair Robin Fox and Lionel Tiger (I really haven't made them up) have come up with a behavioural version of *phlogiston*. This curious construct suggests not that genes directly dictate behaviour but give us a genetic predisposition to certain patterns of activity, a 'biogrammar'. Thus it is claimed that a combination of inheritance from primate ancestors and a genetic adaptation to a hunting way of life by means of natural selection means that dominance in males is a sex linked characteristic and it is argued by extension that therefore politics and war is a male activity. The biogrammar concept does permit change but, as St Augustine is reputed to have said in another context, not yet. Thus patterns of male dominance in addition to being 'natural' will reassuringly persist for the foreseeable future. The old sociological rule of asking 'who benefits if this is true, and therefore *is* is true' is always worth asking. The biological determinists fail in any serious way to come to terms with ethnographic and historical data tending to show that their 'universals' are in fact variable over time and culture.<sup>15</sup>

## Liberal Feminism

The ideas involved in genetic determinism then tend to support a male dominated *status quo*. At the opposite polarity are the ideas clustering around the liberal feminist position, a form of voluntarism which exemplifies the opposite faults to biological determinism. Ultimately it too becomes a conservative position because it ends up blaming the victims - gender divisions exist because those affected 'have not tried hard enough to get rid of them' was a recent formulation. At the base of this position can be found the idea that society is made up of individuals, that the problems of life can be solved by individual activity and that advancement in a chosen direction is a reward for individual effort and initiative ... a view recently made notorious by Mrs Thatcher. This is *not* to say that Thatcherism and liberal feminism are coterminous of course.<sup>(3)</sup> However, both the liberal feminist position and Thatcher's rely ultimately on an atomistic view of society, on the eighteenth century fallacy that people's acts were in the end determined by their character which could be described in isolation from their environment.

Unfortunately for this position human beings are social, not solitary creatures, and are characterised by a heavy dependency on social learning. Enough feral cases have been documented to demonstrate clearly enough that outside of society the human animal does not grow into a human being. In Bakunin's words: "*Man is so much a social animal that it is impossible to think of him as apart from society and the majority think and will according to given social patterns ... a man [sic] thinks, feels and desires whatever the people around him think, feel and desire.*" Given therefore that our very humanity appears to be learned, it would seem probable that sexually appropriate role behaviour is learned too. The cross cultural and ethnographic studies already cited suggest that such is indeed the case.

The liberal feminist position, then, rejecting the conservatism of genetic determinism has tended to ignore, or at least minimise, the shaping effect of social structure. It tends to be ac-

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<sup>15</sup> See particularly Oakley (1972), but also E. Evans-Pritchard's *Position of Women in Primitive Society*, Faber, 1965, and Harold Barclay's 'Male/Female Relations' in *The Raven* number 9.

Barclay's in *Raven* 17.

<sup>(3)</sup> For a feminist demolition job on Thatcher, see Wendy Webster's *Not A Man To Match Her*, The Women's Press, 1990.

cepted as given. This has led other feminists to argue that the liberal feminist position is not really feminist at all as it is not concerned with woman as an oppressed group, but with the exclusion of a section of the middle class from privilege and power, that it takes for granted what it should be questioning. Certainly the sociologist would argue that it is difficult to accept this essentially individualist stance because it is taking as standard an achievement ethic which ignores or minimises the elements of ascription in any society.

## The Sociological Tradition

Bakunin's view (above) is only an extreme version of a standard sociological position. From time to time there are changes of emphasis. During the 1970s the ethnomethodologists had a vogue with a viewpoint which stressed the role of human agency in creating society. Generally, it is culturally shaped behaviour which is fundamental to the sociological perspective. As a result, in Peter Berger's words:

The inexorable controls by which social location determines our lives are not done away with by debunking the ideas which undergird these controls ... our lives are not only dominated by the inanities of our contemporaries but also of those who have been dead for many generations"<sup>16</sup>

People are born into an institutional structure whose overall shape as individuals they cannot alter even though they may affect the detail. Alex Comfort long ago argued that the real enemy of radical change, anywhere in the world, is the necessity to modify cultural patterns as a whole.<sup>17</sup> So people make their history out of the situation which they inherit, to paraphrase Marx, and as we do not start from a position of gender equality, an ethic based on individualism is inappropriate, just as an achievement ethic would be in a caste society.

The structuring effect of socialisation tends to negate any change based largely upon the individual will. Not only liberty of action, but the very thought of action is constrained by the precise position which the agent occupies on the social map. For most people their very sense of the possible is limited by the structure and function of capitalist society or, it should be added, any society. "To alter the world" Marx said, "one must first understand the material with which one deals. The bourgeoisie which wishes to preserve the *status quo* acts and thinks in terms of concepts which, being products of a given stage of development, serve as the instruments of its preservation." Substitute 'liberal feminist' for bourgeoisie and we have a pretty accurate statement of the liberal feminist problem.

## Conclusion

The balance of the evidence is on the whole against genetic determinism. It is reductionist for a start (i.e. it tries to explain complex patterns in a way which simply doesn't account for the full range of observed variation). Furthermore, geneticists themselves have suggested that biological attempts to explain social behaviour rely on an erroneous idea of a fixed relationship

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<sup>16</sup> P. Berger, *Invitation to Sociology*, Penguin, 1966.

<sup>17</sup> A. Comfort, *Authority and Delinquency*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950.

between given genes and observable behavioural traits. J.C. King has argued, for example, that as the gene combination which individuals inherit are infinitely variable, *social attributes are always the product of an indeterminate relationship between genetic potential and environmental factors*.<sup>18</sup> Certainly there are logical gaps in the argument and an unwarranted playing down of the differences created by the importance of social learning in human behaviour. Basically human beings do not have the sort of programming that can be found in the nest building habits of the weaver birds, for example, and facile parallels with animal behaviour are therefore of dubious worth.

We do, on the other hand, have a large amount of evidence that human nature, and therefore gender patterning, is the creation of human groups and highly flexible. However, change cannot come by decree, as the voluntarist school would wish, because *the very predominance of learning in human behaviour creates constraints and limits the rate, but not the possibility of change*. It is a chicken and egg situation. If the fate of individuals is to be changed then changes in the structure that moulded those individuals is essential. This does not rule out individual action. Socialisation is not total, but it, and the pre-existing structure, limit the range of possibilities.

We come back in the end to C. Wright Mills whose approach to the study of society was mediated by a concern for action and informed by the need to marry biography and history. "The correct statement of the problem" he wrote in *The Sociological Imagination*, "and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of *society* not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals ... Insofar as the family as an institution turns women into darling little slaves and men into their chief providers and unweaned dependents the problem remains incapable of private solution."<sup>19</sup>

For anarchists a sociological position, avoiding the helpless reductionism of a 'given' human nature, or the hopelessness of a spurious individualism that ultimately places responsibility for injustice on the victims, would seem to be the way forward. Any discussion of the shape of an anarchist community, any attempt to remould our institutions closer to our concept of the good society must start from the position that human nature is not fixed. It is here that most of the great anarchist thinkers, and the central stream of the sociological tradition, merge.

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<sup>18</sup> J.C. King, 'The genetics of Sociobiology' in *Sociobiology Re-examined* edited by Ashley Montagu, Oxford University Press, 1980. <sup>19</sup> C.W. Mills, op cit.

<sup>19</sup> C.W. Mills, op cit.

## *Colin Ward*

# Martin Buber - Sociologist

Every one of my influences has had views to express about the nature of human society. The reason why I found Martin Buber to be the best explainer of everything I believe about social organisation was precisely because he did it more simply than anyone else. I came across Buber only because he was frequently quoted by Herbert Read in articles in the anarchist newspaper *Freedom*. Read was a director of the publishers Routledge and in 1949 produced an English translation of Buber's book *Paths in Utopia*. This was a reassertion of the anarchist tradition in socialist thought, ridiculed for decades both before and after its publication by two kinds of state worship, that of the Fabians and that of the Marxists.

Thereafter I watched Buber's sociological thought, and was won over by his lecture on 'Society and the State' which crystallised a range of ideas that, paradoxically, earned him only hostility. In the 1950s my friend the architect Gabriel Epstein, whose parents chanced to live in the same street in Jerusalem as Buber, confirmed that the then Labour Party ruling elite in Israel saw him as a saboteur, not as a support. Thirty years later, a veteran *kibbutznik* told me that in his opinion Buber was 'just an old phoney', and, sure enough, when Buber died in 1965, *The Guardian* reported how "in Palestine his idea of bi-nationalism caused him to be ostracised by the orthodox as 'an enemy of the people'".

A philosopher who manages to antagonise everyone, yet who was himself a model of gentle benevolence, must have something important to say, I reflected, and I don't think I was wrong. His reputation was as a theologian, though I can remember him declaring to a puzzled clergyman on a BBC television programme that "I must confess that I don't like religion very much", and parrying the suggestion that he was a mystic with the reply that he was in fact a rationalist, and an affirmation that rationalism was "the only one of my world views that I have allowed to expand into an ism".

The only time I ever saw him was in 1956 at King's College in the Strand, where, lecturing on 'That Which is Common', he related his philosophy of dialogue, set out in his book *I and Thou*, with his views on community and society. He took as his text an account of Aldous Huxley's experiments with the drug mescaline, which became, in Buber's slow and emphatic English, a parable of what he saw as the disjointed society of western individualism. Huxley, in his escape from the "painful earthly world" under the influence of the drug, found that his lips, the palms of his hands, and his genitals (the organs of communication with others, interpolated Buber) became cold, and he avoided the eyes of those who were present. For, said Buber, to look into the eyes of others would be to recognise that which is common. And after this flight from the self and from the ordinary environment, Huxley "met them with a deep mistrust". Huxley regarded his mescaline intoxication as a mystical experience, but, declared Buber, those whom we call mystics, like those we call creative artists, do not seek to escape from the human situation. "They do not



want to leave the authentic world of speech in which a response is demanded. They cling to the common world until they are torn from it.”

“My innermost heart”, he confessed, “loves the world more than it loves the spirit”, and he embarrassed his chairman by leaping up the steps of the steep lecture theatre to question his questioners in order to discern what they really wanted to know.

For Buber held, as Herbert Read put it, “that the communication of any truth, of any ‘lesson’, depends on the existence of a condition of mutuality between the teacher and the pupil - all effective communication is a dialogue ...”. Buber has a different significance for different readers. For me he is a social philosopher, a sociologist in fact, who has grasped many decades ago the nature of the crisis of both capitalism and socialism. “The era of advanced capitalism”, he wrote, “has broken down the structure of society. The society which preceded it was composed of different societies; it was complex and pluralistic in structure. This is what gave it its peculiar social vitality and enabled it to resist the totalitarian tendencies inherent in the pre-revolutionary centralistic state. “ But socialism too had fallen victim to state-worship, and “if socialism is to emerge from the blind-alley into which it has strayed, among other things the catchword ‘utopian’ must be cracked open and examined for its true content”.

He wasn’t an anarchist. He was an advocate of what he called socialist pluralism. But socialists have not yet caught up with him, neither in the west nor the east.

Buber was born in Vienna, a child of the Jewish enlightenment and emancipation, but when his parents divorced, he went to live with his grandfather at Lemberg in Galicia. There he “ enjoyed his all-too-brief and trembling years of piety” and “ceased in his formal obedience to Jewish law”, but also discovered the pietistic sect, the Hasidim. As a student of philosophy in Vienna in the 1890s he encountered both the anarchist poet and propagandist Gustav Landauer and the Zionist movement. He was Landauer’s collaborator, and after Landauer’s murder in the massacres following the Munich ‘council republic’ in the wake of the First World War, his executor. Buber’s relations with Zionism were stormy. For him it had nothing to do with hopes for a Jewish state: “Although for many Zionism became the cloak of pride, the instrument of masking their alienation and lack of roots in European soil, it was for Buber the means of renewing roots, the ultimate device of re-establishing, not sundering, contact with the European tradition”, as well as with the ideology of co-operative settlements propagated by secular, socialist pioneers like Aaron David Gordon.

In the cataclysm that befell Germany, Buber left in 1938 and was appointed professor of social philosophy at the Hebrew University at Jerusalem. There he was more isolated, ideologically, than at any time in his life. “During the strife that accompanied the prelude and consummation of the State of Israel, Buber assumed a position (the natural consequence of his spiritual Zionism) which alienated vast elements of the Israeli community. Arguing with Judah Magnes, Ernst Simon and others that the only solution to the Jewish problem was a bi-national state in which the Arabs and Jews should jointly participate and share, he aroused great bitterness and resentment.”

In 1951 Buber was criticised for accepting the Goethe Prize of the University of Hamburg. Was he not, it was asked, in too much haste to forgive? His reply was to accept another German prize and, in doing so, to say these words:

About a decade ago a considerable number of Germans - there must have been many thousands of them - under the indirect command of the German government and the direct command of its representatives, killed millions of my people in a systemati-

cally prepared and executed procedure whose organised cruelty cannot be compared with any previous historical event. I, who am one of those who remained alive, have only in a formal sense a common humanity with those who took part in this action. They have so radically removed themselves from this human sphere, so transposed themselves into a sphere of monstrous inhumanity inaccessible to my conception, that not even hatred, much less an overcoming hatred, was able to arise in me. And what am I that I could here presume to forgive!

When I think of the German people in the days of Auschwitz and Treblinka, I behold, first of all, the great many who knew that the monstrous event was taking place and did not oppose it. But my heart, which is acquainted with the weakness of men, refuses to condemn my neighbour for not prevailing upon himself to become a martyr. Next there emerges before me the mass of those who remained ignorant of what was withheld from the German public, and who did not try to discover what reality lay behind the rumours which were circulating. When I have these men in mind, I am gripped by the thought of the anxiety, likewise well known to me, of the human creature before a truth which he fears he cannot face. But finally there appears before me, from reliable reports, some who have become as familiar to me by sight, action and voice as if they were friends, those who refused to carry out the orders and suffered death or put themselves to death and those who learned what was taking place and opposed it and were put to death, or those who learned what was taking place and because they could do nothing to stop it killed themselves. I see these men very near before me in that especial intimacy which binds us at all times to the dead and to them alone. Reverence and love for these Germans now fill my heart.

Buber's book *Paths in Utopia*, completed in 1945, is a defence and restatement of that stream in socialist thought that was castigated by Marx and Engels as 'utopian', and was consequently ignored in the histories and university courses on political ideas. It focuses in particular on the anarchist tradition represented by Proudhon, Kropotkin and Landauer. On the issue of *ends* and *means*, he explains that:

Kropotkin summed up the basic view of the ends in a single sentence: the fullest evidence of individuality 'will combine with the highest development of voluntary association in all its aspects, in all possible degrees and for all possible purposes; an association that is always changing, that bears in itself the elements of its own duration, that takes on the forms which best correspond at any given moment to the manifold strivings of all'. This is precisely what Proudhon had wanted in the maturity of his thought. It may be contended that the Marxist objective is not essentially different in constitution; but at this point yawning chasms open out before us which can only be bridged by that special form of Marxist utopics, a chasm between, on the one side, the transformation to be consummated some time in the future - no one knows how long after the final victory of the revolution - and on the other, the road to revolution and beyond it, which road is characterised by a far-reaching centralism that permits no individual features and no individual initiative. Uniformity as a means is to change miraculously into multiplicity as an end; compulsion

into freedom. As against this the 'utopian' or non-Marxist socialist desires a means commensurate with his ends; he refuses to believe that in our reliance on the future 'leap' we have to have now the direct opposite of what we are striving for; he believes rather than we must create here and now the space *now* possible for the thing for which we are striving, so that it may come to fulfilment then; he does not believe in the post-revolutionary leap, but he does believe in revolutionary continuity.

He was writing, of course, long before the 'forty wasted years' of the imposition of Marxist regimes on Eastern Europe. But when we examine capitalist society, Buber goes on: "we see that it is a society inherently poor in structure, and growing poorer every day". (By the structure of a society is to be understood its social content or community content: a society can be called structurally rich to the extent that it is built up of genuine societies: that is local communes and trade communes and their step-by-step association.) He compared Proudhon's views with those of Saint-Simon: "Saint-Simon started from the reform of the state, Proudhon from the transformation of society. A genuine reconstruction of society can only begin with a radical alternation of the relationship between the social and political order. It can no longer be a matter of substituting one political regime for another, but of the emergence, in place of a political regime grafted upon society, of a regime expressive of society itself."

Buber sees Kropotkin as amplifying Proudhon's thought in stating the simple antithesis between the principles of the struggle for existence and mutual help. He regards Kropotkin's earlier theory of the state as historically under-substantiated and sees as more useful the later view Kropotkin expressed in the French edition of 1913 of his *Modern Science and Anarchism*: "All through the history of our civilisation, two contrary traditions, two trends, have faced one another; the Roman tradition and the national tradition; the imperial and the federal; the authoritarian and the libertarian".

And he thinks that Gustav Landauer's step beyond Kropotkin consists in his insight into the State. For Landauer, "the state is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of human behaviour; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently".

He examines the ideas of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, and shows how in their attitudes to co-operatives and workers' councils, as well as to the old Russian communal institutions, the *mir* and the *artel*, these are seen simply as tools in the political struggle. "From the standpoint of Leninism", said Stalin, "the collective economies and the Soviets as well, are taken as a form of organisation, a weapon and nothing but a weapon". One cannot in the nature of things, comments Buber, "expect a little tree that has been turned into a club to put forth leaves".

Everything about Buber's social philosophy draws him towards the co-operative movement, whether seen as consumer co-ops, producer co-ops or the idea of co-operative living. He begins with the obvious comment that:

...for the most part the running of large co-operative institutions has become more and more like the running of capitalist ones, and the bureaucratic principle has completely ousted, over a wide field, the voluntary principle, once prized as the most precious and indispensable possession of the cooperative movement. This is especially clear in countries where consumer societies have, in increasing measure, worked together with the state and the municipalities, and Charles Gide was certainly not

far wrong when he called to mind the fable of the wolf disguised as a shepherd and voiced the fear that, instead of making the state 'co-operative' we should only succeed in making the co-operative 'static'.

Those of us who have spent a lifetime as members of ordinary retail co-operative societies in Britain would no doubt agree. We have seen the internal politics of the co-operative movement used as a stepping-stone to office by politicians of the left. At the same time, we have watched (and this was a factor that Buber failed to observe) the local branch managers of retail co-operative societies lured away by a doubling of their wages by the capitalist chain of retail supermarkets.

But Buber moved on to examine the repeated attempts in the previous 150 years in both Europe and America to found co-operative settlements. He found that he had to apply the word *failure* not merely to those attempts which, after a short existence, either disintegrated completely or took on what he saw as a capitalist complexion, this going over to the enemy camp. He also applied a similar criticism to co-operative efforts which had aimed at a wider style of co-operative living, but in isolation from the rest of the world.

For the real, the truly structural task of the new village communes begins with their *federation*, that is, their union under the same principle that operates in their internal structure. Even where, as with the Dukhobors in Canada, a sort of federation itself continues to be isolated and exerts no attractive and educative influence on society as a whole, with the result that the task never gets beyond its beginnings and, consequently, there can be no talk of success in the socialist sense. It is remarkable that Kropotkin saw in these two elements - isolation of the settlements from one another and isolation from the rest of society - the effective causes of failure even as ordinarily understood.

If the 'full co-operative' in which production and consumption are united and industry is complemented by agriculture, is to become the cell of a new society, it is necessary, Buber argues, that "there should emerge a network of settlements, territorially based and federatively constructed, without dogmatic rigidity, allowing the most diverse social forms to exist side by side, but always aiming at the new organic whole". He believed, in 1945, that there was one effort "which justifies our speaking of success in the socialistic sense, and that is in the Jewish Village Commune in its various forms, as found in Palestine". He called the Kibbutz movement a signal non-failure - he could not say a signal success, because he was too aware of the setbacks and disappointments, of the intrusion of politics, and of the "lamentable fact that the all-important attitude of neighbourly relationship has not been adequately developed", and of how much remained to be done.

There are two poles of socialism, Buber concluded, between which our choice lies, "one we must designate - so long as *Russia* has not undergone an essential inner change - by the formidable name of Moscow. The other I would make bold to call *Jerusalem*".

This polarity has not worn well. Nearly half a century later, there may well be essential inner changes in Moscow, though not in the direction Buber might have hoped. As for Jerusalem, few would see it as a beacon of socialism. It was as long ago as the 1920s that Buber warned the Zionist movement that if the Jews in Palestine did not live *with* the Arabs as well as *next* to them, they would find themselves living in enmity towards them.

In 1950, as part of the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Buber delivered his lecture on 'Society and the State'. He begins by citing the view

of the sociologist Robert MacIver that “to identify the social with the political is to be guilty of the grossest of all confusions, which completely bars any understanding of either society or the state”. Buber traces through sages from Plato to Bertrand Russell the confusion between the social principle and the political principle. The political principle is seen in power, authority and dominion, the social principle in families, groups, union, co-operative bodies and communities. It is the same distinction that Jayaprakash Narayan used to draw between *rajniti* (politics of the state) and *lokniti* (politics of the people). For Buber:

... the fact that every people feels itself threatened by the others gives the state its definite unifying powers; it depends upon the instinct of self-preservation of society itself; the latent external crisis enables it when necessary to get the upper hand in internal crises.”

Administration in the sphere of the social principle, says Buber, is equivalent to government in that of the political principle. But:

... all forms of government have this in common: each possesses more power than is required by the given condition; in fact, this excess in the capacity for making dispositions is actually what we understand by political power. The measure of this excess, which cannot of course be computed precisely, represents the difference between Administration and Government. I call it the ‘political surplus’. Its justification derives from the latent state of crisis between nations and within every nation ... the political principle is always stronger in relation to the social principle than the given conditions require. The result is a continuous diminution in social spontaneity.

Ever since I read these words I have found Buber’s terminology far more valuable as an explanation of events in the real world and far more helpful than a dozen lectures on political theory or on sociology. They cut the rhetoric of politics down to size. Apply them, for example, to the politics of Britain in the 1980s. Governments used the populist language of ‘rolling back the frontiers of the state’ and of ‘setting the people free’, while at the same time pursuing policies of ruthless and pervasive central control, as in their war against the slightest independent policies of local authorities. Voluntary organisations too were manipulated into becoming the vehicle of government policy. The ‘latent external crisis’ in the form of the Cold War or the Falklands campaign was exploited ‘when necessary to get the upper hand’, and when the Cold War collapsed, the Gulf became a convenient successor.

If Buber’s categories are observable in a relatively free society like Britain, they apply with dramatic force to the totalitarian regimes characteristic of the twentieth century, which invariably sought to destroy all those social institutions they could not themselves dominate. The importance of the Catholic church in Poland or the Lutheran church in East Germany was not a matter of religious dogma, but in fact that they were among the few remaining alternative foci of power. Buber’s “continuous diminution in social spontaneity” is a feature of the Nazi period in Germany or the Bolshevik period in the Soviet Union, or indeed of Pinochet’s Chile or Ceauşescu’s Romania, that every survivor records.

Like Buber, I believe that the conflict between the social principle and the political principle is a permanent aspect of the human condition. He did us a service in excavating from Kropotkin’s

always optimistic writings, the observation that the conflict between the authoritarian tradition and the libertarian tradition are as much part of the history of the future as of the past, and Landauer's view that this is not something that can be destroyed by a revolution.

If we want to weaken the state we must strengthen society, since the power of one is the measure of the weakness of the other. Buber's exploration of the paths to utopia, far from confirming an acceptance of the way things are, confirms, as do several of my influences, that the fact that there is no route-map to utopia does not mean that there are no routes to more accessible destinations.

From Colin Ward, *Influences*, published by Resurgence Books, by permission of the author.

# *Robert Nisbet*

## Radical and Sociological Pluralism

### Radical Pluralism

By radical pluralism I mean primarily the anarchist and syndicalist and guild-socialist ideas which began to flower in the latter part of the nineteenth century and which remain viable even at the present time in one form or another... If I deal with them briefly it is chiefly because we can see much of their import in the philosophies of the ecological community based on the ideas of Proudhon and Kropotkin ... (discussed earlier in the book).

The same impulses that led Proudhon or Kropotkin to focus on the natural, autonomous community, which would draw equally from the forces of physical nature and civilisation, led them also to espouse a philosophy of authority luminous with decentralisation and pluralism. For how could the ecological community exist in its multiple forms unless it were granted the kind of autonomy and basis for diversity of type and function that go only with the larger structures of authority characterised by federalism and decentralisation?

Whereas *conservative* pluralism saw its mission essentially as the reinforcement of historic and traditional groups and communities, and liberal pluralism was concerned chiefly with relationships between the democratic state and a structure of social authority that would promise the highest degree of individual freedom, what we find in radical pluralism is a vision of a totally new society, which would be built on the ruins of capitalism and nationalism. But from our point of view here, the chief distinction of the radical vision of the future is that it is in its way fully as pluralist, localist and decentralist as anything to be found among the liberals and conservatives who looked to Tocqueville and Burke for inspiration.

We find little or nothing in Marxist writing and in the mainstream of socialist and communist pronouncements, about the kind of matters that profoundly interested such anarchists as Proudhon and Kropotkin and such guild socialists who came to intellectual prominence in England, especially at the turn of the century: nothing of any significance about the balance between physical nature and social life, the indispensability of localism, the necessity of pluralism in function and allegiance, the values of decentralisation, or the crucial importance to man and state alike of diversity in association and the intermediary functions of association. Marx's hatred and contempt for anything smacking of utopianism, diverting attention from the class struggle as the sole arbiter of history, and new forms of social organisations, led him to neglect almost completely most of the aspects of radicalism that figure so prominently in the writings of the pluralists - anarchists included.

Nevertheless despite the immense power of Marxist thought in radical circles during the past century, the pluralist-ecological ideas of the nineteenth century anarchists and syndicalists would appear to be steadily rising in interest and appeal. In utter contrast to Marx, Proudhon felt it vitally important to deal with the nature of power, the distinction between authority and power,

the necessity - for freedom at any rate - of autonomous associations, of decentralisation of the economy, society and state alike, and of federalism as a constitutive principle in all institutions. Only by diversification of society, Proudhon declared, can freedom be assured. "Multiply your associations and be free" Proudhon told workers and all others. Unlike the Marxists, who thought only in terms of a single centrally led proletariat and, for the distant future a 'classless' society conceived, so far as we can determine, much in the fashion of Rousseau's democracy of the general will, both Proudhon and Kropotkin stressed the need for diversification of all society and also the importance of building the good society, with or without revolution (Kropotkin, for one, did not at all like, or even anticipate, revolution), based on the natural communities that may already be seen forming even under capitalism. Whereas Marx and his followers tended to depreciate the family tie, many of them declaring for what was once called 'free love' and the elimination of kinship values of any kind, both Proudhon and Kropotkin, and all anarchists since with few exceptions, lauded the family relationship, seeing in the varied forms of love and attachment that it represents key elements of the whole social system.

From the beginning, the anarchists expressed much historically grounded dislike of Soviet Russia. Kropotkin, as we have seen, was profoundly critical of Russian communism, staying away from Russia until shortly before his death, going back indeed only to die where he was born. Nor have any other anarchists in the twentieth century found anything but a monolithic political despotism in either Russian or any other form of national-collectivist socialism all, without exception, strongly structured by militarism. The radical pluralism that began with the anti-Marxist anarchists and syndicalists of the nineteenth century remains to the present moment the strongest and the most consistent attack from the left upon modern nationalism and political centralisation. Joined as it is with one variant or another of the utopian-ecological community, there is nothing surprising in the fact that such pluralism, whatever its faults, is the closest thing we have to a genuine ideological alternative to Western society as it is presently constituted.

## **Sociological Pluralism**

The discipline of sociology largely arose in the nineteenth century among the very circumstances in which we have found the beginning of modern pluralism. August Comte, who founded sociology as a systematic discipline, regarded the French Revolution very much as did the liberal pluralists like Lammenais and de Tocqueville. He too found revolutionary centralism oppressive and the banning of free association in the Revolution and in the following Napoleonic period inimical to freedom and justice. He made the values of federalism, functional representation, regionalism and localism vital to the success of the new positive society that he hoped would shortly replace the nationalist collectivism rising all over Europe in the aftermath of the French Revolution.

Likewise Frederic Le Play, perhaps the outstanding empirical sociologist of the nineteenth century, made these pluralist ideals basic in his philosophy. His influential book *Social Reform in France* (1864) based upon his earlier researches in comparative social and political organisation, made the decentralisation of power the foremost objective of a new France. Closely related to this objective were his recommendations for a greatly vitalised kinship system, for maximum use of social and cultural voluntary organisations, for revival of the traditional importance of the local community, and for planning that would be regional rather than nationalist in emphasis.



Precisely the same basic values are to be found, though in modified form, in the writings of the two nineteenth century men who remain to this moment the most creative forces in contemporary sociological theory: Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. They are well enough known for their contributions to the central areas of present-day sociology. They are not so well known for their hostility to many of the same forces that had occupied the minds of conservative, liberal and radical pluralists alike, for their espousal of generally pluralist values.

Adapted from *The Social Philosophers*, HEB 1974 and Paladin 1976

## *Laurie Taylor*

# The Last Giant

Professor Ronald Fletcher died recently. You may have seen the obituaries. He gave me my first university job at York, but we fell out badly years ago over an issue about a colleague's teaching that somehow grew into a campus-wide argument. It was a matter he considered so central to academic values as to warrant his resignation, but to others it still appears something that a compromise might have settled.

In happier times, I had attended his subsidiary sociology classes at Birkbeck College in London where he provided wonderful theoretical refreshment for dozens of psychology students whose minds were being shrivelled elsewhere in the college by the austere principles of behaviourism - the insistent belief that explanations of human learning, memory, language and cognition might eventually be gleaned from the behaviour of a few thousand rats running greedily up and down T-mazes in the lab upstairs.

What made his teaching so impressive was the sheer sweep of his sociological imagination - his capacity to range casually across whole civilisations and their central institutions, while insisting with a Comtean fervour on sociology's capacity to discover significant historical patterns of change and development.

Nothing infuriated him more than those who failed to recognise that fashionable contemporary notions were often little more than re-workings of ideas to be found in the weighty tomes of his beloved 'founding fathers'. And none of us had any doubt at all that Ron was well qualified to take his own place on the shoulders of such giants as Spencer, Weber, Durkheim, Pareto. He was in every way a proper theorist.

When he left York, I even had some vague hopes that I might emulate my hero, become a proper theorist myself. I wrote an historico-analytical article with a central section I still can't understand, struck a few other-worldly poses at staff-graduate seminars, and threw away such tell-tale signs of crass empiricism as punched IBM cards and completed questionnaires.

But somehow I never looked or sounded the part. And in any case, as we all realised the moment Doctor Martens arrived on the departmental scene, the time was already running out for traditional grand theorists.

Doc Martens was way up the ladder of academic sociology. Beyond empiricism. Beyond old-fashioned grand theory. He simply called himself a *meta*-theorist. Traditional theorists - Weberians, Marxists, Parsonians - could count themselves lucky to go one round with Martens. No sooner would they tentatively offer a theoretical insight than they would find themselves reeling under a battery of rigorous epistemological demands.

"What exactly are the grounds for your theory", Martens would enquire. "In what sense is your theory the product of a particular regime of truth, with the term 'truth' being, of course, used in the relativistic sense of the culturally established means for producing and validating such 'truths'?"

And even when we found ways in staff-graduate seminars to cover our tracks by tucking in an early acknowledgement of the historically determined grounds of our present discourse, we'd still find ourselves swept aside by Martens' extraordinary ability to move up one more intellectual gear: his capacity to become, without apparent effort, a *meta meta* theorist who could not only question the grounds of everything that was being said around him, but also question the grounds that informed his very activity of questioning those grounds.

It was a path that was to bury the traditional grand theorist, a path that led away from ideas of historical convergences and development to the announcement of the death of meta-narratives. Traditional theorists either left the scene or embraced the unheroic ironies of postmodern thought and quietly proceeded to saw through the branch on which they'd been comfortably seated for most of their academic lives.

Courses may still bear such traditional labels as Social Theory and Institutions but they are likely to be stronger on the knowing glances of postmodernism than the known histories of other civilisations or other social theories. Indeed, no sooner are today's students exposed to a single grand theory than they are asked 'to outline critically' its theoretical invalidity, no sooner introduced to the fundamental features of another type of society, than invited to 'discuss and evaluate' the possibility of knowing otherworlds. Even teachers who admit privately to being unable to comprehend Derrida are happy to undermine in students' work anything that remotely resembles a claim to 'truth'.

But something else has happened. The machismo has gone out of theory. Right from the sixth form, when spotty boys tried to stop girls from enjoying David Cassidy and Donny Osmond by insisting that the real meaning of popular music was to be found only in the work of such cultural critics as Bob Dylan and John Lennon, theorising seemed as much a male activity as deep sea angling. It came as no surprise at all to anyone to discover a few years later at university that serious theorists were somehow always men and that the origins of sociology could be traced back to 'founding fathers'.

Now we have feminist theory. Quite enough of it to fill whole courses. Quite enough to ensure that the empty spaces left by the retreat of Marxism, functionalism, interactionism, and Parsonianism, are well filled. And while men may acknowledge the significance of feminist theory, you can tell by some of their half-hearted references to its 'obvious relevance' and by their repetitive mispronunciations of 'Kristeva' and 'Irigaray' that their hearts are not exactly in it.

It's all a long way from those trans-historical theoretical classes with Ron Fletcher at Birkbeck. Although, even then, there was the odd hint of theoretical irreverence in the air.

I can remember one occasion when Ron had been engaged in a typically bravura account of the affinities between legal institutions in such disparate civilisations as oriental despotism, Greek and Roman city states, feudalism and pre-industrial society. As he paced around the room, he followed his usual practice of locating individual civilisations and institutions in space above him as though they were orbiting planets. Right in the middle of a particularly complex gestural demonstration of the historical interdependencies of law and other social forms, the door to his left suddenly opened. He turned quickly, and dramatically lowered his right arm to his side.

"Christ", whispered an embryonic deconstructionist from the far end of the table. "He's just dropped feudalism!"

## *Ronald Fletcher*

# Comte for the World Today

There are those who think that Auguste Comte is dead; that he lies buried in the cemetery of Père Lachaise in the heart of Paris. But they are mistaken. The spirit of a man is alive in the work to which he devoted himself, and which he achieved, whilst he was in the world. It can still be felt and known there. And the spirit of Comte is certainly alive today. These are those scholars, too, in Europe and America who think similarly about Comte's ideas: that - formulated to confront the changing society of the nineteenth century, following upon the American and French revolutions - they are now dead. Few of them now read his books, few teach him, even in courses of sociology, the subject which he - more than any other single thinker - founded. But they, too, are mistaken. Comte's ideas are not only alive today, they are vitally relevant to the contemporary conditions and predicaments of human societies throughout the world. Furthermore, the scholars and politicians of today have not yet caught up with them; have failed to understand them; and still fail to realise the truth and vision that lies in them for judging the course of mankind's history and guiding our action at our present historic juncture. It is a timely and salutary exercise, then, to reconsider Comte's ideas now and, though briefly, I would like to draw attention to four of them: i) his *perspective* of historical judgement; ii) the nature of his 'positivism'; iii) his *religion of humanity*; and iv) his conception of, and proposal for, a *Council of Europe*.

Some hundred and fifty years ago, Comte characterised mankind's contemporary predicament in this way:

A social system in its decline, a new system arrived at maturity and approaching its completion - such is the fundamental character which the general progress of civilisation has assigned to the present epoch ... Two movements, differing in their nature, agitate society; one a movement of disorganisation, the other of reorganisation. By the former ... society is hurried towards a profound moral and political chaos which appears to menace it with a near and inevitable dissolution. By the latter it is guided to the definitive social conditions of the human race, that best suited to its nature, and in which all progressive movements should receive their completest development and more direct application. In the co-existence of these two opposed tendencies consists the grand crisis now experienced by the most civilised nations; and this can only be understood when viewed under both aspects.

In this, however, he was decidedly *not* thinking only of the few decades following the French Revolution. His *historical perspective* was much larger than this. He believed that the detailed processes whereby one social system was transformed into another took *seven or eight centuries* for their fulfilment. Our own personal lifetimes, the time-span of two or three generations, are very brief periods only within the time-scale of the historical transformation of societies, and of

their interconnections in wider areas of culture and civilisation. It took seven or eight hundred years (to the eleventh or twelfth centuries) for the growth of the Medieval System out of the ruins of the Graeco-Roman world, and would take at least as long again for the growth of the modern world out of the Middle Ages.

With this realistic perspective in mind, and with our own experiences and observations of the increasingly global implications of the spread of science, technology and industrialisation - violent and catastrophic as they have been, and are bound to be for some time to come - it is quite plain that we are *still* within this same revolutionary formation of the new social system in the modern world, and *still* need the vision of this long perspective. Strangely, social historians have not yet seen it. They still think of 'revolutions' as social and political upheavals which happen explosively, briefly, abruptly, but fail to see the very long processes of gradual, and then radically disturbing change which underlie them. Comte's perspective, then, is still essentially correct and needful of our own judgement on our own situation in our own time.

Comte characterised the basis of the new social system by the modern world which was in the making as '*the positive state*' - distinguishing it from the 'theological' and 'metaphysical' states which had preceded it. By *positive* knowledge, he meant simply that body of propositions and generalisations which was *testable* in terms of our observations and experience of the world - freed from the earlier ages-long domination of explanations in terms of gods, spirits or philosophically conceived 'essences' which went altogether beyond the range of testability and carried with them structures of power: of priesthoods and divine rulers, with close bonds between them. Part of the proof and testability of scientific knowledge was its further value as the only reliable basis for *utility*: for technical application in the progressive improvement of human welfare. By positive science, all Comte meant was ... *science*, free to expand its range of knowledge and apply its findings for human benefit. But '*positivism*' in modern philosophy has become a narrow, sterile thing: thought of in terms of 'logical positivism' and its subsequent offshoots; varying schools of thought restricting 'knowledge' to propositions resting on 'sense data' and the like, or falling only within certain restricted forms of language-usage altogether excluding from the range of 'possible knowledge' such areas of human discourse as the arts, morality and religious experience with all its profundities, doubts and questions which probe into the innermost depths of our nature and the most subtle nuances of our awareness. The *positivism* - the *positive philosophy* - of Comte was far more than this, containing all the dimensions modern philosophy has discarded. For Comte religious thinking, metaphysical thinking, philosophical speculation of the freest kind, all remained of value - and could be the source of profound insight, of *imaginative hypothesis* about the world of our experience. The arts - literature, music, painting - were all extolled by Comte as kinds of creative and appreciative activity by which all dimensions of the human spirit were enriched. Indeed, each of the arts was a distinctive language of the human spirit, which had its own area of sensibility and experience to explore, and, in its own creative form, to express. It is significant that, in England, the most influential book on 'logical positivism' carries the title *Language, Truth and Logic* - indicating the very precisely limited boundaries of what it takes true and valid knowledge to be. For Comte, a similar book would most probably have been entitled *Life, Languages and Truth* - in which all the sciences and arts were seen to have their own specific voices; were different avenues for exploring and expressing truths which lay within all the dimensions of our human nature and experience. And for Comte too, the entire end of mankind's efforts in knowledge, and technological and political action, ended in *moral philosophy*. No matter how accurately knowledge was established, the crucial question always

remained: how *ought* we to put it to use, how *ought* we to live, on what ethical principles *ought* we to regulate our lives - necessarily interrelated with each other as we are in our own particular communities and in the world of nations at large. Comte's own conception of *positivism*, then, needs a new statement and emphasis: taking mankind away from the littleness of logic-chopping into the full enjoyment and exploration of life and art.

Comte knew, however, that scientific knowledge unavoidably raised questions for the religions which - established over millennia - had been the basis, both in particular societies and in larger areas of civilisation, for bringing into relationship with each other, and regulating, man's feeling, thinking and action. Such systems of doctrine, ritual and the power they carried with them, were bound to be disturbed. Indeed, *they would have to give way to the new knowledge which carried the undeniable authority of testability*. Many aspects of the religions of the world - including their assumed authority - would have to fall. At the same time, the feeling, thinking and acting of men in society would continue to need *some* basis of coordination, would have to rest on *some* agreed basis. In many areas of human life too (*social*, in the commemoration of significant events of the part or, as in marriage, in significant institutions of the present; *personal* in connection with the perennial turning points of human experience - celebrating the significance of joy at the birth of a child, or meeting the grief and bereavement of death), it seemed that men needed *ritual*. Somehow, then, in having to leave his hold on his ancient roots and come to terms with new and uncharted conditions, mankind had to face the task of formulating some new *religion of humanity*: a new doctrinal and ritual foundation which would support the clarified principles of morality and justice.

Has it not become perfectly plain in our time that, as the transforming influences of science and industrial technology - coupled with those political and military forces which, with the ending of colonialism and the liberation of hitherto subjugated and exploited peoples - sweep throughout all the societies in the world, the conflicts between old and new are reaching ever new degrees of intensity? The older powers of religion have a great tenacity. They are not going to be easily relinquished. Nor is the deep-rooted hold which their beliefs and rituals have over millions of people as they face the new situations of difficulty, bewilderment, and loss in social and personal upheaval. Not the calm and balanced temper of reason and science, not a careful and reflective consideration of moral, social and political dilemmas, but *fanaticism* now dominates the scene and characterises the radical transformations of the world. Indeed, so deeply established still are the powers of priestly hierarchies and the instilled sentiments of peoples; so prone are they to be inflamed by the very conditions of conflict within which they exist; so vulnerable are they, too, to the deliberate manipulation of those whose power and interests are served by them, that it seems as though their story of sheer destructiveness cannot be stayed. Northern Ireland, the Middle East, Latin America, South East Asia ... the story is the same throughout the world; and more often than not one fanaticism meets another: the tyranny of past dogmas is opposed only by the equal tyranny of present dogmas - the ideologies of totalitarian powers.

The ways of reason, the methods and the findings of science, the application of both in the service of human welfare, the proposals for a new foundation for morality, justice and social order, which Comte's system and his religion of humanity envisage, advocate and offer seems helpless to touch these situations of uncontrollable violence, these massive tragedies. And yet ... this is the effort which must be made. This is the course which any satisfactory resolution of our present problems and the creation of a 'new social system' must take. It is the only way, and this leads to Comte's fourth idea.

Realising the great problems mankind would have to confront in undergoing and working through this transformation, he proposed at least one way of approaching them. He proposed a coming together of the advanced societies of the West, the formation of a Council of Europe, as a basis for helping those people's of societies elsewhere who were bound to experience these upheavals but were not so well-equipped to meet and deal with them.

The existing crisis is manifestly common to the several nations of Europe although ... it is treated by each of them as if it were purely national. Yet it is evident that a European crisis demands a European treatment. And, in truth, each of the nations of Western Europe is, by the special character of its civilisation, placed in the most favourable position for forwarding such or such a part of the general system, whence the immediate advantage of their co-operation becomes evident. But this consideration proves that all European nations alike should work in common to found the new system ... It is manifest that the force destined to shape and establish it, having to produce the combination of the different civilised nations, should be a European power.

It is clear that the nations of Western Europe, by the common character and connectedness of their civilisation, both as regards its gradual development and its actual condition, constitute one great community, the members of which possess reciprocal rights, less extended no doubt but of the same nature with those belonging to the different portions of a single state.

Wise and generous intervention of the West on behalf of our sister nations who are less advanced will form a noble field for social art when based on sound scientific principles. Relative without being arbitrary, zealous and yet always temperate; such should be the spirit of this intervention; and thus conducted, it will form a system of moral and political action far nobler than the proselytism of theology or the extension of military empire."

Some hundred and fifty years or so after his proposal, a Council of Europe *has* been formed: but out of what context and, even now, to what ends? England, France, Germany, Italy ... consider the savagery with which, during our own century, these "advanced nations of the West" have behaved towards each other, and towards the peoples overseas in their colonial territories. The fields of Europe hide the littered bones of millions of men who had no initial hatred of each other - indeed, who were filled with idealistic devotion to their own land - but who were flung into the trenches of political and military obduracy and blindness through the conceptions of 'national interest' and 'victory', and the calculations and manipulations of those in high places. And did not the treaty of these advanced nations, following this 'Great War', create the conditions for, and cause, the next? The evils which subsequently arose in Germany were most certainly great evils, but would they even have arisen had it not been for the vengeful policies of national heads against a whole people? - the dividing of a vanquished population, the creation of new nations to surround it, the inflicting of reparations which many warned against, the creation of an inflation which brought suffering to millions who had not been responsible for war, as no other people in any nation had been responsible for war? "There they lie ... friend and foeman ... man born of man and born of woman". Who now can distinguish and disentangle the bones which lie under the fields of Flanders? Are not the 'War Memorials' erected in all our countries really monumental

and tragic commemorations of 'human sacrifice'? One cannot help feeling that these dead cry out. And have they achieved their end: **'The Great War to End All War'**? Most certainly they have not.

And how, too, following these wars did the Council of Europe come to be formed? Was it not formed out of considerations of national necessity? - out of national interests, many of which are still in conflict? - out of the felt necessity for a shared defence against a newly conceived common enemy? What is it that the Council of Europe - with all its committees, civil servants, Council of Ministers and mountains of (dare we say massively *unread?*) publications - discusses? With what news does it fill our breakfast-time newspapers and television screens? Does it not consist of such items as: The Common Agricultural Policy, Butter and Grain Mountains - and how to dispose of them, The Common Market Budget - and the size of each nation's contributions - how much each nation pays in and whether it gets back as much as it gave? How much attention is devoted even to the United Nations? - to rendering effective the activities of UNESCO? - surely, potentially one of the most effective avenues for accomplishing international understanding? Is it not a sad story compared to the vision Auguste Comte had?

It is surely a timely exercise, then, to recall and present again Comte's ideas. It is not only that they are still relevant to our time but, much more than that, that it is *vitally urgent* that they should be remembered, reconsidered and employed. *The perspective* of Comte's vision - of mankind's past history, his present situation and foreseeable future destiny; the nature of the new *positivism* with all the dimensions he conceived; the movement away from religions of the past, with doctrines and powers no longer supportable, to a *religion of humanity* retaining the best of their aspirations and humane qualities but resting with greater cogency within the context of the new knowledge; and a *Council of Europe* oriented towards the helping of peoples' suffering deprivation throughout the world... these ideas, a hundred and fifty years old, need presenting again clearly, forcefully, compellingly.

I close with a quotation from an English sociologist of recent times - Professor Morris Ginsberg - who thought well of Comte. He wrote:

The history of humanity is the story of an increasing conflict between the rational and irrational elements in human nature. Factors making for unity and co-operation are blended with others making for rivalry and exclusiveness, fears and jealousies. As the scale of operation expands, the conflict is embittered by the growing complexity of life and the multiplication of opportunities for discord. The notion that this process can, and ought, to be consciously controlled or directed, has emerged in theory. But the conception of a self-directed humanity is new, and as yet vague in the extreme. To work out its full theoretical implications and, with the aid of other sciences, to inquire into the possibilities of its realisation, may be said to be the ultimate object of sociology.

That "ultimate object" of the science he created was clearly seen, formulated and stated by Comte. In the world today it is the irrational elements of human nature - fevered within the contexts of political struggle - the "rivalries, fears and jealousies", the fanaticisms, which are dominant. It could be the great testimony of this conference to reassert the existence of another way; to call attention, again, to the vision for the guidance of our thought, feeling and action which the ideas of Comte still contain.



***Robert S. Lynd***  
**Why is Sociology?**

There would be no social science if there were not perplexities in living in a culture that calls for solutions. And it is precisely the role of the social sciences to be troublesome, to disconcert the habitual arrangements by which we manage to live along, and to demonstrate the possibility of change in more adequate directions.

From *Knowledge for What?*

## *Angus Calder*

# Samuel Smiles: The Unexpurgated Version

If Samuel Smiles had possessed a less smirky surname - if he'd had a horribly dour cognomen like his Scottish compatriot Andrew Ure, author of a *Philosophy of Manufactures* - he might not now be so horribly misunderstood. 'Urian' wouldn't have quite the ring of 'Smilesian'. The name immediately evokes an utterly smug exponent of the key Victorian idea of 'self help'. Any man, of whatever rank in society, can advance himself by sober dedicated effort on his own account. As crudely transferred to the Thatcherite Eighties, this idea is taken to imply that rich men have every right to swimming pools in their barricaded mansions, and young blacks in Brixton and jobs on Tyneside have only themselves to blame if they are unemployed. Poverty is a result of indiscipline, sin, insufficient strength of character. 'On your bike ...'

But in fact Smiles's thought derived from the same milieu that produced not only the Victorian trade union movement but also the Cooperative Wholesale Societies which helped poor operatives keep their families fed and clothed. He would have been bewildered by the Thatcherite assertion that there is "no such thing as society". He did not define 'self help' in terms solely of material advance: his criteria were cultural. He thought it was better to be very learned than to be very wealthy. His treatise, *Self Help*, of 1859 needs to be read in its entirety, not raided for selective quotations. It is in fact the work of a confused left wing moralist, blundering into imperialism as a refuge from the implications of the collapse of Chartism and the corruption of working class radicalism by prosperity.

V.G. Kiernan has suggested that imperialism, in its heyday around the time of Smiles' death in 1904, "may seem the outcome less of capitalism's own inner structure, as it was then, than of a peculiar, unique amalgam in Europe and Japan of feudal-monarchical elements still strong and industrial capitalism young and ambitious but still unsure of itself".<sup>1</sup> This reminds us of Joseph Schumpeter's influential view (1919) that imperialism is the outgrowth of pre-bourgeois, pre-capitalist forms of life - of atavism rather than calculation. A close look at Smiles suggests certain routes by which the rationalist, utilitarian, free-standing anti-government, anti-imperialist ideology characteristic of the triumphant manufacturers of Britain when that country was the 'Workshop of the World' elided into emotional and practical support by British businessmen and workers for jingoistic British expansionism.

Smiles' view of the state, as expressed in *Self Help*, is characteristic of the mid-Victorian period: "The function of government is negative and restrictive rather than positive and active, being resolvable principally into protection - protection of life, liberty and property". He is against something he calls 'Caesarism', which he would identify, like other patriotic Britons, with the bluster of European rulers such as Napoleon and his nephew. "Some call for CaeSars, others for Nationalities, and others for Acts of Parliament ... Caesarism is human idolatry in its worst form

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<sup>1</sup> V.G. Kiernan, *Marxism and Imperialism* (1974), page 61.

- a worship of mere power as degrading in its effects as the worship of mere wealth would be. A far healthier doctrine to inculcate among the nations would be that of Self Help; and so soon as it is thoroughly understood and carried into action, Caesarism will be no more".<sup>2</sup>

*Self Help* is implicitly 'anti-imperialist'. The spirit of the remarks just quoted is not easy to reconcile with the ideology of Joseph Chamberlain and Cecil Rhodes. The Smiles familiar to us from the works of social historians, is as a minor prophet of Social Darwinism, a missionary for the middle class world-view among the labouring people who helped make his book a best-seller, a complacent man representative of his times in nothing so much as his complacency. But if one actually reads his most famous book, an intense, confused Smiles appears - and his multifarious other writings confirm the impression that he was deeply self-contradictory. He often seems less a realist than a romantic, less a pragmatist than an idealist, less a man of his times than an anachronism.

Smiles (as surprisingly few people know) was a Scot. He came from Haddington in Lothian. It was a small country town of no more than 4,000 people, relatively remote from the 'industrial revolution'. It gave him a model in his head of how things should be, of "a society of interlocking duties and privileges based on intimate knowledge".<sup>3</sup> Bom in Haddington in 1812 as the son of a small shopkeeper, he lived in this arena of *gemeinschaft*, except for medical studies in Edinburgh, until he was 26 years old.

Jane Welsh, who married Tom Carlyle, was a childhood friend and, coming from their hometown, Smiles was deeply ill at ease with a wider British society dominated by what Carlyle called the 'Cash Nexus'. Cooperation, brotherly feeling, small-town decency, were denied by what he saw in Leeds and London. He had a horror of mobs and crowds, of conformity. He loathed the characteristic 'respectability' of the grand Victorian middle classes based, like that of Dickens' veneerings, on mere appearances. "It means", he wrote in *Thrift* (1875), one of the sequels to *Self Help*, "wearing fine clothes, dwelling in fine houses, and living in fine style. It looks to the outside, the sound, the show, externals. It listens to the chink of gold in the pocket. Moral worth or goodness forms no part of modern respectability".<sup>4</sup> What Smiles wanted was a cultured nation - not a nation of aesthetes, but a community steeped in the disinterested intellectual concerns which had been part of his own upbringing. Haddington in the 1820s had been profusely supplied with schools, libraries, evening classes, self-made entertainment, all reflecting the Scottish educational tradition associated with John Knox, who had himself been bom in the town. Knowledge, in this tradition, is seen as crucial to man's salvation.

But Smiles found that he could not prosper as a doctor there: too much competition. "I wanted to make a living ..."<sup>5</sup> He travelled on the Continent awhile, then went to London, where he experienced acute culture-shock:

I had been brought up in a country town where I knew everybody, even the cocks and hens running about the streets. Now I was in a great city of some of those of the East End, as the latter do of Wales or the Highlands ... Though there is no scandal, there is no help. The people are strangers to each other; each is intent upon his own

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<sup>2</sup> S. Smiles, *Self Help* (1859). The passage about Caesarism was not in the first edition, but added later. For example see Penguin edition (1986), page 21.

<sup>3</sup> K. Fielden, 'Samuel Smiles and Self Help', *Victorian Studies* XII:2 (1968), page 167.

<sup>4</sup> S. Smiles, *Autobiography* (1905), page 66.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, pages 78-79.

business, knowing nothing, and caring less, about what his neighbours are doing or feeling or suffering ...<sup>6</sup>

In London Smiles lived for a while in the same lodging house as Guiseppe Mazzini, the exiled leader of Young Italy, a prime inspirer of the 1848 revolutions and the Italian Risorgimento. He was greatly impressed not only by Mazzini's philanthropy towards his fellow Italians in London, but by Mazzini's patriotic ideas. He continued devoted to the idea of the united nationality of his country, and still spoke hopefully of the revival of cosmopolitanism, of the brotherhood of all men, of the amelioration of all through the work of all.<sup>7</sup>

Smiles moved on to the North of England, as a journalist. He edited, in Leeds, a radical newspaper which was a rival to Feargus O'Connor's famous *Northern Star*. He was, in modern terms, less 'left wing' than the fiery O'Connor, but he was within the broad Chartist movement. He agitated for Household Suffrage and the repeal of the Com Laws. He identified with working class aspirations.

Leeds, a city of 80,000 people, was overwhelmingly working class. Housing conditions in some areas were as bad as in Engels' Manchester. Respectable workers lived crowded in tiny back-to-back dwellings. Sickness and unemployment attacked and destroyed their meagre savings. Yet Smiles was impressed by the "life, industry and energy" he saw. "Although trade was bad, and they had much misery to contend with, they were anxious to help themselves by all conceivable and rightful methods".<sup>8</sup>

He disagreed with the Owenite socialists he met, though he praised their intelligence. He thought that strikes were a way of throwing away capital which could have been used to buy land or buildings - or to set up cooperative production. Yet he admired, in the strike wave which hit the North of England in 1840, the unity of the workers. It showed him what great moral power they had at their command in their beneficent principle of cooperation".<sup>9</sup>

'Self help', as he met it in Leeds at this time, was simply the consciousness of the emerging working class. It was the ideology of the leaders of trade unionism and the cooperative movement, and it was fuelled by evening classes. Self-education became Smiles' most obsessive theme. In Leeds workmen naturalists, workmen poets, were commonplace. In *Self Help* Smiles' greatest approbation, amongst all the people whose improving biographies he cites, clearly goes to such men as Robert Dick of Thurso, the baker-geologist, Thomas Edwards of Banff, the cobbler-naturalist, James Sharples of Lancashire, the blacksmith-artist. The West Riding in the early 1840s was well stocked with young men of similar bent, eager to collaborate in mutual improvement societies.

In March 1845, Smiles was asked to give a lecture to such a society. In it he made his own position on the 'Education of the Working Classes' plain. It was to be seen "not as a means of raising a few clever and talented men into a higher rank in life, but of elevating and improving the whole class ... What matters it how much steam power we employ, if it keep man more than ever yoked to the car of toil? Man, I insist, has a *right to leisure* ... leisure to think, leisure to read, leisure to enjoy."

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pages 78-79.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, page 72.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, page 103.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pages 103-104.

This lecture was the germ of *Self Help*. It was well received, and Smiles began to think that a book written in the same spirit might be useful. So he started to enlarge the lecture, adding examples of virtuous self help.<sup>10</sup>

Smilesian self help relates in its origins to the motivation which took British workers in hoardes at this time to the frontier settlements of North America and Australasia. Smiles himself wrote guides for intending colonists. "The guide to America was especially successful".<sup>11</sup>

118,592 people emigrated from Britain in 1841, 128,344 in 1842, even before the spate of Irish emigrants during and after the famine and even before the lure of the Gold Rushes. The figure for 1852 was 368,764.<sup>12</sup> Men sold their few belongings, added the price of hard-won savings, and ventured on the hazards of the ocean in quest of prosperity - and leisure. These far outnumbered the 70,000 or so people who subscribed to Feargus O'Connor's Land Plan, where the idea was that a Chartist Company should buy up and divide small holdings or estates in Britain itself.<sup>13</sup> Only 250 members were eventually settled, but the pull was the same in both cases. The worker in the new industrial cities was commonly still, at heart, like Smiles himself, a countryman, not reconciled to long hours of mill work or the squalid street of back-to-back houses.

Smilesian Self Help, in its origins, was an ideology arising at the point of conflict between agrarian values and the pressures of 'industrial revolution' in an atmosphere charged with democratic social protest and in a growingly literate society. Its initial direction was as much outward, away from Britain, as it was inwards, into British society. It was, for Smiles himself, an internationally valid creed appropriate to the 1840s when men and women all over Europe were seized with patriotic and democratic ideas. And, indeed, Garibaldi admired Smiles as much as Smiles admired Mazzini. The rhetoric of Smiles' extraordinary *History of Ireland* (1844) evokes at times the choruses of operas in which Verdi insinuated the patriotic imperative. Smiles denounces Henry VIII of England as a 'monster', describes Elizabeth I as "heartless and selfish enough for anything" and characterises her reign in Ireland as "one of the darkest and bloodiest passages to be found in history". Things got even worse, it seems, in the eighteenth century - Smiles cannot describe, he says, "the daily and hourly sufferings of a whole people, endured without intermission from infancy to old age - from the cradle to the grave", until Grattan's Irish Parliament after 1782 "began to sympathise with the nation, to imbibe its patriotism, and to lead it onward in its struggles for liberty". No wonder Smiles could sell America so effectively to emigrants: at this point in his life he was in effect a democratic republican. If only the Irish peasantry had been better armed and led in their 1798 rebellion, it "would have taken rank in history with the struggles for national independence in Switzerland, Scotland and the United States of America". Smiles went over the top in his praise of Daniel O'Connell, leader to greatness of the Irish 'People' (Smiles' capital) while "the civilised world looked on in admiration". In Ireland "the people themselves - did they but know it - hold in their own hands all the powers of the State ... it only requires their united will and energy to accomplish their own complete emancipation - social, political and religious".<sup>14</sup>

Smiles links the claim of democracy with that of the working class. He believed that abolition of the Com Laws was in the interests of the British working class, and his greatest political

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pages 131-133.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, page 127.

<sup>12</sup> W.S. Shepperson, *British Emigration to North America* (1957), page 259.

<sup>13</sup> J. McAskill, 'The Chartist Land Plan' in *Chartist Studies* edited by A. Briggs (1959), pages 304-341.

<sup>14</sup> S. Smiles, *History of Ireland* (1844), pages 47, 55, 65, 257, 340,427, 481 and 484.

hero was without doubt Richard Cobden, the Manchester free trader who led the anti-Corn Law agitation which succeeded in the mid-1840s. Detestation of aristocratic privilege, in both Smiles and Cobden, led to language inciting class war. In Smiles, it was linked to the romantic vision of free and united peoples, in Britain, in Ireland, all over Europe, throwing off the shackles of want and toil and reaping in leisure the fruits of hard-won culture. A thinker more remote from the author of “the great textbook of Victorian casuistry”, as Humphrey House once described *Self Help*,<sup>15</sup> it is almost impossible to conceive ...

But where do we find traces of the romantic Smiles in *Self Help*? Alas, in precisely those pages where he evokes the spirit of the ‘English’ in India during the 1857 Mutiny and ignores behaviour by them similar to that which he had condemned in Ireland in 1798: indiscriminate massacre, in revenge, of native rebels.

What happened to Smiles between 1845 and 1859?

He lost touch with the working class as he identified himself through the railways with the ‘industrial revolution’ of which he had been suspicious. He worked for years on a biography of Stephenson, the railway pioneer, published in 1857. This was his first best seller - its popularity meant that John Murray was prepared to bring out the treatise on *Self Help* which another publisher had turned down a few years before.

But Smiles now rewrites *Self Help*, hundreds of miles from Leeds, with sensationalist tales of the Indian Mutiny fresh in his mind. He has changed, and the world has changed. Chartism’s last outburst was in 1848. The great boom of the 1850s has surged through Britain, taking the edge off working class resentments, bringing full employment and some improvement in living conditions. Emigration has removed many radical, impatient working class men. The industrial middle class which, in anti-Corn Law days had seemed to have revolutionary fire in its belly, is now, to Cobden’s disgust, pervaded with deference to aristocracy. Smiles himself, on certain pages of *Self Help*, tactfully praises hard-working aristocrats ...

Smiles is, in a sense, stranded in Blackheath amid philistines who worship money. The Cobdenite ideal of a nation of citizens rather than classes seems unattainable. Smiles yearns. And his yearning takes imperialistic expression.

*Self Help* is not primarily a book about success. It is a book about heroism. Smiles intends to offer a heroic model of conduct. The aim of striving is not wealth, but salvation. Commerce is not an end in itself, but a trial - trade “tries character perhaps more severely than any other pursuit in life. It puts on the severest tests of honesty, self-denial, justice and truthfulness”.<sup>16</sup>

Where, as Smiles looks around him, are fit heroes? The humble life can still itself be heroic, but it needs to be inspired by lofty examples. Livingstone is at hand, “with a heroism greater than that of Xavier”.<sup>17</sup> But the self-made engineers who pioneered the Industrial Revolution - the link of Stephenson and Arkwright - have passed on leaving opulent but unexciting successors. The heroes of the Anti-Slavery movement won their struggle, and they also are dead. Life is too settled, too comfortable.

o Smiles, who spoke with a strong Scottish accent till he died, falls into naive English nationalism. He blunders into an imaginary vision of the English people, *il popolo*, as they should be - and have proved, in India, they *are*.

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<sup>15</sup> H. House, *The Dickens World* (1941), page 83.

<sup>16</sup> S. Smiles, *Self Help*, page 210.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, page 22.

We read near the beginning of *Self Help*:

Such as England is, she had been made by the thinking and working of many generations; the action of even the least significant person having contributed towards the production of the general result. Laborious and patient men of all ranks - cultivators of the soil and explorers of the mine - inventors and discoverers - tradesmen, mechanics and labourers - poets, thinkers and politicians - all have worked together, one generation carrying forward the labours of another ... This succession of noble workers - the artisans of civilisation - has created order out of chaos, in industry, science and art.<sup>18</sup>

As I have pointed out elsewhere, such passages align Smiles with the greatest novelists of his age - with George Eliot questioning in *Middlemarch* for a model of heroism, with Dickens creating in *Great Expectations* the portrait of a heroic working class 'gentleman', Joe Gargary.<sup>19</sup> Smiles, however, now lacks the edge of radicalism which we find in both novelists. He can sound, in fact, rather like Dickens' Podsnap. The English ...

exhibit what has so long been the marvel of foreigners - a healthy activity of individual freedom, and yet a collective obedience to established authority - the unfettered energetic action of persons together with the uniform of subjection of all to the national code of Duty.<sup>20</sup>

The concept of the 'gentleman' is as important in Smiles's best seller as that of 'self help'. The two are in fact inseparable. It is not wealth but *moral worth* such as the gentleman displays which is the end of self help. And, like Dickens and George Eliot (whose *Adam Bede* came out in the same year), Smiles insists that a poor man with gentlemanly attributes is thoroughly superior to a rich rotter, 'gentleman' in class terms though the latter is.

The Indian Mutiny:

... served to bring out the unflinching self-reliance and dormant heroism of the English race. In that terrible trial all proved almost equally great - women, civilians and soldiers - from the general down through all grades to the private and bugleman.

In the capture of Delhi:

All were great ... men taken from behind English ploughs and from English workshops and those trained at the best schools and colleges, displayed equal heroism when the emergency arose ...

Several times Smiles returns to India and to the Mutiny:

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, pages 3-4.

<sup>19</sup> A. Calder in Open University Course A312, *The Nineteenth Century Novel and Its Legacy*, Milton Keynes, 1982, Unit 11, 26-32 and Unit 26, 27-32.

<sup>20</sup> S. Smiles, *Self Help*, page 7.

Notwithstanding the wail which we occasionally hear for the chivalry that is gone, our own age has witnessed deeds of bravery and gentleness - of heroic self-denial and manly tenderness - which are unsurpassed in history ... It was in the hour of the greatest trial in India that the qualities of our countrymen shone forth the brightest [to] inspire the conviction that the best and purest glow of chivalry is not dead, but vigorously lives among us yet ... Even the common soldiers proved themselves gentlemen under their trials.

Only war, it seems, can bind all classes together like this and show the English 'character', Smiles' great theme, as a *unified* phenomenon. By accepting the propagandist, idealised view of its events purveyed in Britain, he can use the Mutiny as confirmation that result of 'self help', seen as the key trait in national character, is not sordid but beautiful. The working class in whom the spirit of self help is innate take their place in a social structure hallowed by moral values shared by all:

At Agra, where so many poor fellows had been scorched and wounded in their encounter with the enemy, they were brought into the fort, and tenderly nursed by the ladies: and the rough, gallant fellows proved gentle as any children. During the weeks that the ladies watched over their charge, never a word was said by any soldier that could shock the ear of the gentlest.<sup>21</sup>

Smiles does not hurl abuse at the Mutineers. He was not a racist, except in so far as he took on occasions a characteristically naive and confused interest in the very fashionable subject of race, he was happy to use a French Huguenot as an example of self help, and to quote Russian proverbs approvingly in his book with the Crimean War barely over. The spirit of romance lures him into accepting the nonsense he reads about the Mutiny. He finds in it what he needs, in 1859, to permit him to believe that British society, which makes him uneasy, is really sound at heart. He offers a vision of Greater Haddington, in which the English stand together in the spirit of Scottish clan-feudalism as interpreted by that hero of *Self Help* and profound influence on the younger Smiles, Walter Scott.

Around this time, the popular premier Lord Palmerston had shown a precocious awareness of the power of jingoist demagoguery to distract opinion at home from domestic issues. The aristocracy were successfully reasserting their hegemony after the Cobdenite challenge to it over the Com Laws. The public school system was emerging as a basis and nursery for the crucial concept of the 'English Gentleman'. Smiles had picked up the Palmerstonian and Amoldian rhetoric. "Talk to me of the aristocracy of England!" Palmerston had cried in Parliament when defending the conduct of the higher command in the Crimean War.

Why, look to that glorious charge of the cavalry at Balaclava - look to that charge where the noblest and wealthiest of the land rode foremost, followed by heroic men from the lowest classes of the community, each rivalling the other in bravery.<sup>22</sup>

Smiles echoes this very audibly in *Self Help*:

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, pages 21, 164-165 and 330-331.

<sup>22</sup> J. Ridley, *Lord Palmerston* (1970), page 441.



... the bleak slopes of Sebastopol and the burning soil of India have been witness to the ... noble self-denial and devotion on the part of our gentler classes ...<sup>23</sup>

As *Self Help* went through many editions, Smiles took opportunities to change its text. Drake, a hero in 1859, was expunged from later editions, perhaps because Smiles remembered his part in massacring Irish persons. But as the book's sales rolled on - 20,000 copies in its first year, 150,000 by 1889, innumerable foreign translations including those into Arabic, Chinese and the native tongues of India - Smiles never changed his mind about the significance of the Mutiny. Just as only Livingstone's heroism can validate a Christian tottering at home, so only the imagined triumph of *il popolo Inglese* in India can validate *Self Help* in an era when, to Smiles' own disgust and outrage, this idea is made by others a beggar-my-neighbour prescription for winning wealth.

Cobden, vehemently against imperial expansion in general, had made a significant exception for India. After all, that was where Manchester's markets lay. As the century wore on, more and more of his free-trading co-thinkers accommodated themselves more and more to Empire. When Smiles did in 1904, even those who regarded him as a prophet for the very successful Co-operative Wholesale movement would have found nothing remarkable in his patriotic witterings. Thatcherites in the 1980s had a right to appropriate his name, but not for the reasons they supposed. He was not quite the advocate of possessive individualism they wanted, the edition of *Self Help* which appeared in Penguin's 'Business' list in 1986 with an introduction by Keith Joseph, was significantly abridged.<sup>24</sup> But Smiles had unwittingly anticipated one of Margaret Thatcher's characteristic means of ideological mystification. When the results of wealth-getting at home seem sordid, and the long-term success of free enterprise is problematic, it's a good idea to start a war and kill off a few heroes.

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<sup>23</sup> S. Smiles, *Self Help*.

<sup>24</sup> S. Smiles, *Self Help* (Penguin edition, abridged by G. Bull, 1986). Keith Joseph's introduction, while extolling Smiles' "understanding" of the "entrepreneurial function", does allow that for Smiles "self culture" was its own reward.

# Nicolas Walter

## Review

*Demanding the Impossible*<sup>(4)</sup> by Peter Marshall,  
Harper Collins, 783 pages, £25

We live in interesting times, alas. The New World order isn't bringing much order to the world. What used to be called 'actually existing socialism' is no longer existing in most places, and while capitalism is existing it isn't doing much better for most people. The warfare state and the welfare state (right or left) are both falling under their own weight, as the economy (market or command) fails to supply their rising demands. Many 'isms' are becoming 'wasms', and many 'wasms' are becoming 'isms' again. Old imperialism and communism are dying, but old nationalism and racialism and older religious fundamentalism and fanaticism are being reborn, and even older despotism and gangsterism are as lively as ever. The Cold War is over, but the hot wars are getting hotter. As the world collapses into what is conventionally called 'anarchy', it may be worth taking more serious thought about alternatives to the way we live now, and in particular about what is more correctly called 'anarchy'. Conveniently, if coincidentally (and indeed curiously), a major Anglo-American publishing conglomerate has produced what is intended to be a new standard book on anarchism. It may not be that, but it was well worth writing and is well worth reading as a useful contribution to the subject.

The book's title doesn't actually mean what it says; it comes from one of the Paris graffiti of 1968 - 'Soyez réaliste, demandez l'impossible!' - and what it actually means is that anarchism is 'being realistic'. Nor is the book what the subtitle says - 'A History of Anarchism'; it is not so much a diachronic narrative or a synchronic analysis as a mixture of the two - a series of essays and sketches covering some of the people and topics that would be included in such a work. Anyway, a proper history of anarchism could hardly be fitted into a single volume, even one as large as this. When Max Nettlau, the founder of anarchist historiography from the 1880s to the 1930s, turned after many specialist studies to a general account of the subject, he produced seven substantial volumes which only got as far as the First World War. No one has yet overtaken him or indeed caught up with him. Few people have digested all the work done by him, much of which still hasn't been published, let alone all the work by his successors. There has been much anarchist activity during the past half-century, there has been much scholarly research during the past quarter-century, and there is still much basic work to be done.

In such work, the first task is to get over the stumbling block of prejudice, and to open one's mind to other ways of thought and action in political, economic, social and personal life. The second is to study not the many writings by outsiders about anarchism, most of which are worse than worthless, but the many more writings by anarchists themselves, especially the ephemeral

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<sup>(4)</sup> *Demanding the Impossible* was published on 30th January 1992. A drastically abridged version of this review was published in the *London Review of Books* on 27th February 1992.

and elusive periodical and pamphlet literature. The third is to put all this mass of material into proper perspective. In such a context, a single volume which attempts to cover the whole field can offer only a synthesis or a survey of previous research.

For thirty years the standard work of this kind in English has been George Woodcock's *Anarchism: a History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (1962), which was a synthesis - a cheap paperback, elegantly written, deliberately designed for ordinary readers rather than scholars. There have been other general books - English, American or translations - but Woodcock's has been by far the most successful; he later produced a companion volume, *The Anarchist Reader* (1977), an anthology of anarchist writings, which has also been very successful. By contrast, Peter Marshall's *Demanding the Impossible* is a broad survey - an expensive hardback, efficiently written, similarly designed for ordinary readers but with plenty of notes to please scholars. Like Woodcock, Marshall is close to and sympathetic with the subject, neither an academic nor an activist but a professional author, rather careless with facts and references, inclusive rather than exclusive, infectious in his enthusiasm, attractive to read. He is a generation younger than Woodcock, more studious but less stylish, a not unworthy successor. His previous books include a biography of William Godwin, an anthology of Godwin's anarchist writings, an account of Castro's Cuba, and a study of William Blake's anarchist ideas. He is as well qualified as anyone to produce an ambitious and acceptable book of this kind at this time.

*Demanding the Impossible* is certainly more ambitious than its predecessors in English, simply by being several times bigger and covering proportionally more ground. The Introduction briefly sets the scene, summarising the main features of anarchism and establishing the book as "primarily a critical history of anarchist ideas and movements, tracing their origin and development from ancient civilisations to the present day". The basic definitions are straightforward enough - anarchy as "a society without government"; anarchism as "the social philosophy which aims at its realisation"; an anarchist as "one who rejects all forms of external government and the State and believes that society and individuals would function well without them"; and a libertarian as "one who takes liberty to be a supreme value and would like to limit the power of government to a minimum compatible with security". The prevailing emphasis is on ideas rather than movements, on anarchism rather than anarchy, and on libertarians as much as anarchists.

Part One follows 'The River of Anarchy' from its various springs down the stream of history and along the various tributaries, and then traces its main preoccupations - distinguishing society from the state, nature from law, anarchism from liberalism and socialism (especially Marxism), denying power and authority, and reconciling liberty with equality. Part Two covers 'Forerunners of Anarchism', beginning rather unconvincingly in ancient China and India (Taoism and Buddhism), moving more convincingly to ancient Greece (Sophists, Cyrenaics, Cynics, Stoics), then to Christianity (from the New Testament to Tolstoy and Berdyaev), then retracing some mystical and millenarian sects of the Middle Ages and Reformation (Free Spirit, Taborites, Anabaptists), then some radical tendencies in the English Revolution (Diggers and Ranters), the French Renaissance and Enlightenment (Rabelais, La Boétie, Foigny, Fénelon, Meslier, Morelly, Diderot, Rousseau) and the British Enlightenment (Swift, Burke, Paine). Part Three covers what are described as 'Great Libertarians' in France (Sade, Fourier), Germany (Humboldt, Nietzsche), Britain (Mill, Spencer, Carpenter, Morris, Wilde) and America (Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau).

Part Four describes at greater length what are called the 'Classic Anarchist Thinkers' - Godwin, Max Stirner, Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Elisée Reclus, Malatesta, Tolstoy, Josiah Warren, Lysander Spooner, Benjamin Tucker, Adin Ballou, John Humphrey Noyes, Voltairine de

Cleyre, Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman, Gustav Landauer, Erich Mühsam, Johann Most, Rudolf Rocker, and Gandhi. Part Five covers 'Anarchism in Action', describing the historical anarchist movement in various places - France and Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Russia, Germany, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Britain, North and Latin America, China, Japan, Korea, India. Part Six follows with 'Modern Anarchism' - the New Left and the Counter-Culture, the French 'Events' of 1968, the Situationists, the Dutch Provos and Kabouters, Social Ecology, Anarcho-Feminism, the New Right and Anarcho-Capitalism (which has adopted the term 'Libertarianism'), some 'Modern Libertarians' (Russell, Huxley, Buber, Mumford, Chomsky, Camus, Foucault), some 'Modern Anarchists' (Read, Comfort, Goodman), and Murray Bookchin (the leading anarchist today).

Part Seven is called 'The Legacy of Anarchism' but is really a resumption of Part One; it includes a discussion of 'Ends and Means' (individualism, mutualism, collectivism or communism; councils, communes or federations; violence or non-violence) and a miscellaneous consideration of 'The Relevance of Anarchism' to various issues (the left or right, socialism or liberalism or libertarianism, human nature, the state, authority and power, law, public opinion, the economy, work, reform and revolution) before a rather abrupt conclusion. The book is certainly generally acceptable. Marshall has done a lot of work on a lot of material - though one might wish that he had taken a bit more time and trouble - and has put the results into a clear and readable form, so there is more information about anarchism in this than in any other single volume. It gives a bookish view of the subject, even more than its predecessors, and it concentrates on intellectuals rather than activists, which is inevitable but unfortunate. Specialists will have fun picking holes in the treatment of their particular specialisms - my copy of the book is already heavily annotated - but almost all readers will learn something new and unexpected and be stimulated to look for more. The triple construction (thematic, biographical, historical) means that several topics and characters (and indeed quotations from the latter about the former) appear several times, but this repetition does serve to drive the important points home. *Demanding the Impossible* will go straight on to the bookshelves and into the booklists of all serious students of anarchism.

Nevertheless some immediate questions do arise. How far is this a book about anarchism, properly so called? Marshall makes it clear that there is a long and wide tradition of 'anarchism' in the loosest sense - a permanent protest against authority and hierarchy and a persistent demand for both liberty and equality; but he should have made clearer that most of this tradition belongs not so much to real anarchism - practical argument that a society without government is possible and concrete action to put it into effect - as to what is sometimes called philosophical anarchism - abstract or theoretical speculation or rumination about how nice it would be to have such a society - or to mere libertarianism. Much of the book concerns people who worked long before or well outside the anarchist movement, who may have written or spoken in favour of liberty but who had little or nothing to do with it in the real world. Even some of the so-called 'Classic Anarchist Thinkers' have an uncertain status as anarchists - Godwin and Stirner in much of their thought, Proudhon and Bakunin for much of their lives, Tolstoy and Gandhi in much of their activity - and many of the other people gathered by Marshall are fellow-travellers or gate-crashers rather than full members of the anarchist party. Indeed so much space is given to outsiders that relatively little is given to insiders. Thus the formal movement fills less than half the book, and the British movement gets only about one per cent of it. So this is not so much a history of anarchism as a survey of anarchistic ideas.

Another question is whether anarchism has any existence as a social fact rather than as an ideal type. Its past importance is clear enough - individual anarchists and the anarchist move-

ment have played an essential if marginal part on the revolutionary stage for a century or two. Its present importance is less clear - is it only a negative critique of capitalism and socialism, or a positive replacement for both of them? And its future importance is quite unclear - what, if anything, does actually existing anarchism say about the situation before us? Consider, for example, two other recent publications. *The Self-Build Book* (Green Books, 253 pages, £15), written by Jon Broome and Brian Richardson, is a theoretical and practical guide to designing and building your own home, based on what Colin Ward calls 'Anarchism in Action' - peaceful self-help and direct action within existing society. *Class War: A Decade of Disorder* (Verso, 113 pages, £7.95), edited by Ian Bone, Alan Pullen and Tim Scargill, is an anthology of the paper *Class War*, based on revolutionary working-class anarchism - violent confrontation with and destruction of existing society. They share virtually nothing apart from the word 'anarchism' - so are both or either or neither of them anarchist? Marshall prefers the former, though he takes account of the latter, but it is hard to decide whether they belong in one category, and if so what it is. It may be easier to think of *anarchisms* in the plural rather than *anarchism* in the singular, or even to discard the platonic idea of some thing or things defined as *anarchism(s)* and to adopt a more phenomenological view of some people described as *anarchists*.

Even then there are further questions of balance. It is easy to think of many topics or people that should have had more or less space - I should have preferred more attention to natural and social science, freethought and freemasonry, iconography and hagiography, the peace and green movements, art and literature, and to several important figures who are only mentioned (or not even mentioned) - but there is a deeper distortion in this as in most books on the left. The macropolitics is clear enough - what anarchists say about public life. The micropolitics is less clear - what anarchists say about private life. And the mesopolitics is quite unclear - how anarchism applies to the rest of life in between. Here is a serious problem, not just with this but with all work on the subject. Anarchism is so simple that it can seem simplistic - Engels once sneered that "it is so simple that it can be learnt by heart in five minutes" (Marxism took a little longer) - and anarchist propaganda is always in danger of becoming mere rhetoric. Yet, at its best, if anarchism means anything it is something much more than a destructive ideology demanding the eradication of authority, hierarchy, competition, exploitation, representation, violence, and so on from political life, but is also a creative ideology demanding the establishment of autonomy, autarky, reciprocity, cooperation, mutual aid, and direct action in all human life. The second half of this programme is too often forgotten, even by anarchists - and is insufficiently stressed by Marshall. It hasn't been tried very much, because it is difficult; it involves not just society but the self - and, as Tolstoy said, "Everyone wants to change society, but no one wants to change himself". The answer is not a traditional revolution - after two centuries, we may ask, what price revolution now? - but a much more radical transformation in the way we live.

If such a change ever comes, it will be through action, but it will begin with thought; reading helps thinking, and Demanding the Impossible is probably as good a start as any. When all these questions are answered - not by reading books but by being in the world - it may be possible to decide whether anarchism is just a beautiful dream or a dreadful nightmare, or is a serious ideology with a future as well as a past.

# *Harold Barclay*

## **Communication 1**

### *On 'self-interest' and other matters*

I wish that Peter Gibson (in *The Raven* number 18) would not have me say things I didn't say and that he might read what was written more carefully. For example, I nowhere reject a notion of 'cooperative self-interest'. Self-interest is an important element of altruism, reciprocity, mutual aid. Secondly, I did not think that the San and Inuit "never need to store their excess food because they share it". I quite explicitly listed ways in which the Inuit actually *store* food. I said the San did not need to store excess wealth. They collected fruits, nuts, berries and roots from their surroundings according to a schedule which ensured continuing access to such resources throughout the year. Meat in some form was generally always available, particularly as they shared their kills." Further, I did not say "that since the genes for altruism have not been identified then all inferences that depend upon them are false". I said they are conjectural. In any case to hold, as Gibson does, that we would have to deny our own existence if we did not accept our dependence on genes sounds like nonsense to me. I know I exist whether I know anything about genes or not.

Gibson nibbles at the edges of my argument but never addresses the heart of it. Twice in my letter I stressed that sociobiology does not and cannot explain why human cultures are so widely variant. Sociobiology is guilty of the reductionist fallacy, holding that human behaviour is perfectly explicable by biology. (A consequence of this is that sociology, anthropology and psychology are completely redundant.)

In his most recent contribution to *The Raven*, Gibson anthropomorphises the genes and makes so many unsubstantiated and dogmatic statements that they defy any proper response. For example, "the greater part of our behaviour is not controlled by our intellect but is genetically determined in the same way as it is for other animals". Let's have some solid evidence and let us put these propositions into falsifiable hypothesis. Finally, contrary to Gibson, non-human animals do possess intellect and act according to what they learn.

## *Michael Duane*

# Communication 2

According to E.O. Wilson sociobiology is “the study of all aspects of social behaviour up to and including the evolution of social behaviour in man. It consists of five major topics: group size, age composition, mode of organisation including the forms of communication, division of labour, and time budgets of both the group and its members ... Sociobiology is to be distinguished from Social biology.”

Social biology is defined by Wilson as “The study of the application of biology to social problems, from food production, pollution, overpopulation, etc., to the long-range goals of social and ecological planning”.

Since Wilson includes among the ‘five major topics’, ‘the forms of communication’, it would seem to be relevant to consider the work of Chomsky on language.

In *Language and Politics* (pp.102-117) Chomsky, in response to questions by Stuart Hampshire, sets out what he calls “A Cartesian view of language structure” in which he claims “that the evidence available to us suggests that there must be some very deep inborn principles, probably of a highly restrictive nature, that determine how knowledge of language emerges in the individual, given the scattered and degenerate data available to him”.

Throughout this interview he goes on to elaborate on this initial statement, and, towards the end of the interview, to resurrect the concept of ‘faculties of the mind’ in a new way (p.112).

Of course it is clear, from the fact that there are so many different languages and that each of them is evolving constantly and at varying rates that seem to relate to the speed of development of technical sophistication in the culture in which the language is used, that the notion of ‘innate structures’ does not operate as a specific, narrow and rigid determinant but operates in conjunction with environmental factors.

Children placed in a new linguistic context pick up the new language and its rules far more easily and swiftly than adults, as I have seen with my own grandchildren. And, although I have no research evidence to support this hunch, they seem to do it more quickly than children given intense teaching.

Further, in view of the volume of analytical work done by Chomsky in dealing with e.g. Skinner’s behaviouristic view of language, he can hardly be accused of not providing evidence for his findings, or of failure to test his theories against others.

The following event demonstrates, I believe, an inbuilt ability to classify events and to apply whatever forms of language are appropriate.

My wife, Margaret, had taken a young friend, Renato, aged at that time a little under three, on to the beach at Lowestoft. While they were there a helicopter arrived, stopped over a large machine already on the beach and lowered a mechanic on the end of a cable to do something to the machine. When he had finished the helicopter returned, lowered a cable to which the man attached himself, hoisted him up and went off.

When Margaret returned with Renato she encouraged him to tell me what he had seen. He started by telling me about the helicopter: he was familiar with the word because helicopters flew over our house daily on their way to the oil rigs. He then started to talk about the man, but paused as if lost for words and then, in a rush, came out with “He came sliding down the bell-pull”, a phrase I recognised at once because it came from Beatrix Potter’s tale ‘Miss Moppet’. She had chased a mouse which ran up the curtain. Miss Moppet banged her head, tied it up in a duster and sat by the fire. The mouse, concerned about Miss Moppet, “came sliding down the bell-pull” to get closer.

When Renato paused to find the right words for the action of the man he was searching for something that would approximate with what he had never seen before, a man coming down from a height on the end of a cable. He did not then have the word ‘cable’ and had not seen anyone sliding down a vertical rope. But the essential action -coming down from a height by means of a rope/cable - he was able to match with the phrase from Beatrix Potter because it was as near as he could get. We then went into the garden, fixed a string to the clothes line, pinned the arms of one of his dolls round the string and let it slide down. Then we tied the end of the string to the doll and, using the clothes line, pulled it up and down on the end of the string, talking about each action meanwhile. The ‘deep structure’ - the action of coming down from a height by means other than stairs, lift or ladder, with which he was familiar - determined for him which, of all the phrases stored in his memory, was the most appropriate.

‘Deep structures’ have to do, I believe, with kinaesthetic memories that we accumulate as soon as we can use our limbs and body to respond to forces acting on us or to initiate actions affecting other objects/people. That is why there are many ‘surface structures’ to express one ‘deep structure’ - since all events can be viewed from a number of standpoints. The event remains constant but aspects of it are many, as in *The Gate of Rashomon*.



## *Harold Barclay*

### **Corrections to Raven 18**

I would like to note three printers' errors contained in my article 'Anthropology and Anarchism', because I believe that left uncorrected they will totally confuse the reader.

First, on page 150 in the third line of the second paragraph the sentence should read "In addition it seems likely that matriliney is ... (NOT matriarchy as printed).

On page 155 in the first paragraph the 11th line, and important phrase was deleted. It should read: "Organised sanctions are less widespread while one kind of organised sanctions which Radcliffe-Brown calls legal sanctions ..." (In other words organised sanctions may be either diffuse or legal).

On page 161 line ten should read matrilineal clan (not matrimonial clan as printed).

## *Lee and Newby* **The Last Word**

Sociology is a difficult, stringent discipline. It is not that the concepts and information it comprises are particularly hard to grasp. Many of its discoveries, such as the cramping effect of inequality upon human potential, are almost 'obvious'. The problem for the would-be socialist lies elsewhere. It is that our taken-for-granted beliefs, however they arise, provide a comfortable, convenient and necessarily simplified picture of the social world. The effort required to place them under critical review and to keep them there is almost superhuman.

*The Problem of Sociology*, Hutchinson, 1983



# Back Cover

## What is anarchism? An introduction

**Donald Rooum**, the creator of the anarchist Wildcat strip cartoons, is responsible for the first part of this pamphlet. He writes, "My contribution is intended to describe anarchism as it appears to anarchists in general, in Britain at the end of the twentieth century. The three headings, 'What anarchists believe, How anarchists differ, What anarchists do,' are taken from Nicolas Walter's 1969 pamphlet *About anarchism, and ways of putting points* are lifted from many other contemporary anarchists." He adds that he "takes personal responsibility for the opinions and errors".

Freedom Press are responsible for the second part, consisting of excerpts from the work of **Michael Bakunin, Alexander Berkman, Marie Louise Berneri, Bill Christopher, William Godwin, Peter Kropotkin, Errico Malatesta, William Morris, George Nicholson, Vernon Richards, Jack Robinson, Rudolf Rocker, Donald Rooum, Philip Sansom, Peter Turner, Colin Ward, and Charlotte Wilson**, selected to show the range and consistency of anarchist ideas. Most of the excerpts are from current Freedom Press titles, but we also take this opportunity of re-publishing a couple of essays, one by **Charlotte Wilson** the founding editor of Freedom, and one by **George Nicholson**, which have been out of print for many years.

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Various Authors  
The Raven: Anarchist Quarterly 19  
On Sociology  
July - September 1992

Retrieved on 22 May 2023 from <https://libcom.org/article/raven-19-sociology>  
Volume 5 Number 3 ISSN 0951 4066.  
Cover artwork by Donald Rooum.  
Freedom Press; 1st edition (1992)

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