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Autor: Berger, Peter L.

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DOES SOCIOLOGY STILL MAKE SENSE?*

Peter L. Berger
Institute for the Study of Economic Culture at Boston University

At this stage of my life I find that I have little stake in my identity as a sociologist. If asked for my academic discipline, I will routinely come up with this identification, but it has little to do with what I do or what I consider myself to be. I pay scant attention to what people in the discipline are engaged in, and I daresay that they return the compliment. This is quite all right. But I am sometimes reminded of the fact that, in my impetuous youth, I rather passionately invited others to this discipline, both in published writings (which, to boot, are still in print) and in my teaching. Should I repent this action? Should I perhaps issue a solemn disinvitation, so as not to be responsible for yet more innocent students being seduced into what may well be a bankrupt enterprise? I think that the answer to both questions is a less than hearty no – no, because I continue to think that the sort of sociology I once advocated is as valid today as it ever was – less than hearty, because I am aware of the fact that this is not what most people who call themselves sociologists are actually doing. Is there any chance of changing this state of affairs? Probably not, and for good sociological reasons. However, before one assesses the prospects for therapy, one should have some clarity regarding the diagnosis.

It is a truism to say that we live in a time of massive and rapid change. This is only an accelerate phase of the vast transformation brought on by the process of modernization first in Europe and then increasingly throughout the world. It is instructive to recall that sociology as a discipline arose precisely as an effort to understand, and if possible to gain greater control over, this huge transformation. This was clearly the case in the three countries in which distinctive sociological traditions first arose – France, Germany, and the United States. To understand, perhaps even to control, modernity – an awesome proposition! It is no wonder, then, that the early masters of sociology were individuals of impressive intellectual and, in most cases, personal powers. It would be misguided

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to expect their successors, several academic generations down the line, to possess comparable characteristics. But one would expect a certain continuity of intellectual stance, a continuity in form if not in substance. It would be difficult to argue that this is the case. Sociology in its classical period – roughly between 1890 and 1930 – dealt with the "big questions" of the time; sociology today seems largely to avoid these questions and, when not avoiding them, deals with them in exceedingly abstract fashion.

The classical sociologists were careful to look at social reality objectively, without regard to their own biases or wishes (what Max Weber summed up in the much-maligned notion of "value-freeness"); large numbers of sociologists now proudly announce their non-objectivity, their partisan advocacy. Sociology in America at one time was intent on cultivating a robust empiricism, which Louis Wirth summed up as "getting one's hands dirty with research" and which one could also call the cultivation of a sociological nose. Today many sociologists take pride in the abstract, antiseptic quality of their work, comparable to the fine model building of theoretical economists. One wonders whether these people have ever interviewed a live human being or participated with curiosity in a live social event.

What has gone wrong? And is there anything that can be done about it? I am not at all sure that I can authoritatively deliver either diagnosis or therapy. Nor can I claim to have been immune all along to whatever it is that ails the discipline. But I shall take a stab, if not at a comprehensive diagnosis, let alone a promising therapy, so at least at describing some of the symptomatic failings. And I shall do it in light of four important developments that have taken place since the Second World War. Each of these developments completely surprised most, if not all sociologists. What is more, even after these developments had come sharply into view, sociologists found themselves unable to explain them or to make sense of them within a frame of sociological theory. Given the importance of these developments, the failure of sociology to either predict, or at least to apprehend them, indicates that something is seriously wrong here.

Case one: In the late 1960s and early 1970s a cultural and political upheaval took place in the major Western industrial societies. It was a total surprise. Looked at through the spectacles of conventional sociology, it posed a tantalizing question: How could it be that some of the most privileged people on earth, indeed in history, turned violently against the very society that had made them thus privileged? If one turns to American sociology, as it was taught then and still is in numerous college courses, one finds the proposition that people become more conservative as they become more affluent. This proposition may have been quite valid up to the aforementioned event. It certainly was not valid as the politico-cultural cataclysm occurred, and it is no longer valid

today. On the contrary, both in politics and in culture the "progressive" movements have been socially located in the affluent upper middle class – the New Left and the New Politics, the anti-war movements, feminism, environmentalism and the Greens, and so on. Conversely, the newer conservative movements found their constituencies in the lower middle and working classes, dragging along a reluctant older conservative establishment.

Today the conventional view has it that the "late sixties" are a past history, recently re-evoked in a mood of nostalgia. This is a serious misinterpretation: The "late sixties" have not disappeared; they have become institutionalized, both culturally and politically. The only halfway persuasive sociological explanation of this development was the so-called "new class theory", which surfaced briefly in the 1970s and has not been heard of much since. Interestingly, this explanation had both a leftist and a rightist version, articulated respectively by Alvin Gouldner and Irving Kristol. Neither version fully meets the facts, and the formidable task remains of reformulating a sociological theory of class in advanced industrial societies. But this is not my concern here. The question is why have sociologists been so inept in dealing with as massive a phenomenon? To some extent, perhaps, it is reluctance to modify accepted theoretical paradigms.

Sociologists of the left have tried, very unsuccessfully, to squeeze the phenomenon into Marxist categories like the "proletarianization of the middle class". More "bourgeois" colleagues have mumbled something about "status politics". But the best interpretation is probably that most sociologists were very much a part of the phenomenon. People are reluctant to accept sociological explanations of their own commitments – even if they are professional sociologists. In other words, the failure of sociology to apprehend this development is largely due to ideological blinders.

Second case: One of the fundamental transformations in the contemporary world has been the rapid economic ascendancy of Japan and other East Asian countries. What is happening here is not just an economic miracle of enormous proportions, occurring at breathtaking speed, but the first instance of successful modernization in a non-Western cultural context that should be of special interest to sociologists. As I have argued for some time, here is a second case of capitalist modernity, obviously of great interest in and of itself, but of even greater interest from the standpoint of a theory of modern society. Put simply, Japan is important for our understanding, not so much of it, but of ourselves. Again, no one expected this. If any of its proponents had been asked in the 1950s, the time when so-called modernization theory developed, which Asian country was most likely to succeed in terms of economic development, chances are the answer would have been the Philippines, now the one economic disaster

in the capitalist sector of the region. At a conference that took place at the time and which some participants still recall uncomfortably, there was wide-spread agreement that Confucianism was one of the most formidable obstacles to development in Korea and in the Chinese societies. Today, this cultural heritage is commonly cited as one of the causes of the East Asian economic success stories.

Modernization theory faltered in the wake of the late sixties, when it was widely derogated as an ideology of Western imperialism. Leftist sociologists meanwhile were busy giving birth to so-called dependency theory, according to which capitalism necessarily perpetuates underdevelopment; the solution, of course, was to be socialism. There is a bizarre synchronicity between empirical and theoretical developments. Just as capitalist East Asia was bursting into astonishing economic growth and prosperity while all the socialist societies, from Indochina to the Caribbean, were sinking into hopeless stagnation, more and more sociologists were proclaiming their allegiance to a theory according to which the opposite was bound to occur.

In all fairness, my second case is not quite like the first, in that there has indeed been a considerable effort by sociologists to understand the phenomenon, even if they did not anticipate it. The aforementioned post-Confucian hypothesis, though first formulated by non-sociologists, has been the subject of intense and sophisticated discussion among sociologists both in the region itself and outside it. The left has obviously not been able to participate in this for ideological reasons. But non-leftist sociologists have not been prominent in the discussion either, except for those with a specialization in the region. Another formidable task is one of modifying the concept of modern society, as it developed from, say, Max Weber to Talcott Parsons, on hand of the insights to be gained from the new non-Western modernity.

This is a very "big question" indeed. It is uncongenial to people whose perspective is parochially ethnocentric and who are committed to methods that do not lend themselves to "big questions". What is called for is a sociology in the classical vein, grounded in a knowledge of history, methodologically flexible, and imbued with a cosmopolitan spirit endlessly curious about every manifestation of human life. Needless to say, sociologists practicing their craft in such a vein are rather difficult to find. Worse, one may say that both the training and the reward system of the profession is cleverly (if, probably, unintentionally) designed to prevent such people from emerging.

Third case: Another body of theory that seemed well-established in the 1950s and 1960s was the so-called secularization theory. Briefly put, it posits the notion that modernization necessarily brings with it a decline of religion in

human life, both in terms of social institutions and of individual consciousness. This notion has a long history in Western thought, going back at least to the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, if not farther. But, in all fairness, it gained strength through the findings of sociologists of religion, especially in Europe. Good reasons were given for the linkage alleged between growth in the GNP and the demise of the gods. Modernity, built on the foundations of science and technology, brought with it an increasingly rational mindset that no longer found plausible the presumably irrational religious interpretations of the world.

Leave aside here the questionable presumption as to the irrationality of religion – a presumption certainly grounded in Enlightenment philosophy. The theory seemed grounded in empirical evidence and was consequently open to empirical falsification. By the late 1970s it had been falsified with a vengeance. As it turned out, the theory never had much empirical substance to begin with. It was valid, and continues to be valid, for one region of the world, Europe, a few scattered territories, such as Quebec, which underwent an amazing process of secularization after the Second World War, and a fairly thin stratum of Western-educated intellectuals everywhere. The rest of the world is as fervently religious as it ever was, and arguably more so than it was earlier in this century.

Two events in the late 1970s forced this fact on the public's attention. In the United States the validity of the theory had already been put in question by the so-called religious revival of the 1950s and the counterculture of the 1960s, though sociologists of religion tended to see the former as only dubiously religious and the latter as only marginally religious. What made the theory altogether untenable was the evangelical resurgence, first brought to widespread attention by the presidential candidacy of Jimmy Carter and a little later by the noisy appearance of the "moral majority" and similar groups. Suddenly it became obvious that, though little noticed in intellectual milieus, American society contained millions of born-again Christians and, alarmingly, they kept growing and growing, while mainline churches went into a fairly steep demographic decline. The evangelical phenomenon served to underline a more fundamental fact: America differed from Europe precisely in its religious character.

Beyond the United States, though, the event that rattled the theory linking modernization to secularity was the Iranian revolution. Once again, a momentous event came into view that, theoretically, should not have occurred at all. Since then, religious upsurges of every sort have been erupting all over the world. Neotraditionalist, or fundamentalist, Protestantism and Islam are the two biggest games in town, on a global scale, but almost every religious

tradition in the world has evinced similar revitalization movements. And sociologists of every coloration continue to be baffled.

Sociologists have had a hard time coming to terms with the intensely religious character of the contemporary world. Whether politically on the left or not, they suffer from ideological blinders when it comes to religion, and the tendency is then to explain away what cannot be explained. But ideology apart, parochialism is an important factor here too. Sociologists live in truly secularized milieus – academia and other institutions of the professional knowledge industry – and it appears that they are no more immune than the sociologically untrained to the common misconception that one can generalize about the world from one's own little corner.

Finally, the fourth case: This is the momentous collapse of the Soviet empire, and what seems, at least for now, the worldwide collapse of socialism both as a reality and as an idea. Even the beginnings of this world-historical event are very recent, and the consequences are still unfolding with undiminished rapidity. Thus it would be unfair to blame anyone for not having at hand a theory to explain it all. It would be equally unfair to single out sociologists; just about nobody anticipated this (including regiments of certified sovietologists) and everybody is having great difficulty grasping it within any theoretical frame that makes sense. Still, it is worth stating that sociologists, even those with the relevant regional expertise, were no better than anyone else in predicting the event nor are they better in accounting for it. One must wonder how they will do in the years to come.

Those on the left, of course, will share in the general confusion (may one call it "cognitive anomie"?) of others in this ideological community. Leave aside those on the left who, despite everything, thought that the Soviet Union and its imitators were engaged in a noble experiment. Mistakes were made, and all that, but there was still the assumption that even a flawed socialism carried more hope than a capitalist system alleged to be hopelessly corrupt. But even those on the left who had long ago shed all illusions about the Soviet experiment were endlessly scanning the horizon for the "true socialism" that had to come, sometime, because the logic of history willed it. It was not just a matter of le coeur à gauche; it was the mind that was on the left, in its basic cognitive assumptions.

The collapse of the Soviet empire and the worldwide crisis of socialism poses an enormous challenge to sociological understanding of modernity. And it is not just sociologists on the left who are unprepared to meet this challenge, who were no more prescient about these developments than their left-leaning colleagues. What is called for is a thorough rethinking of the relation between

economic, political and social institutions in a modern society. The more interesting question is not why "they" have collapsed, but why "we" have not. This is a basic theoretical point that much sociologizing has routinely overlooked: The "problem" is not social disorganization, but social organization – marriage rather than divorce, law-abidingness rather than crime, racial harmony rather than racial strife, and so on. We may safely assume that – in Jan Romein's handy phrase – the "common human pattern" is faithlessness, violence and hate. These manifestations of human nature hardly need explanation, except perhaps by zoologists. What needs explaining is those instances in which amazingly, societies manage to curb and civilize these propensities.

What do these cases disclose about what ails sociology today? One can point to four symptoms: parochialism, triviality, rationalism, and ideology. Each one is crippling. Their combination has been deadly. If one looks at the opus of the great classical sociologists, with Max Weber and Emile Durkheim in the lead, one is reminded of Wesley's dictum, "The world is my parish". Few sociologists could say this today, and those who do very often betray an embarrassing lack of historical depth.

At issue is much more than a bias in favor of some sort of sophisticated cosmopolitanism. One can be an excellent physicist without ever having stepped outside one's own society; I know that this is not so for a sociologist. And the reason for this is simple. Modernization is the great transforming force in the world today, but it is not a uniform, mechanical process. It takes different forms, evokes different reactions. This is why sociology, the discipline par excellence for seeking to understand modernity, must of necessity be comparative.

This, of course, was one of Weber's root insights; it is more relevant today than ever. Thus sociologists must look at Japan in order to understand the West, at socialism in order to understand capitalism, at India so as to understand Brazil, and so on. Parochialism in sociology is much more than a cultural deficiency; it is the source of crippling failures of perception. It should be part and parcel of the training of every sociologist to gain detailed knowledge of at least one society that differs greatly from his own – a feat that, needless to say, involves something many students shy away from: the learning of foreign languages.

Triviality too is a fruit of parochialism, but in the case of sociology the more important root is methodological. This ailment of the discipline goes back at the least as far as the 1950s. In a futile and theoretically misguided effort to ape the natural sciences, sociologists developed ever more refined quantitative methods of research. There is nothing wrong with this in and of

itself, sociology contains a good many questions that necessitate survey-type research; the better the quantitative methods, the more reliable will be the findings. But not all sociological questions require this approach, and some are of a character so as to require very different, qualitative approaches. Identification of scientific rigor with quantification has greatly limited the scope of sociology, often to narrowly circumscribed topics that best lend themselves to quantitative methods. The resultant triviality should not come as a surprise.

Sociology, as a science, will necessarily be an exercise in rationality. This is a far cry from assuming that ordinary social action is guided by rationality. This had been well understood in classical sociology, perhaps most dramatically by Vilfredo Pareto, a mathematically oriented economist who turned to sociology precisely because he discovered that most human actions are what he called non-logical. The discipline of economics, alas, has refused to share this insight and continues to operate with a highly rational model of homo oeconomicus. As a consequence, it fails spectacularly, over and over again, to understand, let alone predict, the dynamics of the marketplace.

A good many sociologists seek to emulate economics, adapting theoretical models based on the "rational-action paradigm" to their own discipline. We may confidently predict that the intellectual results of this approach will closely resemble those in economics. Yes, sociology is a rational discipline; every empirical science is. But it must not fall into the fatal error of confusing its own rationality with the rationality of the world.

To some extent these criticisms correspond to those of C. Wright Mills in The Sociological Imagination. Mills wrote before the ideological sea-change of the late 1960s overtook the field. We cannot know what Mills would have done, had he lived through this period. We do know what large numbers of his readers did, especially those who were most impressed by his criticisms. They plunged into an ideological delirium, mostly shaped by Marxist and quasi-Marxist assumptions, which seemed to provide remedies for all ailments of the field. It provided a theoretical orientation that certainly dealt with "big questions", did so in an international frame of reference ("world-systems", no less), was not greatly enthused about quantitative methods, and finally, while considering itself to be thoroughly scientific, also assumed that most everyone else was running around afflicted with "false consciousness".

Unfortunately, the answers to the "big questions" turned out to be wrong and the world refused to behave in the way the theory predicted. It is premature to proclaim the demise of Marxism, let alone that of "marxisant" doctrines that have been quite successfully detached from the total Marxist corpus. The worst consequence of the ideologization of the discipline that took place in the

1960s and 1970s is the persistent belief that objectivity and "value-freeness" are impossible, and that sociologists, understanding this, should expressly operate as advocates.

This stance need not be restricted to the left at all. In the great methodological disputes during the classical period of sociology, especially in Germany, it was thinkers on the right who took this position most forcefully. The antidote to the "false ideal" of objectivity was a "German science" and the most elegant formulation of advocacy science came from no less a personage than the late Dr. Goebbels – "Truth is what serves the German people".

As the left declines in American intellectual life, if it is declining, other ideologies can be observed adopting the same stance. It is a stance that transforms science into propaganda; it marks the end of science wherever it is adopted. Feminists and multiculturalists are the leading representatives of this stance in the American social sciences today, but we may confidently expect others to appear. Some may well be on the right.

In diagnosing the condition of sociology, one should not view it in isolation. Its symptoms tend to be those afflicting the intellectual life in general. Other human sciences are in no better shape.

But sociologists have a particular problem no one else (with the possible exception of anthropologists) in the human sciences shares. Sociology is not so much a field as a perspective and if this perspective fails, nothing is left. Thus one can study the economy, or the political system, or the mating habits of the Samoans from perspectives that are quite different, one of which is sociology. The sociological perspective has entered into the cognitive instrumentarium of most of the human sciences with great success. Few historians have not somewhere incorporated a sociological perspective into their work. Unlike most other human scientists, sociologists cannot claim a specific empirical territory as their own. It is mostly their perspective that they have to offer. The ailments described above precisely effect the dissolution of this perspective, thereby making sociology obsolete.

One could argue that such obsolescence is not a great intellectual disaster, since what sociology originally had to offer has been largely incorporated into the corpus of other fields. But, when one looks at these fields, one can only reach the conclusion that they are badly in need of a good dose of sociology, as the discipline was understood in its classical period, and not just bits and pieces of sociological lore that have been assimilated. In other words, there are good intellectual reasons why one should not applaud the possible demise of the discipline.

But can this fate be averted? I am not at all sure. The pathology now goes very deep indeed. It is possible to suggest some conditions for such a reversal of fortunes. Substantively, the above observations have already outlined the necessary contours: We are talking about a sociology that has returned to the big questions of the classical era, a sociology that is cosmopolitan and methodologically flexible, and is emphatically and militantly anti-ideological. But what of the institutional requirements for such a reversal? Clearly, it could not be effected by conferences, manifestos, and other fugitive intellectual endeavors. The revival of the discipline must be based in one or more of the academic programs in which sociologists are trained, probably (if regrettably) in elite universities. And the process has to be in the hands of younger people, those with two or more decades of active professional life ahead of them – because this is what it will take. Is any of this likely? Probably not. But one of the root insights of classical sociology is that human actions can be surprising.

Author's address:
Professor Peter L. Berger
Boston University, Institute for the Study of Economic Culture
10 Lenox Street, Brookline, Massachusetts 02146, U.S.A.