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DECOMPOSITION OR RECONSTRUCTION OF SOCIOLOGY? *

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Textbook definitions of sociology constantly repeat that this field deals with society, social institutions, and social relationships. The problem is whether we are talking about a society as it is, as it was, or as we would want it to be. The present period reveals a sociological environment which tries to look in all three directions at once. But failing to determine the difference between empirical and valuational elements, present-day sociology – especially in America – looks backward, looks at the present moment, and at the same time poses a comprehensible sense of the future.

The fathers of the discipline bequeathed this set of multiple goals, which are now monumental confusions to the present. The European background provided a dual inheritance: an examination of a science supposed to be looking at the history of society and the structure of its institutions; and on the other side, a vision of a future society in which ideal relations can be diagramed. This schism was the exact dividing line between Weber and Mannheim on the "scientific" side, and Comte and Marx on the "utopian" side – pretensions to lofty analysis notwithstanding.

"Utopian" and "scientific" forms of sociology had much in common. But they could not heal the rift created by political choices and values. The dilemma in part is that the field is saddled with its past. Beyond rhetorical concerns, the origins of decomposition are in the ideological structure of the field itself, namely a sense of trying to make the future over. Sociology is a nineteenth century discipline, and a nineteenth century that was largely Hegelian and Marxian in orientation. As a consequence, sociology had a vision, not so much of ameliorating present ills, but of revolutionizing the present so that ills dissolve all at once. In consequence, it could not shed its utopian origins, worse, it could not come to terms with its own ideological proclivities. Mannheim, Toennies, Simmel, Durkheim, Weber – each in their own way warned about

* These remarks were made during a discussion of *The Decomposition of Sociology* (Oxford University Press, 1994) held in Chicago, Illinois at Station WGN on April 6th, 1994, by Milton Rosenberg (University of Chicago), Donald Levine (University of Chicago) and Charles C. Moskos (Northwestern University). I hasten to note that these abbreviated remarks are mine alone, and do not in any way reflect the comments made during this discussion by my colleagues.

such dangers and risks. But in the end, the fanatics and ideologists carried the day. The field preferred "praxis" to "theory", "socialism" to "society".

I genuinely believe that there is a gulf, a severe difference between political and sociological types of analysis. The more I examine the commitment to partisan politics within sociology, often disguised as a belief in change agents, the greater becomes the risk of its decomposition. The gap between the sociological and political is not the problem, the mindless fusion of the two is the problem. That is a leitmotif of my book *The Decomposition of Sociology* – a concern that has hardly abated with the passage of time.

One of the dilemmas that the field displays is that there is a long standing impulse to social reform in sociology. This is especially the case historically in the United States. The work of the Chicago School from Park to Hughes set the tone. There is a strong impulse to identify with people down below. That is, with economically deprived people who are depressed and exploited, in particular racial and ethnic minorities. The impulse to reform is genuine, but it is an impulse that faces problems from two professional angles: One is the spill-over into social work; and the other, the application without much theorizing, that is, without an appreciation of complexity. The strong impulse to develop political networking, political ways of transforming sociology into power, or empowerment, has often swept aside even the most rudimentary safeguards by which sociology has been conducted as a science.

Among the ideologists within sociology, empowerment of those who presumably are out of power soon switches to advocacy of what those out of power advocate. The concern with the dispossessed, with the burdened classes in our society, shifts into a sharp critique of the wealthy and how they acquired their presumably ill-gotten gains. The moral concerns of sociology are with the poor; but the scientific concerns for the analysis of class structure as such begin to dissolve. This pattern is unlike that which took place in the history of political science which tends to be concerned with elites and their decision-making proclivities. How was that evident in classic empirical work in sociology? There were major projects in which data was collected and some sort of analysis of outstanding social systems or social problems were dealt with. Take *Brown vs. Board of Education*: Gunnar Myrdal on the *American Dilemma* or Rose's work on *Political Elites* was very important. There were few legal precedents for the overthrow of the separate but equal doctrine established in *Plessy vs. Ferguson*. In the case of *Brown vs. Board of Education*, those sociological authors were quoted, as well as a major psychological investigator, Kenneth Clark, who was a social psychologist and did research showing the kind of psychological injury that supposedly separate, but clearly unequal, educational

facilities did to black children. The sociological concerns were for uneven *behaviors*. The political science concerns were for uneven *laws*. The gulf was never bridged in American social science.

I do not believe that we can simply go from sociological or empirical information straight to the political position – even though the moral impulse might be there. Let me use an example, a non-American one. Suppose we have a revolution in Cuba, and it is made by Fidel Castro. He lands on the island with ninety people, or twelve people in a boat, and they take over the island miraculously, and win the revolutionary war against a tyrant within a short time. The guerrilla's movement from mountains to cities is successful in Cuba. It is now folklore, folk history. Suppose a revolutionary says: Very well, look, if we can make a change in Cuba, we can also do it in Bolivia.

What is the responsibility of the sociologist towards the leader who believes in that kind of position? Is it his responsibility to say the conditions in Bolivia are different than they are in Cuba? Are his responsibilities to be sublimated so that the scientific limits of prediction are second to the political agenda – or vice versa? I think that this is where the field of sociology has gone awry. We have forgotten that there might be a variety of professional responsibilities and not just a downtrodden group or an oppressed class. Whether a revolutionary effort should be undertaken at all, whether it serves the social good to form a revolution in Bolivia is a question apart from a successful model implemented in Cuba. The complex nature of decision-making in actual contexts is precisely why one cannot simply have an easy movement from the sociological to the political; that is why we are concerned with the substance of science and not simply with its purposes.

We should not confuse the decomposition of sociology with the general healthy state of social research. There is indeed an amazing growth of social research in America. What is taking place is that the social sciences are alive and well, but they are being performed essentially in the fields of demography, urban affairs, community studies, policy analysis, decision theory, and criminology. I do not want to comment specifically on any department of sociology, but I do believe that sociology is unique in its advanced stage of decomposition. Our field is in difficulty, is in trouble, because its empirical core has dissolved. We are really talking about a discipline with a purpose rather than a science with a method. It is not a denial that social science is vibrant and dynamic. I have been editing a magazine called *Society* for thirty-two years, and publish what I consider to be the very best of social research every other month. However, to generate a first-rate product, we must move far beyond the sociological profession. The *public* interest is not the same as the *political* program.

What we are examining is the decomposing of a field, the fragmentation of the field into its parts. Years ago, when we had a discipline, it embraced in a ecumenical manner things like demography and urban affairs, and community study and criminology. Now we are faced with a situation where all these people, all these disciplines either have their own departments, their own institutes, their own professional journals, and certainly their own organizational frameworks. Why did this take place? We are not dealing here with the moral judgment about sociology. We are dealing with the empirical fact of disintegration. Budgets are dwindling, research funds are going elsewhere, and departments are stagnating. There have been some departmental closures, there have been a few partial departmental closures. I do not think that decomposition is something that takes place all at once, nor is it necessarily dramatic. Part of the problem is organizational stagnation, when you have a discipline like sociology which between 1973 and 1993 shows no membership growth, and you compare this with areas like psychology and economics that have grown exponentially in the same period of time, when you have a discipline that can barely sustain an undergraduate program, much less talk about the quality of the graduate program, you have every right, even obligation, to express concern.

Methodology in social science is basically common to each of the social sciences. Whether in psychology, sociology or economics, we all use a shared statistical and analytical base. When you look at people like Lionel Robbins, or John Maynard Keynes, in economics, they too had a shared commitment to ethnography, no less than the sociologists. But in the late twentieth century, sociology has come to represent a kind of theology of society, a return to Comtean and Marxian recipes; and hence a guide to the perplexed. The sociological tradition at its best attempts to broaden out, create some framework for a common shared culture, an appreciation of the public nature of knowledge as represented by adherence to common standards of evidence. This sense of common purpose has been badly shaken by a return to ideological standards of evidence.

In any event, and summing up: the decomposition of sociology is hardly the end of the world. Indeed, it is not even the end of honest social theory and social research. It is merely one facet in the reconstruction of social research. The world changes, and conventions about how to carve up societies at large and sciences writ small also change. Michel Foucault performed a similar task in *The Order of Things* in 1970. It just took me an extra quarter of century to do something similar in *The Decomposition of Sociology*. I regret that it has taken me so long to absorb the lessons offered by our European brethren in cultural studies. The need for a human science has never been greater. The

potential for the reconstruction of sociology depends upon its ability to participate in this search for common grounds in method and theory with the rest of the disciplines. In this way we may yet reach a human science.

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