

GE4002

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NOTES

SOCIOLOGY

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Sociology (Michael)

Sociology is the discipline that ties all the preceding together: anthropology, phenomenology, scientific methodology, hermeneutics, narrative analysis, postmodernity and the research techniques of interviewing, sampling and use of questionnaires. At heart, it is the study of societies, and the sociology of astrology refers specifically to understanding the constituent dynamics of any society in relation to its collective awareness and consideration of heavenly phenomena. This development of a coherent conceptual scheme applies as well to the astrological communities themselves: their various phenomenological forms, their divisions, their interactive relations, and their births, trajectories and demises. Sociology in itself can be comprehensively reductionist, biasedly religious or phenomenologically neutral while recognising its own applications and limits. It seeks knowledge on social mechanics, social evolution and the actualities of social life. While Marx considered that all social structure is class structure, Spencer felt the society's structure and function are comparable to that of living organisms. Durkheim focused on the factors of social cohesion and segmentation; Weber, on authority, power, bureaucracy and rational conduct as models of social action. The various competing analytics of sociology offer different lenses through which to view and interpret phenomena. Methodologically, sociology depends on detailed empirical and quantitative studies that aim toward a systematic investigation and understanding of community, status and alienation. Being essentially unable to theorise formally in mathematical terms, it depends instead on constructing various conceptual models (e.g., structural-functional, conflict, exchange, evolutionary, ecological, etc.) But beyond rigorous systematic analysis, there is also a qualitative sociology that is closer to the kind of observation conducted in the humanities in which the subtleties and complexities of social interaction are discerned but not reductively simplified. In the overall study of cultural astronomy and astrology, both the quantitative and qualitative approaches are valid and equally applicable. Nevertheless, the key aspect of all sociological methodology is its development of critical reflection – including self-reflection – on both the data collected and how that data is obtained and interpreted.

The sociology of religion has raised a number of contentious issues from its inception. Michael Hill (1973) delineates three basic possibilities for a sociology of religion: (1) 'religious sociology', (2) the epiphenomenalist approach, and (3) an intermediate position between the other two extremes. The first of these, 'religious sociology' - including Gabriel le Bras' *sociologie religieuse* is, as Hill points out, oriented essentially from a theological rather than a theoretical sociological source.

The existence of 'religious sociology' is itself a complex issue within the broader field of sociology. There are numerous aspects which arise from a sociology of religion, whether religious or classical. A fundamental question relates to what Northrop Frye considers the two chief ethical positions of Western culture, namely, detachment and passion. According to Frye, both attitudes are necessary to the fully integrated, fully alive individual, although both cannot be operative at the same time. Passion refers to our involvement with life itself, with living, with experiencing and with growth. Detachment is the very basis of science and involves our very recourse to objective, unbiased and hence useful knowledge. Since one cannot be passionately detached or detachedly passionate, each orientation requires its separate and independent operation.

When I began my sociological investigations into the New Age and Neo-pagan movements, one question which appeared to be bandied about through much of the sociological literature I first came across was that concerning participation/observation by believers. Is it a possibility? Or is it something like the current *sociologie religieuse* of France which is "for the most part institutional, Roman Catholic and in many respects service oriented (since the 'problem-defining agency' for many socio-religious institutes is quite often the religious hierarchy itself)"? (Hill, 1973:9).

The distinction between classical sociology and religious sociology is that for the latter the content of theological dogma is accepted as *a given* and not, as for the former, a part of the problem to be defined. For the sociology of religion as chiefly practiced in the United States, Britain and related areas, the consensus appears to support the contention that believers can make good sociologists along with non-believers. As Jeffrey Hadden (1977:308) puts it rhetorically, "Why shouldn't natives, compassionately committed to their culture, be trained to do sociological

observation?"

The required suspension of belief necessary for proper and objective sociological research and evaluation relates to Frye's mandatory switching between the attitudes or virtues of detachment and passion. The detached life with no experience of ardor and enthusiasm is as bereft and unacceptable as the fully passionate life with no propensity toward objective understanding. The sociologist is a human like any other, and as such, he or she must become variously adept in a kind of acrobatic juggling feat - keeping in mind in this case when he/she is wearing the sociologist's hat and when not. But when that hat is indeed being worn, it is best to keep in mind Eileen Barker's injunction (1984:36) that "social scientists are useful only in so far as they communicate information which corresponds to the object of their study rather than colouring, distorting, confusing or oversimplifying an already messy and complicated reality with the addition of their personal beliefs and values."

There is, however, another question which arises though sociology of religion, and that is the question which asks how much is the sociology of religion a theological position in itself? This is a hard one and perhaps at best must remain an open question. It does, however, relate to that third possibility of sociology as a kind of sociological positivism. For Ernst Troeltsch, sociology is the history of the present. This is debatable since history is not a science but a descriptive art. But I find no fault with Troeltsch's understanding of sociology as a discipline which "pays attention to the structure and function of human society, to the conditions under which social changes occur, and to the interaction of the various social groupings which exert checks and pressures upon each other" (Macquarrie, 1988:155).

What I would find fault with is the position which affirms that "religious beliefs ... are so much a product of the social environment in which they are located that it is possible to give a comprehensive account of their meaning and significance which is composed entirely of socio-economic explanations" (Hill, 1973:12). The reductionisms characteristic of Comte, Tylor, Spencer, Frazer, Durkheim, Marx, Lenin and perhaps Weber invariably involve an evaluative judgement about religious phenomena. The religious explanation is judged to be in some sense unreal - especially as it

is based on some non-empirical point of reference. In other words, on an area beyond the means and legitimization of science.

The implicit assumption in this epiphenomenalist approach is theological - whether rationalistic, naturalistic or empirical, and in degree of bias it differs little from the religious sociological position which remains convinced of the transcendent and revelatory character of religion. As with the Ritschlian tendency to identify religion in practice as the application and pursuit of social goals deriving from revelation or mystical insight, the epiphenomenalist reduces religious ideals and activities to empirical statements about the social world. Non-empirical goals are thereby eliminated, and a range of meaning which is significant to the religious adherent falls beyond the scope of this kind of sociology.

As Hill argues, the observation of religious phenomena occupies an intermediate position between that of religious sociology on the one hand and that of the epiphenomenalist on the other. The sociologist of religion rejects the belief that religious belief itself is beyond the scope of empirical scrutiny, but he/she balances this rationale and defense of observation by (1) recognizing that belief most often takes a social form and (2) assuming that a complete explanation is not possible in every case. For Hill (1973:15), "the sociological approach to religion [is] one among a number of possible approaches, each of which is valid within its own sphere of reference and using its own techniques." The sociologist does not pass judgment on the validity of revelation or channeling because this is beyond the scope of his or her judgment as a sociologist - leaving this instead to the theologian or religious adherent. In other words, the sociologist makes no judgment over the 'reality' or 'unreality' of religious belief but keeps instead within a particular frame of reference which simply studies the *meaningfulness* of a set of religious beliefs to its adherents.

When we avoid the stance on the one hand that religion is nothing but a social phenomenon and, on the other, the equally biased position that religion has a transcendent basis that removes it automatically from the possibility of dispassionate observation and questioning, we have the basis for the modern social scientific study of religion. Doubtlessly, the field of study in this case is a substantial remove from that of the natural sciences which focus on the more predictable behavior of

the physical object, the chemical reaction or biological gender differentiation. The methodology which has arisen from the natural sciences demands precision in measurement, rigid clarification of terminology, empirical observation, repeatability of experimentation, multiple controls, critical scrutiny from colleagues, and consensus of interpretation. As any scientist understands, science *is* a methodology, a means of gathering information and knowledge. It is not a hallowed sanctum of inviolate truth, unsubject to disverification and change. Science is not scientism; it is not a religion but simply a way of observing our world and formulating understandings based on that observation.

Compared to the natural sciences, the social sciences operate under a greater onus of difficulty. Their subject matter is more idiosyncratic and less subject to accurate predictions concerning behavior - whether that of the individual human, the social group or society, the economy or the political state. Quite often, the behavioral science pursues the statistical average rather than the wayward and erratic course of the individual behavioral subject. Nevertheless, the social sciences have managed through painstaking achievement and critical self-reflection to develop a status of creditability as sciences despite their inherent handicaps when compared to the natural sciences.

In more recent times, however, and thanks in large part to the lead exercised by the Santa Fe Institute, science itself has undergone a quasi-revolution with the emergence of what are increasingly being called the sciences of complexity. This emergent understanding known as Complexity Theory affects the natural sciences as much as the behavioral ones. It is based upon (1) Einstein's demolishing Newton's concepts of absolute space and time, (2) the Heisenbergian principle of indeterminacy which discredited Laplace's assertion that knowledge of a particle's position and velocity is simultaneously possible, and (3) the ideas of deterministic chaos which counters belief in macroscopic determinism - that is, that even the physics of a small number of objects makes long-term prediction impossible (Arecchi, 1992:350-351).

In short, Complexity Theory comprehends a universe which is complicated, highly adaptative, undergoing sudden phase transitions or upheavals at the edge of chaos, non-linearly dynamic, spontaneously self-organizing and emergent. Complexity Theory embraces such concepts as increasing returns, lock-in and unpredictability, as well as the immense historical consequences

that can result from tiny events. According to the sciences of complexity the universe is ever increasing in information, i.e., negentropy or negative entropy (Jencks, 1995:37). In other words, Complexity Theory is a counter to the Second Law of Thermodynamics which argues that information (including heat or energy) disappears rapidly as entropy increases to maximum.

The upshot for science in general and for the social sciences in particular is that the world we live in is much less predictable than we had previously thought. Change follows a non-linear course more often than it does a linear one, and this throws into question the very laws of cause and effect upon which science has been traditionally established. Complexity understands that the totality is often more than simply the sum of its parts: that spontaneous self-organization working with ever-increasingly complex building blocks leads to new and unpredictable properties. Spontaneously emergent behavior, however, undermines the foundational basis for science as a means and method of explanation.

But if the sciences of complexity have complicated the task of the natural and social scientist alike, the theoretical perspective which questions other modern assumptions has come to render even additional problems concerning methodological legitimation. From a currently emergent critical viewpoint, what has been labelled modernity or modernism is seen to rest on a paradigm which is based on empirical methodology. This paradigm is mechanistic, exclusively rationalistic, and dedicated to efficiency and technological achievement. It has come to be criticized through its bland uniformity and non-recognition of difference or non-conformity, its non-consideration of human sentiments and needs, its exclusive functionalism, and its perceived bankruptcy with regard to providing viable sources for social validation, meaning and regeneration.

As a philosophical perception on Western society and a critical reflection on its direction or lack of direction, the postmodern criticism of modernity and science becomes of immediate concern to the social scientist and, with the question of sectarian protest based on values and meanings, to the sociologist of religion in particular. While Jurgen Habermas considers modernity 'an unfinished project', Frederic Jameson is equally dismissive of the postmodern as none other than the cultural logic of late capitalism. On the other hand, for the French school (Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard,

Jean-François Lyotard among others), postmodernism is perhaps more a methodology. If so, we must ask whether the deconstructive methodology of postmodernity counters or invalidates the traditional methodology of science?

As a social agenda, it is clear that postmodernism is a quest for recognition of the other: the disenfranchized and the marginal - whether this other is a racial distinction, the economically deprived, a prisoner of gender immobility or an adherent of an alternative religious group. The postmodern affirms diversity and pluralism. It asserts that it is not enough simply to recognize or tolerate but that the postmodern condition is one of celebration - celebrating the full scale of human difference. In the reconstructionist school of postmodernism (Charles Jencks, Charlene Spretnak, Andreas Huyssen, Linda Hutcheon, etc.), the postmodern is not seen as a rejection of the modern but as a double-coding between the modern and the romantic or classical or ethnic or any combination of these. The reconstructionist school recognizes limits, self-imposed limits, to modernity and empirical methodology which it seeks to transcend through acknowledging other realms of knowledge beyond the traditional confines of science.

So the question before us now is whether a postmodern science, a postmodern sociology, is a possibility. Or would a postmodern sociology of religion be an oxymoron. Is it an incongruous and self-contradictory concept?

This is essentially a rhetorical question. I do not propose to answer it but rather to raise the question as something we must consider. Postmodernity does not, as I have said, reject science or the modern per se. In the multifaceted-ness of postmodernity, there is a legitimate and necessary place for traditional methodology as well. Complexity Theory raises a different set of questions, however, and may force the sociology of religion along with all social sciences to postulate new types of questions, new types of models, and new types of procedures. It is already doing this with the so-called natural sciences. Complexity Theory alone forces us to recognize the greater complexity of our subject and the surprises which are doubtlessly in store as social evolution continues to grow evermore complex and differentiated. The increasing proliferation of new religious movements and such amorphous developments as new age, neo-pentecostalism, neo-paganism, human potential,

goddess spirituality and creation-centered spirituality may be seen as manifest products of contemporary evolutionary complexity. They are equally to be seen as products of the postmodern quest for, and endorsement of, plurality.

But the real question concerning the possibility of a postmodern sociology of religion rests with the validity of the scientific quest for truth. From the deconstructive analytic, truth is approached as something which is contextual. There is no absolute or ultimate truth, because there is always the possibility of a greater or different context. For a postmodernist such as Charles Jencks, there is such a thing as ultimate truth; but I would doubt if Jacques Derrida would ever say (assuming he could ever say anything clearly) that there is such a thing. In the postmodernism I understand, truth is relative, relative to the particular situation. Change the situation, and the truth itself changes. But without the imperative of a fixed and obtainable truth, can there be a science of any kind - let alone a sociology of religion? I do not know, but I would suggest that Michael Hill's proposal for "the sociological interpretation of religion [to be] regarded as no more than one *perspective*" (1973:17) may allow for the validity of the sociology of religion within a pluralistic, postmodern context.¹

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¹ The denial of an ultimate or absolute truth is perhaps akin to Lyotard's denial of any kind of metanarrative. For Lyotard, this is the 'postmodern condition'. However, critics of Lyotard have countered that his denial of metanarrative is itself a metanarrative. In like manner, the denial of an absolute or acontextual truth may itself be taken as an absolute truth and thereby one which provides a foundational basis for a postmodern sociology of religion.

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