

Peter Berger's Sociology and his Images of Society [I]

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Introduction

A series of images usually makes up a story and a series of thought elaborations is often meant to make up a theory. Peter L. Berger's sociological imagination has produced many ideas and images of what society and social man are like. Berger's felicitous style and original sociological theorizing have earned him the honor of reading and hearing the expression 'Bergerian sociology' (Hunter, 1984: 21); several of his books have been bestsellers and are frequently cited¹⁾, yet not many evaluations of his work have appeared in print²⁾. To fill this lack, I would like to engage in an extensive, critical study of Berger's opus, beginning with his first sociological work *The Invitation to Sociology*, its sequel *Sociology Reinterpreted*, and some parts from *Sociology: A Biographical Approach*.

The Invitation was not intended as 'an attempt at theoretical system-building.' As an 'invitation' to an exciting and significant intellectual world, it was intended 'to be read, not studied' (1963: 7)³⁾. But as a very successful book it merits a close look in order to find out what story its images tell, what theoretical implications it contains, and what is so 'Bergerian' about Berger. Certainly, it should be interesting to trace the evolution and growth of the sociological thinking of such a prolific writer as Berger. Also, I believe, it will be rewarding to look for hidden treasures in his work.

By way of introduction, I shall begin with a collage of Berger's images of society and an overall view of his sociology. The first image of society that, according to Berger, comes out of social reality, is that of a prison, in which man is subject to many pressures. If society is to be seen as a prison, its walls have been constructed by the occupants themselves, who, at times, seem to behave like puppets. However, since people play their roles following their own will or wiles as the case may be, society is, rather, like a stage or a theater, but it might be a circus or a carnival as well. The reality of the drama is essentially a morality play in the sense that the actors usually behave morally and sincerely, but their behavior may be cynical, too. All in all, to a great extent society is the result of a conspiracy.

Putting up a collage like this may seem trivial and the impression it gives bizarre, but it does not fail to make the important point that Berger has touched on several dimensions of social reality. The social world is definitely not a one-dimensional thing. We get a similar impression from Berger's view of sociology. Having developed out of a specific modern consciousness, the discipline of sociology is, or aims at the scientific understanding of important social phenomena: human interaction, the complex of human relations, social institutions and the ideas and values that move people. Sociology is to be objective and value-free. Methodologically, it is necessarily interpretive. As a science, sociology is ethically neutral and is at its best when qualified as such. In this respect, sociological knowledge resembles intelligence gathered by a spy, which should be as accurate as possible, in order to be useful. Obviously, sociology differs from intelligence-gathering, in that the sociologist belongs to the scientific com-

munity and does not take sides. Debunking is part of his task. Further, the goal of clarifying various constellations of meaning and interpreting social events from the viewpoint of the actors involved is bound to have a relativizing effect. In its application, sociology is never neutral. On the contrary, many attitudes are possible. Sociology ought to be humanistic.

It has been said of Berger's main theoretical work *The Social Construction of Reality* that it concerns the relationship between individual and society, which is one of the important themes in classical sociological theory (Hunter; Ainslie: 1986: 26), but this theme was already central from the beginning. It should be clear from our short summary that this relationship, which involves the sociologist himself, is not a simple one. The multi-dimensionality of Berger's sociology apparently has to do with his concern with consciousness (and the sociology of knowledge) as is explicit in his later work. This concern with consciousness implies that the object of sociology is not merely objective social reality, but much more the subjective reality that exists and evolves in living people. The same inference can be made from the fact that interpretation is an important part of the sociological method. Also, Berger's approach is complicated because of the interrelatedness of sociological knowledge and social praxis. Berger firmly advocates the separation of science and praxis, but as a person involved in social issues, he has not limited his work to neutral, scientific analysis⁴⁾. Berger's urge to be involved probably stems from what appears to be an obsession with the problems of modern society, as he himself stated recently: 'I suppose that my entire published opus revolves monomaniacally around two questions: What is modernity? And, how can one come to terms with it personally and politically?' (Berger, 1986: 225). The latter urge towards involvement seems to have intruded sometimes into his more detached research. Let us track the main lines of Berger's earliest sociological argumentation and see what kind of problems are involved.

I. The principal dimensions of social reality

1. The pressures of the societal prison

Being people with an address, we are located in society within a specific stratification structure, subject to social control. To begin with the latter, its numerous manifestations, occurring at different levels, are not treated very systematically. At the community level, large and small, there are political and legal controls; the harshest manifestations of this control are physical violence and the threat of violence. Economic sanctions are common, both in public and organizational life. Interpersonal control is effected by ridicule, gossip, and ostracism, actions which may be used in a fraudulent manner. At the general social level, again, shared conceptions of morality, custom and manners have a controlling function, while at the personal social level the choice of an occupation functions as a powerful mechanism of social control, too. 'Each occupational role in society, even in very humble jobs, carries with it a code of conduct that is very hard indeed to defy' (1963: 92). Last not least, other social involvements, especially one's family and circles of friends contain many occasions of restraint effected by the unspoken norms that govern these relations. All these mechanisms work mainly because of a profound human desire to belong and to be accepted as a person.

A different kind of function is at work in social stratification. Social stratification is a social system of ranking people in terms of power, privilege and prestige. Ranking differs from

society to society, but it can be said that, in general, it is centered on class, occupation and race. The latter is the most rigid factor in social stratification, since it cannot be altered and since it is bound up with cultural differences on top of those related to a specific social stratum. Class is defined after Max Weber in terms of life chances that are similar within a given stratum. Life chances, though mainly economic, translate into a different quality of life and culture to be enjoyed by the population in question. It is a quite telling observation that even average life expectancy differs from class to class. Further, occupation, in addition to being a mechanism of social control, appears to be the most important determining factor of social stratification, i. e., of what people are and of the way they live. For example, considering the varying physical circumstances of the various forms of manual and mental labor, it is clear that these circumstances have a different impact on health and its maintenance. Obvious, too, is the fact that occupations yield different financial means for a living and that occupations, therefore, are major determiners of the immediate social and cultural environment of daily life: the house people live in, its location in the community, its interior decoration, the education the children will receive, the population within which they can look for a marriage partner, the family's political and church affiliations, etc. At the same time, with the differing quality of daily life, there are many differences in terms of ongoing socialization. Occupation, then, reveals itself as the major factor determining personal identity.

The social significance of social stratification represents a difference in life chances, but its sociological meaning lies in the fact that this social system of ranking codetermines peoples' consciousness. In other words, the reality of everyday life is a matter of social definition. In contrast, the sociological significance of social control is quite different. Since it is a concomitant phenomenon to all social interaction, people are not actively conscious of its workings. From this it follows that social control and social stratification are different social realities, but they are not independent of each other as is illustrated by the fact that occupation is a factor in both. Similarly, education, being a representative case of social control, is at the same time a factor in the solidification of social stratification (1972: 190ff). Berger generalizes these considerations concerning social control and social stratification with a description of social institutions. An institution is understood here as it is by A. Gehlen, 'as a regulatory agency, channeling human actions in much the same way as instincts channel animal behavior' (1963: 104). Institutions are models of action. They provide a typology of action in society. Their characteristics, which are most salient in language, the prototype of social institutions, are the following: externality, objectivity, coerciveness, moral authority and historicity (1972: 80-88).

Since institutional behavior is not reflected upon, different ways of behavior are almost excluded from consciousness. A curious consequence, to be encountered again later on, is that 'every institutional structure must depend on deception and all existence in society carries with it an element of bad faith' (1963: 107). In Durkheimian language, society is a phenomenon *sui generis*, that confronts us massively with objective facticity.

Thus, according to Berger, the societal pressures on the individual derive from social structures and the mechanisms of social control. But this is only one part of the picture. It has come to pass that the yoke of the societal prison is easy to bear. The inmates aspire to what is expected from them. This means, to Berger, that people themselves build the walls of their prison. In other words, society is self-imposed confinement. Society exists within man.

2. Self-imposed confinement and puppet theater

How society exists within man is explained by means of role theory, reference group theory and the sociology of knowledge. For simplification, let us see how roles, reference group behavior and social knowledge have succeeded in putting society within man.

For example, learning and teaching are role behaviors. Since students want to learn many things, or are compelled to do so, they listen or are made to listen to teachers. The roles of both student and teachers are 'typified responses to typified expectations' (1963: 112). Put differently, a role regulates behavior and carries with it certain emotions. As for teachers, they will feel intelligent and important when students listen intently to them. They will feel strong and clever when they can make students listen who do not feel inclined to do so spontaneously. What these feelings mean sociologically is that a role has attached to it a certain identity, which is bestowed on the person in question through acts of recognition. This is the difficult part of the story. It is relatively easy to generalize about roles that may be considered as more or less constant sociological mechanisms. In contrast, the interrelationship of roles and identity is an ongoing process, the outcome of which is highly variable in every situation and its functioning is unclear. The typified expectation toward role players is a far-reaching one. Though not explicitly stated, the expectation is both personal and institutional. Role players are expected to be what they act out in their roles. (But they may play these roles 'tongue in cheek' as well, as we will see in the following section). Identities are socially bestowed, socially sustained but also socially changed. Concerning the institutional expectation, it can be said that institutions select those persons who are able to play roles fittingly, while rejecting others who do not.

As for social knowledge, ideas are socially located, too. People become the possessors of a world view, and of moral and religious ideas in much the same way as they come to hold an identity, i. e., by way of socialization into a world that is taken for granted. Further, it is reference group behavior that, as a nexus between role behavior and the function of social knowledge, shows the many little workshops in which social reality is constructed. Such behavior reveals the tendency, as the saying goes, for birds of a feather to flock together, but even more, it reveals the tendency of people who want to join a group and those who actually do so to choose a costume that fits the ideology of the group in question.

It is these forms of behavior (in roles, in reference group behavior, and in the internalization of social knowledge) that are responsible for putting society in man. Reflecting on Berger's argumentation concerning these forms of behavior, it is not difficult to see that they make up an important part of the socialization process. However, it is not very clear that this behavior results in 'self-imposed confinement,' or that it makes society resemble a puppet theater 'with little puppets jumping about on the end of their invisible strings, (1963: 140). The question that immediately comes to mind is: Who is pulling the strings? It cannot be but the other puppets themselves, who are invisibly linked to one another. This means that the metaphor is not correct, since marionettes are not invisibly linked to one another. Humans are. However, being interdependent is quite different from 'self-imposed confinement.' Something seems to be wrong with Berger's initial metaphor of the societal prison built by the inmates themselves. The depressing aspects of social stratification and the pressures of social control that bear on the individual are real enough, but these do not derive from society as a whole. Social stratification is an informal system of ranking related to an informal social structure, which

entails inequality with very real consequences for interaction among people of various strata. Further, the pressures of social control derive from intra-group social mechanisms that are either directly mediated through persons or indirectly through institutions. These two manifestations of social reality do not constitute isolatable mechanisms; they certainly do not add up to blocks of *sui generis* reality. They are nothing but more or less homogeneous aspects of social structuring that can comprehensively be labeled social stratification and social control. The implication of both these social realities is that, as Berger himself suggests in his generalization about social institutions, human behavior is channeled in certain ways, better perhaps, in highly variable ways. More generally, people do not act autonomously. Exactly the same is implied in the processes of socialization. All our social knowledge and almost all our other knowledge is mediated knowledge. A large part of our behavior is behavior within institutional frames, overshadowed by the groups we belong to, while role behavior functions as response to expectation. How can such behavior be called autonomous? Berger does not say it is, but his approach presupposes it. The above sociological considerations become much more consistent when they are made 'on social man' instead of society. In other words, Berger's expressions of 'man in society' and 'society in man' are sociologically reifying. His conclusion is too sweeping: 'Society not only controls our movements, but shapes our identity, our thoughts and emotions. The structures of society become the structures of our consciousness' (1963: 140). The problem with metaphores like the societal prison and puppet theatre is that they suggest a particular totality or whole, where in reality, there are only dimensions of social reality.

3. Society as drama

Next to the image of the societal prison and puppet theatre, drama is Berger's third major metaphor. This he uses to mitigate the overdrawn deterministic picture of the external pressures of society and its internal bondage. To do so, Berger looks for experiences that confirm human freedom. This he does in two ways. Firstly, he shows that social control is less rigid than previously suggested, and secondly, that the reality of freedom, as a human perspective superposed on the sociological one, can be postulated.

To show that social control is less rigid than supposed at first, Berger discusses several aspects of autonomous action in society. Very generally, with Weber, he subscribes to the intentionality of social action and its subjective meaning. More concretely, Berger elaborates on three instances in which confirmation of control systems is withheld. The first one we find in action directed toward the transformation of the social definitions of reality and other social change. The means of effecting social change range from individual deviance, ironical sabotage, and the exercise of personal charisma, to revolution in extreme cases. The second instance of counteracting social control is that of detachment, found in marginal existence and in several forms of withdrawal from society. Some people are successful in forming groups or even subcultures, which may be critical of the general society in various ways. These groups may be religious, intellectual, artistic, or political. The third instance is that of individual manipulation, that is, the deliberate use of the institutional structures for private purposes, extreme cases of which are those of swindlers, impostors, and charlatans. Goffman's concept of 'role distance' and Simmel's theory of sociability, e. g., non-committal, play-forms of social interaction, are brought in for corroboration of the latter perspective.

It is these individual manipulations together with activity expressing discontent and action toward social change that, according to Berger, are elements of the dramatic model of society. These elements, in addition, are supposed to show the precariousness as well as the fictional character of society. Depending on the quality of the action, the drama may turn into a circus or even a carnival.

The discussion of freedom as a non-empirical reality is a philosophical argument, in which freedom is postulated. Institutions channel human conduct, but human beings should be able to say 'no,' notwithstanding unpleasant consequences. If freedom is not recognized, or when it is implicitly denied, people lapse into 'bad faith,' in the sense in which the term is used by J. P. Sartre. Put differently, bad faith occurs when one sees something as necessary that in fact is voluntary.

Roles, routines and ritual may function as an 'immense apparatus of "bad faith"' while law is called its 'master fortress' (1963: 167). People may hide inauthentically behind laws, roles and routines. In that way they can evade personal responsibility and hide their freedom from themselves. Implied in this scenario is the curious consequence, mentioned earlier, of 'deception' occurring at the structural level. This is stated with greater force than ever:

Since society exists as a network of social roles, each one of which can become a chronic or a momentary alibi from taking responsibility for its bearer, we can say that *deception* and *self-deception* are at the very heart of social reality. Nor is this an accidental quality that could somehow be eradicated by some moral reformations or other. *The deception inherent in social structures* is a functional imperative. Society can maintain itself only if its fictions...are accorded ontological status by at least some of its members some of the time... (1963 166-7, emphasis added).

Berger adds that the possibility of 'bad faith' shows the possibility of freedom, since roles can be played knowingly and blindly. But this statement, evidently, is the equivalent of the postulate of freedom.

A quite different, paradoxical effect of faithfully playing roles, of undergoing rituals, and keeping to one's identity is that all these things are a defense against the terror of chaos and existential meaninglessness. How this sense of security relates the conditions of 'bad faith' and structural deception is not pointed out. To quote:

Society gives us names to shield us from nothingness. It builds a world for us to live in and thus protects us from the chaos that surrounds us on all sides. It provides us with a language and meanings that make this world believable. And it supplies a steady chorus of voices that confirm our belief and still our dormant doubts (1963: 170).

As should be seen from the foregoing summary, Berger's drama-model of society is not a simple one. It is ambiguous from the beginning because it contains several dimensions. The metaphor of societal drama suggests that social actors play roles following a previously written script. Adherence to the script implies external determinism which somehow also produces an internal feeling of security, since it is precisely sticking to the societal script that becomes a protection against chaos and the feeling of nothingness. With this implication of drama we get

continuity with the earlier images of confinement and puppet theater. To develop the metaphor a little, we could say that the deterministic elements of social control and social stratification are represented by the physical stage, its settings and backdrop that encircle and limit the stage show in a certain way. But this continuity with the earlier images was not intended in Berger's use of that image: his only aim was to illustrate intentionality and freedom of action, which means that some *dramatis personae* may play roles following their own intentions against the societal script. Moreover, all actors ought to act autonomously in order to avoid inauthenticity and bad faith. They must be careful to avoid the deception inherent in the structure of the drama. Most actors will be sincere, but some may become clowns and /or impostors. All of them ultimately face the specter of the night of chaos and nothingness. All in all, this dramatic reality is ultimately precarious and fictional.

Obviously, this drama has several dimensions. Berger, no doubt, has launched separate attacks on these dimensions in *The Invitation*, but in his theatrical metaphor he apparently could not but touch on all of them. There is the objective, structural dimension looming in the background; there are elements of the cognitive, the normative and the moral order, and there is the metaphysical dimension of ultimate meaning. Let us comment briefly on each of these dimensions.

The cognitive and the normative aspects of social reality are only implicitly touched upon in the context of the drama metaphor, since the actors evidently must know what they are doing and since they can only act within a specific social structure while confronting specific options of action at the same time. The dimensions of order and meaning are touched upon, but they are not duly analysed, and therefore not well distinguished. Berger assumes that both are behind social stability and certainty. It can indeed be shown that meaning systems have an ordering dimension⁵⁾, but this is not always the case. For example, systems of belief give meaning but may create uncertainty at the same time⁶⁾. In general, it can be said that order suggests an objective-social reality.

Neither does Berger distinguish well between common, social meaning and metaphysical aspects of meaning. That is, the metaphysical dimension encroaches on the social one. He appears to have stumbled on the metaphysical dimension in his lengthy argument concerning human freedom, which he himself called 'an epistemological *salto mortale*' (1963:163). This, no doubt, is the case and while performing it, Berger seems to have landed on very unsure terrain. It concerns the problem of meaninglessness and chaos. At the empirical level, order and disorder always coexist in some degree, in the sense that a perfect order is empirically and logically impossible. Also, a society may exist in peace but occasional terror may strike when natural disasters take place and personal misfortune occurs with illness and death. It is difficult to see how the names and roles that society distributes protect us from that empirical kind of disorder or unhappiness. Not even identity has a built-in theodicy. Further, at the empirical level, in the cognitive order, there are not just meaning and meaninglessness, but many kinds of meaning, at least as many as there are values⁷⁾. However, at the ontological level, it is meaningful to concentrate on these two antithetical entities of meaning and meaninglessness, order and chaos, existence and nothingness. Berger seems to have had these two opposite poles of meaning in mind when generalizing about the relationship of social realities and ultimate meaning, the latter tending to be experienced in marginal situations. Ultimate meaning is unmistakably a question

of religion and philosophy. As a religious question, it is discussed properly in *The Sacred Canopy*. It should have been avoided in the present context of the relationship of individual and society.

The moral dimension of human behavior has a significant place in the matter under discussion, but it is not distinguished by Berger from the normative one. These two dimensions are always problematic, again, in that a perfect society is empirically and logically impossible, but they do not always coincide either. For example, laws certainly belong to the normative order, but even laws that are enacted for the good of the whole society do not necessarily procure the good of all. Immoral laws are enacted at times—for example, when fanatical nationalism and racism are rampant. We know, as Berger has commented upon, that even in recent history immense crimes against humanity have been committed in the name of race and nation. If there are ordinances leading to such aberrations, it simply means that normative and moral order are not one and the same thing. To take a less extreme example, role behavior is normative behavior to a large extent. It is the normative aspect that creates the possibility of hiding behind its structural element in order to avoid personal responsibility. This occurrence itself shows its moral character, which is negative in this case. While the normative aspect has a limited purport, which is represented by a more or less definite expectation in the case of role behavior, its moral character evidently depends on how the actor accomplishes it. The many possible ways, positive and negative, of accomplishing a task show that the moral dimension is much broader than the normative one. The fundamental difference between the normative and the moral order is that the former is primarily structural and general, while the latter is particular and very variable. 'Moral' is primarily a notion connected with behavior and only secondarily with structure in that, for example, good and bad laws can be institutionalized.

This lack of proper distinction between normative and moral order probably is responsible for introducing an element of morality into the sociological function of laws so that they become 'a master fortress of bad faith.' More generally, morality is introduced into social structure in the form of deception, which is unmistakably a moral concept. Now, society can become a conspiracy toward inauthenticity. A similar lack of distinction may be related to Berger's conception of sociology and its relationship to ethics, which we have to see later. Presently, we need some concluding remarks concerning society as a drama.

The ambiguity of the metaphor has to be taken care of. Role behavior indeed contains elements of a stage act in that a large part of our behavior is learned and rehearsed behavior especially during primary socialization, but this is exactly the opposite of what Berger wanted to illustrate. The image of drama was intended to weaken the deterministic impression of social structures. Also, we must not forget that life is quite different from drama, since it is not collectively planned or fictional in the sense a stage drama is⁸⁾, but this (the possibility of freedom), again, is the aspect that Berger intended to convey with the metaphor. In this sense then it is doubly wrong. But the metaphor is a second time right in the sense that life is dramatical. Our fate as human beings depends to a great extent on the place and time we are born, the social situations we are in and further on everything that may happen in our immediate environment and even that what happens beyond it. However, as the aggregate of all social institutions, society is mostly not dramatical, but rather dull. All this means that the image of drama has only limited heuristic value and that it applies only to some aspects of social reality, never to its totality. There is still a further complication in that the stage show may change

into a circus or carnival, but with these images the spotlights are directed on the moral character of the play, as we have to see now.

II. Sociology, method and implications

1. A discipline with many moral implications

Before turning to Berger's methodological considerations in the narrow sense, I shall first summarize his frequent elaborations on the implications of the discipline, which are methodological in the broader sense. Berger, again and again, has emphasized that sociology, in order to be a science, must be objective and neutral. However, the fact that the sociological enterprise exists as part of the social world has various ramifications, not all of which are beneficial.

First, even if the sociological discipline succeeds in putting out scientific, neutral knowledge, the way it is used is never neutral. To begin with, sociology, to the sociologist as an individual, in addition to being a science, is an enjoyable pastime, an occupation he makes a living by and possibly a reputation. It will transform his consciousness probably much more than many other occupations, because it enlightens everyday life. Next, the sociologist or any other person in a social situation can apply sociological knowledge as an ethically concerned person, in short, as a humanist committed to the well-being of the groups and of the society of which he is a member. Another possibility is to remain neutral, and not to commit oneself in either way, good or bad. Neutrality is better than hostility, but it may become morally questionable, for example, in cases when not speaking out against highly ambiguous moral problems can be considered the acquiescence of malice. Furthermore, scientific knowledge may be used in ethically negative ways to different degrees. A profound understanding of the various social situations and interrelationships amounts to knowledge of the game that can be used cynically, in a Machiavellian way and fraudulently. Further, similar attitudes, negative and positive, can be found in the organizational and/or ideological use of sociological knowledge. Then again, sociology as a profession contributes to the knowledge industry and to the birth and growth of the 'knowledge class' with its own vested interests. As such it may get caught in class conflict and become an ideology in its own right. This would be a sad fate.

Second, a somewhat different view is adumbrated in Berger's argumentation concerning the relation of sociology and ethics, namely the view that much sociological knowledge is not neutral, but has several positive and negative implications. For example, Berger often states that sociology has a debunking motif. This can be understood scientifically as objective understanding, e. g., of sociological mechanisms, latent functions, and unintended consequences as it is explained later (1981: 11-2), but Berger's first formulation of this problem suggests a different stance:

The sociological frame of reference, with its built-in procedure of looking for levels of reality other than those given in official interpretations of society, carries with it a logical imperative to unmask the pretensions and the propaganda by which men cloak their actions with each other (1963: 51).

Terms like 'levels of reality' presuppose a scientific approach, but others like 'pretensions and propaganda' clearly imply specific or ideological points of view, the clarification of which is

a clarification of values, further presupposing standards and criteria of values. This view that might derive from Berger's urge towards involvement has expectedly been criticized by commentators.

Third, a related aspect of sociology mentioned by Berger is its relativizing effect. While the origin of sociology supposedly has to do with the breakdown of traditional values and traditional social structures, sociology is well in tune with the times, since the relativization of values is a characteristic of our present modern society—this being the result of the experience of geographical and social mobility, of contact with different cultures, and of the rise of new religious groups, etc. Sociological understanding itself further deepens the feeling of relativity by showing that, for example, very different religious and ideological meaning systems, which within individual consciousness become an important part of human identity, fulfill an identical function by providing an exclusive interpretation of reality, including explanations of rival systems. More generally, sociology shows that social reality is often a matter of social definition and that 'not only identities but ideas are relative to specific social locations,' (1963: 66). Therefore, the teaching of sociology may have a destabilizing influence on people living in homogeneous, traditional milieus, relying on simple, taken-for-granted beliefs to maintain a stable identity. An ethically committed sociologist should be careful in his teaching approach.

Fourth, partly reconsidering the matter (1981: 122-31, 143-64), Berger has argued forcefully that sociology is not only in tune with the set of mind of the present times, but that it has become a carrier of modern consciousness and that it harbors the danger of becoming a value orientation of its own. This would be, not a relativizing effect but rather a self-absolutizing one with even more pernicious consequences. The argument runs approximately as follows. Notwithstanding some resistance against the rational development of modern society, rationalization continues to be the dominant trend in the world of science and technology. It dominates the market economy and the organization of the modern bureaucratic state. The spread of rationalization means that the whole of the public sphere, including education and many aspects of culture, are saturated as it were with rational attitudes, entailing a carry-over effect on consciousness. More concretely, it means that instrumental values such as efficiency and maximalization tend to become dominant values. As is the case with the other social sciences, sociology cannot but produce rational explanations and in that way contribute to the 'scientization' of everyday life, orienting everyday life in a normative fashion with an apparatus of concepts that are originally nothing but scientific categories of interpretation. In other words, cognitive concepts take on a normative connotation and become guidelines of behavior, and, consequently, agencies of social change. 'Scientific value-freeness becomes value-freeness in everyday life,' changing from 'scientific virtue' into 'cultural vice.' Sociology, then, may become a causal element of decadence and disintegration. Berger maintains, in opposition to this trend, that sociology as a science operates in a relevance structure, distinct from that of everyday life, and that these should not contaminate each other.

Fifth, however strongly Berger warns against the dangers and misuses of the discipline, and however adamantly he advocates its scientific, distinct relevance structure, he nonetheless recognizes and *recommends* its positive ethical implications. It seems as if he can have his cake and eat it too. As a neutral science, sociology can never decide on what is right or wrong. It cannot lead directly to humanism, nor establish an objective morality (this is especially empha-

sized in 1981: 19, 59, 80), but there are 'significant ethical possibilities directly grounded in sociological understanding' (1963: 175-6). Several examples and specific implications are given. The sociological understanding of social phenomena can promote humanitarian motives. For example, in the case of discrimination arising from ethnocentric or parochial ideas about race and sex, in particular about homosexuality, seeing that such conceptions are socially constructed notions of reality can lead to relativization and a lessening of that discrimination. In connection with the example of capital punishment, Berger returns to his view of the structural deception inherent in roles and laws which allow killings nobody need feel responsible for. As for the other specific implications, sociological understanding may foster humanitarian virtues such as humility, a democratic attitude, openness of mind, and responsible evaluation of one's findings — in spite of the fact that the academic world itself does not promote such attitudes, since it is a pragmatic world in which competition and struggle for survival can be as hard as anywhere else. Sociology is only one of the disciplines that grapple with the immense variety of social reality and human life. The sociologist should be aware of its limitations and the relativity of its 'empirical data,' 'facts,' and so on. Sociology being a discipline of such mixed blessings, what can be said concerning its method? What can we expect from it?

2. On sociological method

Berger's main methodological guideline is similar to that of Wright Mills, who even before the 1960s began to criticize Grand Theory and Abstracted Empiricism and who argued forcefully that method should not be made into something like ritual, which limits activity. He stated that method is simply a way of explaining a certain matter that is not immediately understood, and observed that:

Useful discussions of method as well as of theory usually arise as marginal notes on work-in-progress or work about to get underway. 'Method' has to do, first of all, with how to ask and answer questions with some assurance that answers are more or less durable. 'Theory' has to do, above all, with paying close attention to the words one is using, especially their degree of generality and their logical relations. The primary purpose of both is clarity of conception and economy of procedure, and most importantly just now, the release rather than the restriction of the sociological imagination..... When we pause in our studies to reflect on theory and method, the greatest yield is a restatement of our problems (Mills 1959: 134-5).

Berger usually starts with theorizing about specific problems without any separate consideration of method unrelated to the subject matter. He is not interested in theory divorced from reality, but he often looks back in summarizing and restating the problem. As for the requirements of sociological craftsmanship in general we have a 'Bergerian' restatement of important issues and aims in *Sociology Reinterpreted*. There, making sense of modern times is said to be the central issue of sociology as it was in classical sociological literature. From these classics also comes renewed emphasis on the requirements of objectivity and value-freeness; these issues are discussed in connection with the interpretive approach and the problem of the relativity of meaning.

To summarize Berger's argumentation, following A. Schutz, two broad kinds of meaning are distinguished: one, the meaning appropriated by the individual and two, the constellations of

meaning outside the individual's life-world. When people engage in communication, change of meaning results. In other words, through exchange of communication new knowledge is acquired, occasionally resulting in a change of attitude. This is more than acquiring new knowledge. Since sociological interpretation is always interpretation of others, it must of necessity involve some kind of communication, which will bring about some change in the knowledge system of the interpreter. Interpretation, then, is like a game that requires interaction and that results in a different state from that which obtained before the game began. More to the point, the external source of meaning has to be respected and duly taken into account, but interpretation is guided by sociological knowledge, which represents the contribution of the interpreter.

As for the external sources of meaning, there are several kinds. The act of interpretation will differ according to the source. Differing to some extent are the meaning contexts in interpersonal communication and those of impersonal sources such as written accounts of events, which already are interpretations in themselves. Different again are the sedimented meanings in social institutions (and social structure) and the meaning contexts that belong to the past as a frozen reality. Also different problems will be involved in interpreting meanings that belong to another culture. How all these different meaning-contexts are to be interpreted is not much elaborated upon, supposedly because in the present context it was, rather, similarities that had to be discussed. Berger concludes :

What is involved is an interpretation of the meanings of others through a complex interaction and interpenetration of relevance structures, meaning systems and bodies of knowledge (1981: 42).

Further, the rules of sociological guidance are the following. First, there is the requirement of adequate conceptualization in such a way that the meaning of the external source is not ignored. On the contrary, it must be adhered to and, we might add, is to be brought to a general level. The construction of ideal types in Weber's fashion is one way to do this. Second, directly related is the issue of evidence in that all generalizations have the status of hypotheses, statements of probabilities for which one has to bring forth quantitative or qualitative evidence. Third, related is also the issue of objectivity, but this is more complicated. Here, Berger's conclusion is that objectivity is more a problem of method and attitude than of the subject matter itself. In other words, the sociologist has to suspend his own value judgments in order not to distort the meaning-context. The fact of belonging to the scientific community and the institutionalization of science itself are supposed to function as safeguards of objectivity. The core of the problem is that sociology cannot but choose certain perspectives as against others, from which it follows that sociology will be partial. However, there are indications that objectivity concerning the subject matter is possible in principle. This view is belabored in connection with the problem of the relativity that is both an actual consequence and a logical conclusion from the multiplicity of meaning-contexts.

The sense of relativity itself has become an object of sociological inquiry. Sociology originated in a situation in which traditional values became polarized into a spectrum of various orientations, differing according to social strata, occupations, income groups and so on. Such relations between consciousness and social structures are investigated by the sociology of knowledge. The main reason for the close relationship between consciousness and social structures lies

in the fact that opinions and value orientations tend to be shared within more or less homogeneous groups and social strata. The validity, then, of value orientations mainly depends on their being shared and the extent to which they are commonly adhered to within a specific group. This is called the 'plausibility structure' of contents of consciousness. The ultimate conclusion of the sociology of knowledge is that social reality is constructed.

The possibility of objectivity, then, can be inferred from the multiplicity of relevance structures. For example, let us consider the empirically given difference of relevance structures like politics, business, and art. What is relevant in each case simply depends on the point of interest and the aim of the activity concerned. Further, that we can pass from one relevance structure into another is a given of experience, too. It is this interchangeability of standpoint that indicates the possibility of objectivity, but the extent to which objectivity is possible is not pointed out. On the contrary, some arguments seem somewhat messy and some sociological sleight of hand appears to have been used in this context. For example, it is argued that we cannot deny the specific character of relevance structures against their empirical evidence. Now, 'Science is a particular relevance structure, with particular characteristics—one of which is objectivity, as previously described!' (1981: 65). Thus we cannot deny that sociology is objective! Again, the following statement misses the mark.

To say that this scientific relevance structure is not hermetically sealed off from all other relevance structures is not to make a telling statement against the principle of objectivity, but is simply a general description of how the human mind works (1981: 67).

Since the interchangeability of points of view in relevance structures has been invoked as an indication of objectivity, so logically 'its not being sealed off,' meaning the same thing, should not impede objectivity! However, I would like to maintain that, on the contrary, it does so in the sense of limiting its range. The possibility of taking different standpoints is supposed to mean that empirically speaking, there is no absolute one. This is simply a restatement of Berger's view concerning the core of the problem of having to choose a certain perspective and of being partial. This in itself poses a severe limit to objectivity. Theoretically, a statement that includes all possible perspectives would be most objective: but this is logically fallacious, since it may include also contradictory elements.

Another argument for the possibility of objectivity is philosophical. It says that radical relativity is logically circular. If all statements about reality were radically relative, so would be the present one. A third argument is that relativity can be transcended to a certain extent by means of comparison. The possibility of comparison implies the existence of common features from which the universal features of the life-world can be arrived at. Here, Berger turns again to the moral or protomoral aspects of sociology, in which he finds a 'bridge between method and vocation' (1981: 74), or between sociological theorizing and social activity. The selection of the quasi-religious term 'vocation' expresses an unusual seriousness, and again, perhaps, an urge towards involvement. It also seems significant that Berger in his reformulation of the earlier moral implications now focuses on positive morality. He discovers an affinity between sociology and the ethics of responsibility as thought of by Weber. The criteria of the ethics of responsibility are not absolute principles but rather the consequences of action itself. A similar concern with unintended consequences and various other implications is characteristic

of sociological method. It is also for the same reason that sociology serves sober and pluralist causes more easily than absolutist ones. The sociologist is or should always be aware of the constructedness and empirical relativity of all human beliefs. From this vantage point sociology can insist on seeking universally valid norms of morality and universally valid criteria of religious truth.

Here we see that Berger has come a long way in discussing scientific neutrality as it pertains to sociological method and a humanistic vocation of positive involvement in social action. When the dilemma becomes too acute, the problem is solved with the 'dual citizenship' of the sociologist. He has to make clear which role he performs at what time. As for the validity of sociological statements, it will depend, besides craftsmanship, on the extent to which the sociologist is able to bracket his own values. For example, in the case of two different moral points of view, the sociologist can describe each one, explain them in their contexts, and consider what the consequences are when adhered to. In the end the sociologist 'does not interpret reality, but he rather interprets various interpretations of reality' (1981: 74).

3. Evaluation and some critical remarks

Looking back on Berger's earlier sociological theorizing and his later restatement of sociological method, I shall briefly discuss its main concepts and attempt to evaluate it as a whole. To do so, let us first return to Berger's images of society.

In their diversity Berger's images of society can be seen as an implicit statement concerning the multi-level nature of social reality. We found fault with some of them, but this is not to say that metaphors are unfit for theoretical purposes. Analogy has been said to be useful as the first step toward the identification of the underlying structures of relationships (Craib, 1984: 24), but it need not be restricted to that role as is illustrated by the famous example of Weber's image of the 'iron cage,' toward which progressing forms of rationality in modern society seemed to lead. A compelling argument can be made for the metaphorical nature of language itself and of a great part of our conceptual system. Besides the fact that the use of metaphor is beneficial to style, it augments comprehensibility (consider Weber's example), since the nonphysical is conceptualized in terms of the physical. Understanding often begins with *seeing* coupled with further imagination, that is, making connections with the nonphysical. In this sense it is said that metaphor is 'imaginative rationality' in that it unites reason and imagination⁹). A weak point of metaphor concerns a certain degree of ambiguity, because only certain aspects of the analogy are relevant, while others are not. To elaborate on unrelated aspects is tedious, but not to do so is dangerous from the point of view of theory. This was the case especially with Berger's image of drama.

Of course, Berger does not explain why he uses metaphor profusely. One can imagine that it was out of reaction against 'intellectual barbarism' (1963: 23, 162), as he used to call those versions of Grand Theory known for their sociological jargon and insensitivity to the use of language. ('Barbarian', however, also qualifies those versions of narrow empiricism that lack breadth of vision). Having the necessary talent may explain the rest. Leaving that as it may be, the first characteristic of 'Bergerian sociology' is its sense of the concrete often coupled with a sense of humor. This characteristic puts him at least stylistically within the category of the sociology of everyday life.

Second, as for Berger's concepts of the individual and society, which are central in his work because of his final aim of making sense of living in present-day times, there is a pervasive feeling that the former is *undersocialized*, and the latter *oversocialized*, while sociology itself is seen as a highly social phenomenon. The individual, controlled by inner bondage and further subject to many external pressures, is nevertheless assumed to be free and autonomous. The assumption of individual autonomy is partially correct especially in Western culture in which self-realization is highly valued and therefore part of the social definition of human nature; however, seen at the existential level, it is partially wrong, since interdependence is so fundamental that isolated individuality is simply impossible. As human persons we are morally free and responsible for our behavior, but it should be recognized first, as has been argued above, that we are dependent on others for most of the external conditions of our life and that we have built up our personality as it were with borrowed materials, relying continuously on help from others. In this sense, there is nothing that we can call our own, because nothing originates from within ourselves without relation to the external and social environment. This is not recognized by Berger. He appears to end up with an *unsocial* individual.

On the other hand, Berger's conception of society can be said to be oversocialized in the sense that this concept plays a greater role than is the case in recent sociology. In spite of the fact that society is seen as having several faces, it is conceived of in a Durkheimian fashion, as a reality *sui generis*. Again, this conception is not totally wrong, since at times people think of society as an object of behavior, as is found in such simple expressions as 'to live in society,' and 'to find a place in it,' and so on. But such phrases are rather rhetorical. As a matter of fact, society has been conceptualized in various ways¹⁰. Durkheim's just mentioned view of society as an objective entity is only one. As we know well, Durkheim found special significance in the facticity and the constraint of social realities; he stressed the social origin of all concepts and ideas (*science collective*) in such a way that society could be seen as an entity that was more than a mere collectivity of individuals and the whole much more than the sum of the parts. Durkheim went so far as to declare that the human soul and even God were personifications of society. In this view, society relates to the individual as the soul to the body. Another view of society implied in Durkheim's thought is that it exists as an idea and as an ideal, in a word, as a moral order. The collective consciousness is a supra-individual reality, which has moral authority over the individual. In the same sense, one can say that society is a symbolic order, a universe of shared meanings, which makes individual action meaningful. Berger does not ascribe to Durkheim's extreme conclusion, but similarly, he has made much of society's objective status, while assuming that society provides meaning and order.

Quite differently, society is almost an absent concept in sociologies like that of Simmel and Weber. These authors

turned to an examination of the process by which individuals engage in sociation (*Vergesellschaftung*) and the forms which they take (Simmel) and the study of collective aggregates such as society as they emerge out of tendencies of social action and the meaningful behavior of individual actors (Weber). This led them to focus upon forms of interaction between individuals and groups (Simmel) and the types of meaningful social action which individuals engaged in (Weber) (Frisby; Sayer 1986: 54).

Here, society as an all-embracing concept is rejected as the object of sociology. Meaning now derives from various individual and social realities.

Still different conceptions of society and the individual are found in Marx. Marx criticized the abstractions of both individual and society that prevailed in his day. The individual is not an isolated actor and society is not a subject existing apart from interacting individuals. Society is the product of human interaction, a set of relationships that links individuals. The relationships that are crucially significant are those that come about in the process of production; these relations determine the fundamental conditions of life. Seen as a set of relationships, society is not a static entity as might be gathered from Marx's central metaphor of 'base and super-structure'; on the contrary, society is a dynamically and historically developing set of relations. Therefore, it is to be conceptualized sociologically as a process from which both individual and society emerge as products. A related theme found in Marx's work is that society may become something like a mirage that may deceive people. This occurs when a set of relationships are considered to be universal and therefore unchangeable. These are alienated human relations. It is this idea of the mutual production of man and society, constituting a dialectical process, together with the specter of alienation that are taken up by Berger in his later theoretical work, as mentioned above.

It may come as a surprise that Berger's conception of sociology itself is penetratingly social in contrast with his under- and overdeveloped notions of the individual and society. To begin with, the object of sociological inquiry contains objective social realities (social institutions) and the subjective intentionality of action. Also, the interpretive method consists essentially in interaction between the interpreter and the interpreted. Further, the numerous implications of sociological knowledge for social praxis show the close relationship of a neutral object (sociology) with subjects caught up in the web of value orientations. The insistence on moral implications of social science can be considered as explicitly 'Bergerian,' but this has become less original lately, since the general relationship of sociological theory and social reality has recently become more widely recognized¹¹). It is in the two former respects, to wit, the object of inquiry taken as a whole and its method together with its aim of objective knowledge, that Berger follows closely in the footsteps of the classical authors, especially Durkheim and Weber, while borrowing some important conceptualizations from Marx and others like George H. Mead. Berger's originality as well as its limits lies in this attempt at synthesis, as has been mentioned by his commentators.

Thirdly, some final remarks concern Berger's logic of sociological method. Problems of method for whatever activity are supposed to be seen in connection with the aim of the activity concerned and the means to accomplish its goal. To take a simple example, when hungry one can cut a German bread and fix a sandwich. In a humorous play someone might hit on the idea of using a hammer to flatten a chunk of bread. This may become a hilarious scene, because of the clumsy act, but it definitely shows the inefficiency of the instrument. How logical and adequate is Berger's professed method of sociological interpretation?

Once again, following the classics, Berger claims that the production of objective and scientific knowledge is the goal of sociology, but conceiving of sociology as a way of seeing and developing his sociological thought in the direction of the sociology of knowledge, he naturally chooses the methodological instrument of interpretation. An interpretive technique

should indeed be adequate when one is concerned with knowledge and meaning, since the latter comes about through intentionality in interaction and changes in the same way. In this it is implied that meaning is an intersubjective phenomenon and that it is meaning in a *context*, presupposing the interdependence of its elements. Since sociological meaning is only a generalization of social meaning, it makes sense to claim that to establish such generalizations, one has to use a method that is interactional itself. However, it is difficult to see how one can arrive at objective knowledge in this perspective. To this Berger would agree, since he concluded that objectivity pertains less to the object of study than to the attitude of the sociologist, who can interpret only interpretations. Therefore, it is questionable to claim objectivity as a characteristic of interpretive sociology, if its limits are so severe.

On the other hand, social reality is not merely a matter of interaction and meaning coming about through intentionality in interaction. There are phenomena of structure and function that are not directly related to intentionality and meaning. Evidently, social structures and social processes have a meaning component apart from their objectivated structural elements. Thus, for example, how institutions channel human behavior and how social stratification and social roles function in the formation of identity are more or less constant sociological processes that need not be interpreted, because these realities function independently from the intentions of the actors; often they function against their intentions. Berger implicitly agrees with this too, since he states that :

not all sociological interpretation can be done by means of sociology-of-knowledge tools. The basic reason for this is that social actions have unintended consequences that are not in the consciousness of the actors and that generate institutional dynamics with a frequently high degree of autonomy (1981: 70).

This statement can be understood as applicable to all objectivations of meaning and social structure that in themselves are not intended, even though this is not the common understanding of the term 'unintended consequences.' What goes on at the structural level is object of discovery rather than interpretation. For the same reason, at this level it makes more sense to raise the issue of objectivity, i. e., to inquire into the degree to which structures and processes are objectivated.

Further, it is arguable that it would make more sense to raise the issue of objectivity even at the level of consciousness, if distinctions are duly made between the several levels of consciousness. I argued earlier that distinctions should be made between cognitive and normative dimensions, between the normative and the moral, between social meanings and ultimate meaning. The most general distinction is that between meaning and order. The latter can be considered to coincide in the case where the cognitive and normative aspects of knowledge are generally taken for granted, in other words, when there is a high degree of objectivation of meaning. Meaning and order do not coincide when cognitive and normative dimensions differentiate, when several normative orientations concerning the same situation arise and possibly come into conflict with one another. This is often the case in pluralistic societies, where it is especially true that moral and ultimate meanings are a matter of preference. The degree of objectivation of meaning in these areas is small. Therefore, it would be easier to raise the issue of objectivity in the former case with its higher degree of objectivation, but the

problem is fundamentally the same when one is concerned with meaning as an intersubjective phenomenon. Objectivity can be found in the above mentioned distinctions themselves, because they are structural aspects of human existence and of meaning systems.

A characteristic, then, of Berger's earlier sociological approach as a whole appears to be the preoccupation with both the domain of social structure and that of consciousness, implying an endeavor toward synthesis of microsociology and macrosociology, as has been pointed out by other commentators¹¹⁾. This can be considered to be an asset in that both subjective and objective aspects of social reality have to be considered in a holistic sociology, but the dangers of this approach are clear. When describing society and social structures, Berger puts too much emphasis on facticity, which results in an overdeterministic picture of society. When analyzing interaction, he places too much weight on individual autonomy.

As we shall see in a discussion which is to follow later, the main themes of Berger's work have been present from the beginning of his career. We will see how Berger has developed his thought on the relationship of the objective and subjective aspects of reality, and how he sees the legitimating function of knowledge and ultimate meaning (religion) that can be considered to be a link between social structure and manifestations of consciousness. Also, it will be interesting to see to what extent his theorizing outside the value-free perspective, which he has engaged in quite often, differs from sociology proper.

To be continued.

NOTES

- 1) 'According to figures provided by Doubleday (one of the two presses which, by and large, handle Berger's work), his books have sold in excess of a million and a half copies' (Hunter; Ainlay 1986: 2). A check by the present author of citations compiled by the *Social Sciences Citation Index* revealed 1.053 listings for the period between 1977 and 1985.
- 2) While a few doctoral theses have been devoted to Berger's work and a few partial evaluations have appeared, till the present only the above mentioned volume edited by Hunter and Ainlay has been published, written by nine contributors.
- 3) A similar caveat is found in Berger 1981: 7, where we read: 'We have called our book "an essay" to describe its light, perhaps easygoing character. It is a book to be read rather than pored over...'
- 4) A few examples of books which Berger did not intend as value-free science are: *A Rumor of Angels*, 1969, and *The Heretical Imperative*, 1974, which are about religion; also *Pyramids of Sacrifice*, 1974, a book about the Third World and political ethics.
- 5) The 'ordering dimension' of meaning is said to become explicit at the 'meaning system level,' implying that this dimension is an objectivated one. Its ordering strength, then, will depend on the degree of objectivation (Smith, 1979: 20f).
- 6) Abercrombie criticizes Berger for basing his work on the axioms of chaos and order, that is, for assuming that precariousness is a root idea of the social world, which in turn necessitates the idea of order and its legitimation. Berger, consequently, disregards conflict. Abercrombie further draws attention to the difference between meaning and order (Abercrombie, 1986: 26-30).
- 7) For example, the number of terminal values (fundamental ones) has been said to be one dozen and a half, while instrumental values, which may lead to the former, count several times the number of terminal values (Rokeach, 1983: 5-17).

- 8) For a discussion of how the metaphor of drama can be used more validly, see Wilshire 1977, 199-207.
- 9) The metaphorical nature of language is discussed by Lakoff and Johnson, 1980 : esp. 3-9 : 56-60 ; and 192-4.
- 10) The summary of the various conceptualizations of society is based on Frisby and Sayer, 1986 : 34-123.
- 11) See Giddens's concept of 'double hermeneutic' that was meant to indicate the double relationship of sociology to everyday life. People are concept-using beings. Sociology, therefore, is dependent on social actors for its conceptualization ; on the other hand, the social actors, at least in present-day modern societies, appropriate terms and elements of sociological theory, possibly resulting in change of behavior (Giddens, 1987 : 18-19 ; 29-32).

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