

# SOCIOLOGY: PROMISE AND PROBLEMS

INAUGURAL LECTURE

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RHODES UNIVERSITY

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# SOCIOLOGY: PROMISE AND PROBLEMS

## INTRODUCTION \*

A cynic reputedly once defined a professor as an academic caretaker who, during his lifetime, keeps thousands of young people out of mischief at the taxpayer's expense. This, I suggest, is, at best, a partial view and thus caricatures the professorial rôle.

A professor, whether in the humanities, the natural sciences or the social sciences, is primarily an academic who professes, something. He professes, that is, he affirms, proclaims and believes in a discipline and he holds this discipline worthy of study, of teaching and of researching. No professor exists in isolation; he is part of an academic community which, in the final analysis, is world-wide as well as being historically rooted. Whether his chair be located in an ancient discipline such as law or in a relatively new discipline such as sociology, by the very fact that he is an academic, each and every professor is committed to certain values, which constitute the core of our conception of a university. All these values can be summed up in the assertion that the overriding goal of the university is the pursuit of truth and the love of wisdom.

One of the best modern descriptions of an academic's value orientation comes from the pen, not of a professor, but of the well-known American journalist, Walter Lippmann. Lippmann is specifically referring to the university when he declares: "The search for truth proceeds best if it is inspired by wonder and curiosity, if, that is to say, it is disinterested—if the scholar disregards all secondary considerations of how his knowledge may be applied, how it can be sold, whether it is useful,

\* This lecture was somewhat abbreviated in delivery.

whether it is good or bad, respectable, fashionable, moral, popular and patriotic, whether it will work or whether it will make men happier or unhappier, whether it is agreeable or disagreeable, whether it is likely to win him a promotion or a prize or a decoration, whether it will get him a good vote in the Gallup Poll.”<sup>(1)</sup>

## NATURE OF SOCIOLOGY

Sociology is a systematic attempt to grasp and understand man's social life as scientifically as possible. Sociology endeavours to pin down, conceptually and analytically, the collective and institutionalised aspects of human society. One of the very early sociologists, Durkheim, argued that human society was a reality “sui generis”.<sup>(2)</sup> More than that, he held society to be an emergent and contended that it could not be reduced to its individual components. The coming together of human groups and their persistence over time gives rise to symbolic systems and social structures which can never be understood exclusively on the level of the individual. Moreover, these constituent individuals are profoundly modified by their membership of, and participation in, group life. The study of these phenomena is what sociology is all about.

What intrigues the sociologist, above all, is the undeniable fact that “throughout human history nearly all human beings have been confronted with the overwhelming weight of a society they as individuals did nothing to create. They have lived out their lives within a very narrow range of alternatives.”<sup>(3)</sup>

In sociology our focus is on groups, collectivities, categories and structures rather than on individuals as such. Methodologically, we prefer an inductive to a deductive approach. Moreover, sociology is a non-normative discipline in that it does not lay down or prescribe standards of human conduct; it does not moralise. Consequently, sociology is an analytical discipline rather than a prophetic one and it operates more readily in the conceptual, rather than the reformist, sphere.

Sociology is both empirical and humanist. Its founders were all committed humanists but the near-swamping of sociology by

American sociologists has led to an overly empirical thrust while European sociologists have preserved the humanist element ever present in the sociological tradition.

Among other things, sociology forces us to take a long, hard, unsentimental look at those aspects of group behaviour which are non-volitional and sometimes non-rational. The study of the pull and power of supra-individual forces is our intellectual concern.

Sociology aims to be both empirical and theoretical and to avoid the danger of fashioning theories in an empirical vacuum. According to a contemporary American sociologist, Blau: "The aim of sociological studies is always theoretical—to contribute to the development of valid generalizations that explain observable social facts. But the only scientific criterion of the probable validity of a generalization is that its implications are confirmed in empirical research. Hence all sociological enquiry worthy of the name is both theoretical and empirical—theoretical in its ultimate aim, yet oriented to empirical research . . . ." <sup>(4)</sup> In this context theory simply means the logical and systematic attempt to make sense of social experience—to try and resolve the unresolved.

Over a period of about one-hundred-and-twenty years, the discipline of sociology has developed to a point where "there now exists a sociological mode of thought, a way of raising problems and giving explanations that have coalesced into a discipline with new research techniques . . . ." <sup>(5)</sup> However, because sociology deals with topics intimately bound up with man's emotional and socio-cultural life, it is only to be expected that there are widely differing perspectives and different schools of thought within sociology. In terms of theoretical orientation there are at least six clearly defined schools of thought, viz., structural-functional, Marxist, social exchange theory, conflict theory, the phenomenological school and symbolic interactionism. Over and above this theoretical division, sociology has what might be termed three faces or wings, viz., the neutral or rigidly empirical, the critical and the radical or activist.

Not surprisingly, there are paradoxes in sociology. For instance, a sociologist is granted a mandate to study society but it is society itself which is the source of that mandate. But this society is man-made yet, at the same time, it is man-making.

Sociology is anything but a monolithic discipline and in various countries it manifests diverse trends and orientations and, quite rightly, tends to concern itself with local, domestic or national issues rather than international affairs and developments. The attitude of the political authorities, the academic traditions of the country as well as the national intellectual climate and history create a set of overall conditions to which sociology has to adjust. For example, sociology in Israel concentrates on the question of immigration; Marxist sociologists are deeply interested in the phenomenon of alienation; British sociologists show a special predilection for class studies while in the third world the accent is on modernisation and development.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Although sociology only developed as an academic discipline in the last century, one finds traces of sociological and parasociological thinking—in bits and pieces and unsystematic, it is true—stretching far back into history. For example, in the 14th Century, Ibn Khaldun, the greatest of the Arab historians, argued that “social phenomena seemed to obey laws which, while not as absolute as those governing natural phenomena, are sufficiently constant to cause social events to follow regular, well-defined patterns and sequences.”<sup>(6)</sup> All sociologists without exception would agree that this succinct statement represents the basis and starting point for all sociological thinking.

Sociology cannot be understood apart from an historical context. Sociology did not drop from the skies but grew out of the soil of a specific socio-cultural environment. Acute social, political and economic problems actually created sociology. “Sociological thought emerged in response to the crisis of a newly dynamic European society, fresh from industrial and

political revolution. The aim of this new thought process was to forge intellectual tools which would make the complex web of social relations more transparent.”<sup>(7)</sup>

The great pioneering sociologist, Durkheim, explains the genesis of his discipline as follows: “How does it happen that we experience the need to reflect on social matters, if not because our social state is abnormal, because the unsettled collective organization no longer functions with the authority of instinct—for that is always what determines the arousing of scientific thought and its extension to a new order of things.”<sup>(8)</sup>

As far as its founders were concerned, sociology was not just to be an intellectual pursuit; it had a practical aim as well. These men as well as many of their successors in the optimistic and reformist tradition, have cherished what Weber referred to as “an almost superstitious veneration of science as the possible creator of social evolution.”<sup>(9)</sup> In the late 18th Century serious observers of the human scene believed that the scientific method had conquered nature and they were thus led to pin their faith on the equally successful application of this same method to the study of human society.

The early pioneers of sociology were typical 19th Century thinkers who were captivated and entranced by an image of rational man and who maintained that an increase in knowledge must inevitably result in moral progress. When sociology crossed the Atlantic in the late 19th Century it became intoxicated with the assumption that applied scientific knowledge would solve all social problems; consequently a whole generation of sociologists became infected with reforming zeal. There are thus solid grounds for regarding some sociologists as disguised social engineers. For example, W. I. Thomas, a leading American sociologist in the 1920's saw the aim of sociology as: “the abolition of war, of crime, of drink, of abnormality, of slums, of this or that kind of unhappiness.”<sup>(10)</sup>

All in all, sociology originated from the convergence and fusion of a number of intellectual and philosophical traditions. “The strains of natural law, science, materialism, determinism



and inevitability, the romantic emphasis on organic wholes and on conflict, ideas of progress and evolution, all have found their way into its intellectual pedigree.”<sup>(11)</sup> ,

## **RESISTANCE TO SOCIOLOGY**

Sociology, as a distinct intellectual perspective, did not arise in an academic environment. In fact, sociology was established by men outside the academies and universities and, in the case of Comte, by a man hostile to the academic world. Others, like Spencer and Marx, were outsiders with respect to the professional academic environment.

For a long time during the infancy of sociology a chasm of suspicion on the one side and a gulf of resentment on the other separated sociologists from other academics. As a result, for many decades sociology faced an uphill struggle to achieve intellectual respectability and academic legitimacy. This was particularly the case in Great Britain where distrust of scholars in the more traditional academic disciplines was formidable and prolonged.

The objection to the new discipline was as much due to its being non-individualistic as to its non-rationalistic ethos. In addition, the critics felt that political economy and philosophy covered the field and there was thus no need for sociology. In any event, anthropology was well entrenched in the British universities and in the eyes of some dons there was, therefore, no need for sociology because, after all, anthropology was a type of colonial sociology.

Sociology is, in some respects, a rather politically vulnerable discipline and thus the acceptance patterns which it encounters throughout the world are anything but uniform. In some countries such as Greece and the Malagassy Republic sociology is simply banned while in Cuba, it has “been derided as a tool of capitalism.”<sup>(12)</sup> In other countries, sociology meets with strong opposition. For instance, in the Argentine, sociology faces a truly redoubtable band of opponents, namely, the academic establishment, the literary elite, the army, the top echelons of the Church hierarchy as well as the students and intellectuals of the

extreme left. There, sociology obviously has what is known as 'a politically inconvenient public image'.<sup>(13)</sup>

## **SOCIOLOGY IN SOUTH AFRICA**

In 1918 the University of South Africa founded the first sociology department in our country. However, it took a succession of severe droughts, the depression and the poor White problem to make the residential universities open their doors to sociology viz., Pretoria (1931), Stellenbosch (1932), Cape Town (1934) and Witwatersrand (1937).<sup>(14)</sup>

This might seem unimpressive but at the outbreak of World War II in 1939, South African universities had twice as many sociology departments as universities in England. At the Black, Indian and Coloured universities, sociology departments were commenced between 1960-62.<sup>(15)</sup> Thus, we see how youthful sociology is as an academic discipline in South Africa.

The original impetus behind the mounting of sociology departments at our South African universities arose from pressing social problems which were plaguing the country at the time. Consequently, from the very beginning, the applied nature of sociology was strongly emphasised and the discipline's main focus was on the solution of local problems, especially the poor White problem.

It is interesting to note that it was largely the leaders of the Afrikaans-speaking community who promoted the creation of sociology as an academic discipline in South Africa. The Afrikaners, more than the English, were new to urbanization and its attendant problems. Like their early 20th Century American counterparts, the first Afrikaans-speaking sociologists were men with a rural background fortified by strong religious convictions. Such men, more than their English-speaking compatriots, saw the need for the establishment of joint departments of sociology and social work. Only decades later would these two disciplines go their separate and autonomous ways.

From its earliest days, South African sociology has been characterised by a strong flavour of moral commitment; in fact,

there is a good deal of evidence of the uplift syndrome among South African sociologists. Perhaps this fact, combined with the dominance of Calvinist ethical imperatives, in part explains the neglect of historical perspectives in much of South African sociology as well as the fragmentary nature of its research and general lack of theoretical depth. The same was true of early American sociology.

Furthermore, the separation between sociology and social anthropology resulted in the latter discipline concentrating on the Black indigenous population while sociology confined itself to a concern with welfare among Whites rather than with more general theoretical issues.<sup>(16)</sup> Above all, the dominant ideology tended to define as unproblematic those matters that might naturally be expected to have interested sociologists. There is nothing peculiarly or uniquely South African in this because "every dominant class lays claim to the universality of the ideology which legitimates its position of dominance."<sup>(17)</sup>

Sociological research in South Africa has, by and large, tended to concentrate disproportionately on welfare aspects and deviant behaviour. This is not an equating of sociology with social pathology but the bias is evident. In fact, in the study I conducted among final-year sociology students at twelve of our South African universities in 1972, I found that a significant majority of senior sociology students opted for applied sociology as opposed to theoretical sociology; in fact, the overwhelming impression gained from this study was that most students majoring in sociology do so because they regarded sociology primarily as a service discipline. Thus, a relative majority of our respondents felt that the major rôle sociologists should play in society was that of solution-finder to society's problems. Clearly, South African sociology is still haunted by the ghost of the early reformist school of sociology.

On paper, South Africa's polyethnic society might appear to be a research paradise for the sociologist. However, the actual reality is far different. As the country's most distinguished research sociologist, Professor Lawrence Schlemmer, has ably expressed it: "Today, virtually no research can be conducted in a moral vacuum. Social research in South Africa is often

strained by as much conflict and contradiction as the society itself . . . .”(18) Epigrammatically, Schlemmer sums up the problems facing research sociologists in South Africa as consisting of “partisanship and permits.”(19) Moreover, research in a culturally pluralist and heterogeneous society is always much more difficult, technically and ideologically, than in a relatively homogenous society.

Perhaps the greatest weakness in South African sociology is its overwhelmingly imported nature. From textbooks to research models, we rely to an unfortunately great extent on American sociology and, to a much lesser extent, on British sociology and are inclined to ignore the great continental traditions such as the French and German schools. Our sociological mentality is, I fear, still painfully and dismally colonial.

In South African sociology circles at the moment there are strong moves afoot to effect the professionalization of sociology. South Africa does not need a professionalized sociology. It does not require sociologists who are professionals but rather sociologists who are learned, critical and committed to the view that sociology is a discipline, not a profession. If we become a profession, then—like all professions—we will tend to take our society, its norms, values and institutions as givens and such a posture of acceptance is foreign and inimical to sociology’s most crucial requirement, namely, that of regarding all human cultures and all social institutions as problematic.

Professionalism in sociology will tend to undermine the sociologist’s commitment to objectivity and possibly weaken the discipline’s socially critical function. Professionalism is right, proper, and logical in fields such as law, medicine and social work but sociology is different from these fields and professionalism, while safeguarding the above-named disciplines, will assuredly constrict and hamper the sociological endeavour in our society.

Therefore, it is much better and much safer for sociology to remain an independent vocation than to aspire to becoming a bureaucratized profession. A profession qua profession has no

warrant for believing that it is incorruptible or that it will be spared the temptations of power.

Thus far, sociology in South Africa has been primarily an academic discipline. The university has been its institutional setting and we have nothing comparable to the wide, extra-university market for sociology graduates which operates in the U.S.A. Consequently, we do not refer to the Ph.D. degree as a union card!

## **SOCIOLOGY AS SCIENTIFIC**

From the very outset, the founding fathers of sociology insisted that the new discipline must be scientific and that it must have no truck with metaphysical or conjectural speculation. Sociology must rest solidly on observation and fact.

There is much that is valuable in the positivist tradition and observation and exactitude are commendable virtues in any scholar. Indeed, as Gouldner contends, "the value-free principle enhanced the autonomy of sociology . . . ." <sup>(20)</sup> Unhappily, it was inclined, quite unrealistically, to separate values from facts too sharply and to assign them to totally watertight compartments; this brought a degree of insensitivity into sociology which rode ill with the discipline's basic subject matter, namely, human social relations. In short, these sociologists carried their methodological asceticism—if not, narcissism—too far and so the mountain of empirical precision has groaned but it only brought forth a mouse of meaningful results.

At its worst, this type of sociology specialised in trivia and irrelevance and was a far cry from the intellectual austerity and avoidance of triviality of the great masters of sociology like Durkheim and Weber. Consequently, it is scarcely surprising to find Gellner accusing these sociologists of living in a world, "curiously hygienic in its lack of historical and philosophical vistas. Its inhabitants though anxious, are extremely confident yet curiously touchy; often equipped with . . . a methodology instead of a mind." <sup>(21)</sup>

In any scientific pursuit a rigorous methodology is praiseworthy but not when it becomes a phobia excising all sub-

stantive guts from the sociological enterprise. Extreme positivist methodology fully merits Mannheim's strictures on its " 'exactitude complex' which canonises every fact, every numerical certitude just because they are factual and controllable." (22)

The danger lies in the attempt to model sociology exclusively along the lines of mathematics and the natural sciences. Aping the natural sciences has led to an indisputable narrowness in much of positivist sociology. After all, "social facts do not display the same degree of repetitive uniformity as do those of inorganic nature. To concentrate on what repetitive uniformities there are in social facts is to lose sight of their most important characteristic, growth and change over time." (23)

Much of sociology is concerned with symbolic systems and meaning structures. Consequently, it is dangerous to assume that methods of study suited to the world of natural objects are completely suitable for the study of sociological data. Unlike engineers or botanists or metallurgists, in the case of sociologists there is very little mental distance between these sociologists themselves and their proper object of study, that is, the ongoing social world around them, a world to which they themselves belong. Hence, it is folly for any research sociologist to imagine himself as a human recording machine or an impersonal seismograph. It is one thing to be able to agree about what constitutes intersubjectively verifiable criteria of evidence but the final interpretation thereof lies outside the domain of social science.

Social reality differs profoundly from physical reality and the nature of the social world is essentially contrived. In fact, "it can be readily observed that the factual status of a physical or natural object or force (such as rain, gravity or electricity) is different in kind from the facticity or 'thingness' of a social convention or institution (such as divorce, crime or 'polite behaviour')." (24) Once we realise this, the natural-science paradigm of the extreme positivist sociologists becomes less convincing. The natural scientist is dealing with a world that has no intrinsic meaning whereas the phenomena studied by sociologists are intrinsically meaningful. There is no simple solution to the

very real problems arising from the inextricability of the sociologist and his discipline's subject matter.

Bramson, a sociologist critical of extreme empiricism, has argued that, "a 'pure science' of the type which sociologists, clinging to Newtonian imagery, imagine to be carried on by the physicists, is hardly possible in the Social Sciences, nor is it even desirable."<sup>(25)</sup> Spratt, a British sociologist, is more blunt and states categorically that he doubts whether sociology "could ever be an orderly deductive system of propositions."<sup>(26)</sup> Indeed, all the empirical ingenuity in the world will not turn sociology into an exact science. In fact, Spratt thinks that the best we can hope for in sociology is prediction with rather low probability over a short range and in terms of unlikelihoods rather than likelihoods.

Rigidly empirical sociology contends, quite vehemently, that sociology is, and must be, totally value-free. This is, to be sure, a contradiction in terms but it does sound scientifically soothing to many practitioners of sociology. This value-free syndrome has arisen partly from a misreading and misunderstanding of possibly the greatest of the classical sociologists, Max Weber. When Weber argued that we must very carefully distinguish values from facts he was not arguing in favour of moral indifference. His whole distinguished career would give the lie to such a groundless imputation. Weber was arguing about certain methodological points but he would never have been so naïve as to pretend that a totally value-free sociology was possible—even if it was desirable. Hence what the extreme anti-theoretical empiricists have done is to turn an instrumental value into a terminal value.

The extreme empiricists believed that they were building up a so-called value-free sociology which has turned out to be simply "the vain ritual of moral neutrality which, because it invites men to ignore the vulnerability of reason to bias, leaves it at the mercy of irrationality."<sup>(27)</sup> All sociologists believe that the norms of scientific objectivity and indispensable in sociology, But what is not always grasped or accepted is that commitment to scientific objectivity differs radically from moral indifference.

There are over 50 clearly demarcated fields (sub-disciplines) within sociology and the ability to quantify our research data depends on the nature of the particular branch of sociology being studied. For example, sub-disciplines such as demography, criminology and mathematical sociology lend themselves much more readily to quantification and statistical manipulation than do other sub-divisions of the discipline such as the sociology of knowledge, the sociology of religion and medical sociology.

## **SOCIOLOGY AS CRITICAL**

Any intellectual discipline which studies and analyses beliefs and cultural traditions is bound, at times, to be critical of popularly-held opinions. In this context, sociology is obviously a critical discipline. The sceptical, analytical and evaluative stance of sociology in these sensitive areas sometimes leads our critics to label us nasty, morose and meddling. Therefore, the critical sociologist must choose between the mental ghetto of the narrow empiricists and the shaky ivory towers of the extreme radical sociologists.

Deeply grounded in sociology is a paradoxical element; sociology is at one and the same time both conservative and debunking. Sociology argues that man cannot be man without a social order—this is an absolutely fundamental prerequisite—and it also holds that all social systems and all normative orientations are relative and, in some sense, arbitrary and, therefore, inherently problematic and precarious. Unless the sociologist keeps these two foundation pillars or polarities of his discipline continually in mind, he is liable to exaggeration and imbalance.

Sociologists who cherish their discipline's critical stance are particularly hostile to a market value being placed on sociology particularly because they believe this vulgarises and trivialises their discipline. In short, sociology is not for sale. In addition, sociology as a critical discipline rejects any assumed moral imperative to provide "solutions" to social problems as payment for the right to be critical because the critical and analytical spirit is intrinsic to the discipline itself. Thus the sociologist sets



his face against any sacrifice of academic ideals especially in the matter of responding to consumer and vocational demands.

The critical element in sociology does not make the sociologist a revolutionary; neither does his conception of society as a precarious reality make him a visionary. Peter Berger, one of the foremost of contemporary sociologists, has argued quite rightly, "that sociological understanding is inimical to revolutionary ideologies, not because it has some sort of conservative bias, but because it sees not only through the illusions of the present status quo but also through the illusionary expectations concerning possible futures, such expectations being the customary spiritual nourishment of the revolutionary."<sup>(28)</sup>

The sociologist is a difficult customer for he refuses to see his discipline as an instrument for making the status quo work better. In fact, he does not even see it as his task to assure politicians or comfort industrialists. Sociology endeavours to make a sound analysis of this or that aspect of social reality, followed up by a reasoned judgment and interpretation; it does not leave matters hanging as do the value-free neutral empiricists, neither does sociology attempt to politicise the discipline and its students as is the wont of the extreme radical sociologists. Sociology must remain an intellectual pursuit, not a commercial commodity nor a party political platform.

Critical sociologists, while rejecting a totally neutral positivist stance as an unrealizable dream, nevertheless value the empirical nature of sociology. In the words of Gouldner, one of the leading critical sociologists, "Sociology's sheer empiricism, then, necessarily creates tension for all authoritative definitions of social reality, for the claims of the conventional, the sacred, the socially privileged."<sup>(29)</sup>

In a South African context, a good example of the critical stance of sociology is to be found in the work of my eminent predecessor, Professor James Irving, in the field of industrial sociology. In his *Man, Machines and Society*, Professor Irving discussed, among other things, the contradiction in South African society whereby black tribalism is entrenched while more and more black workers are becoming involved in the industrial

order. Irving viewed tribalism and industrialism as psychologically and functionally incompatible and observed: "What we are asking the African to do is to remain tribal, or he wishes to remain this way himself, and we expect to find the norms produced by centuries of industrialism to be found in his performances. As these norms are social and not biologically derived it would be luck to find them in tribal societies whose motivational systems and work ethical codes are based on different principles."<sup>(30)</sup>

The intrinsically critical nature of sociology inclines the sociologist to analyse the beat generation as dispassionately as he analyses some particular form of political despotism. He must be able to see that to some groups law is sacred while to other groups law is their greatest enemy. Sociologists know that while in middle-class society respect for law and order is essential for survival, very often, in lower class sub-cultures, survival seems to depend on disrespect for, and violation of, law as the actors themselves experience it.

It is fairly common knowledge that much sociology possibly suffers from an overdose of underdog identification and there are historical reasons for this. But sociology embraces in its intellectual concern the underdog as well as the overdog and even the topdog. The sociologist aims at a holistic and balanced view, a total picture, of social reality.

Sociology is indisputably a threat to the taken-for-granted view of human society. The sociologist requires the ability to stand outside the world of his own experiences. He also must possess the knack of detaching himself from prevailing value currents in so far as he can. Now it is undeniable that either of these two postures can court unpopularity and, in some societies, disaster. The root issue is this: sociology forces on the sociologist anti-conventional perspectives.

I do not see the task of sociology as merely providing information—decked out to be sure, in suitable statistical form—for political reformers or administrators or anyone else, but I

prefer to think of sociology as an attempt which contributes to our knowledge of social relations and social structures, but especially which exposes the illusions of individualism.

## CONCLUSION

Sociology, like any other intellectual discipline, needs continuous critical evaluation if it is to survive and make progress. But the criterion of criticism must always be reason and never emotion. Consequently, if sociology is forced to move from an "is" orientation to an "ought" orientation, this will result in the intellectual deterioration and possibly the destruction of sociology as an independent academic discipline.

Here, in the Rhodes University Department of Sociology, my colleagues and I do not regard it as our task to neutralise or smother or ridicule the well-developed and sensitive social conscience, which many sociology students have. We know, however, that the study of sociology will chasten and mature this social conscience and make it more realistic, wiser and, we hope, more effective. This, by any standards, constitutes an admirable goal especially in the contemporary world where, as a leading South African sociologist, Professor S. P. Cilliers, contends "social and political systems which are built upon or accommodate social injustice will tend to be intolerant of the discipline of sociology. It was not a mere personal idiosyncrasy of Adolf Hitler which led to the persecution of sociologists under the Nazi regime."<sup>(31)</sup>

We try to teach our students that sociology, by definition, and because of the nature of its methodology and subject matter, does involve a critical and analytical stance. As Luckmann has argued "It can be said of most brands of *social criticism* that—while seeing the problem—they failed to formulate it dispassionately and in a manner that permits the inspection of evidence. This we take is one of the most important tasks for the sociologist."<sup>(32)</sup>

My colleagues and I do not regard sociology as a big stick with which to beat the establishment. As far as we are concerned, there is a crucial difference between a critical stance

and polemical intoxication. Social reality may be painful but we prefer it to utopian fancies. We hold social reality to be complex, variegated and changing and believe it is the task of the sociologist to study this phenomenon in a sober and scholarly manner rather than to react emotionally and impressionistically to passing events.

Our study of social reality is not confined exclusively to the problem of order but we also take account of its ineluctable correlate, viz., social change.<sup>(33)</sup> Consequently, we try to teach our students to avoid the temptation of easy answers and we endeavour to lead them to the realisation that moral assurance and passionate sincerity alone will not solve mankind's problems. Thus, this department is particularly hostile to any "denial of history and its casual rôle" because, *inter alia*, "it would have been unthinkable for, say, Marx, Weber or Durkheim to ignore history."<sup>(34)</sup>

In the twentieth-century world sociology forms part of an all-round education. Sociology is the foe of chauvinism, parochialism, bigotry, absolutism, cultural imperialism, negative individualism and vulgar snobbery. In a swiftly changing world, sociology can throw light on certain aspects of deviant behaviour and crime. In addition, sociology has a contribution to make to our understanding of phenomena such as class and power and the collective forces which shape our lives. Particularly in respect of the culture shock it engenders, sociology assists the young in the process of escaping from ethnocentrism and the fallacies of popular wisdom as well as developing their critical faculties.

In a world in which the have-nots threateningly outnumber the haves, sociology can tell us much about the structural components of poverty and cultural deprivation, e.g., hostility on the part of most of the poor and the culturally deprived towards the basic institutions of society: their built-in fatalism, helplessness, dependence, inferiority, shiftlessness, alienation, weak ego structure, immediate indulgence of impulses rather than deferred gratification and so forth.

While not ignoring personality factors, sociology teaches those who submit to her discipline the invaluable lesson of how to think structurally. The classic example of this type of thinking is to be found in Marx—not in his rhetorical and polemical broadsides—but in the largely structural manner in which he analysed society and history.

Sociology brings in its train a disinclination to impute moral depravity to individuals or other groups in those instances where the institutional elements of the situation plus the reality of cultural relativity tip the balance one way or another.

Sociology has been called a gloomy science but, more accurately, sociology is a sobering discipline. Sociology is geared to making its students—and this is extremely relevant in a South African context—realise “the danger of assuming that those who lack material benefits are naturally deficient in their culture.”<sup>(35)</sup> More than that, sociology teaches its adherents not to disvalue or discountenance the cultures of minority groups; sociology also underlines the limitations and fallibility of even the most dominant cultural traditions. Thus with regard to both in-groups and out-groups, sociology, at its best, combines impartiality with sensitivity.

Therefore, sociology is a rewarding discipline because it has added something to our knowledge of man, the social animal par excellence. True, the gains have been modest yet worthwhile; nevertheless there is still a long way to go to reach the Comtean goal of a perfectly scientific knowledge of human society. I, for one, regard this goal as a vitally useful, though completely unreachable, beacon. But, even if the holy grail can never be found, the enduring search for it is none the less extremely enriching.

In conclusion, I submit that all sociologists ought to be reminded that “society is richer than sociology and that for all our science, the world is still the mystery and passion of being with our fellowmen.”<sup>(36)</sup>

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