# PART ONE

# The Sociological Perspective

TOPIC 1

# Introduction to the Discipline

"The first wisdom of sociology is that things are not as they seem."
—Peter Berger, *Invitation to Sociology*

IF WHAT PETER BERGER SAYS ABOUT SOCIOLOGY IS TRUE, then the discipline of sociology can aid students in discovering what is real about society and social life. If "things are not what they seem" on the surface, then what are things like "really"? This idea suggests that most of us live in a world that we don't understand. If we are not questioning what we see on the surface of society, the things that seem real to us in our daily lives may actually be illusions. The goal of sociology, therefore, and of this first topic, is to aid students in the development of the sociological perspective, or as C. Wright Mills writes, "the sociological imagination."

"The promise of sociology" is to illuminate the social world so that people can understand it and help themselves to a life lived with greater efficacy, a greater ability to understand and control their lives. Some people believe that since they live in society and are surviving, they understand it. Sociologists assert that most people do not understand society any more than they understand the physiology of their own bodies. Who among us could explain the intricate interactions between the digestive and cardiovascular systems, which are so much a part of our physical selves? If we could understand life by being close to it or living

in it, then what would be the purpose of education in any subject? Most of us have a long way to go to appreciate fully the social lives we lead.

Please enter into the study of sociology, these preliminary steps in developing a sociological perspective, with an openness to learn. Most of us are very inquisitive about other people—we love to watch them in shopping malls, listen to their conversations in restaurants, and often see ourselves in their actions. It is this curiosity, this openness, that will aid all of us in coming to the sociological perspective. It is important to note that this process of developing and using a sociological imagination has the power to transform the world as we know it and transform our personal lives in the process. To see the social world as it really is, rather than as it appears, is a gift that will last a lifetime—a gift that will benefit the learner in any social situation.

Society, in all of its complexity, has multiple layers. Much like an onion, what we see on the surface tells us little about what lies beneath. Once peeled and cut, the onion can provide delicious flavor and tears. In much the same way, society holds for us these paradoxical opposites—it nurtures us and frees us to attain full potential as human beings while it creates a prison of rules to follow that take away our ability to be free at all. Living creatively inside this paradox will take all the understanding we can attain, and it will also require that we continue to learn and be adaptive as the society around us changes at an ever-faster pace. Having a sociological imagination will truly be a gift that comes from the discipline of sociology, but a gift we give ourselves through increasing awareness about society and our personal lives.

In this first topic articles by Peter Berger, C. Wright Mills, and W. Richard Stephens offer the first glimpse of the discipline of sociology. Peter Berger writes an invitation to study sociology that presents our discipline as one with exciting possibilities. He invites all of us to a discipline where people are benefited if they have a curiosity about things social. C. Wright Mills writes that the sociological imagination must be informed by seeing the connection between our personal lives (biography) and larger social structures (history) that greatly affect us. In this selection we will see that personal *troubles* and social *issues* are closely related, and understanding the relationship will illuminate part of the social world many of us have never seen before. Finally, W. Richard Stephens presents what it means to have a career in sociology and what we might do to "make the most of our first class in sociology." He will give us five important ideas to guide us through an Introduction to Sociology course with the intent of pushing us toward a life with increased relevance and meaning.

READING 1

PETER BERGER

# Invitation to Sociology

We would say then that the sociologist (that is, the one we would really like to invite to our game) is a person intensively, endlessly, shamelessly interested in the doings of men. His natural habitat is all the human gathering places of the world, wherever men* come together. The sociologist may be interested in many other things. But his consuming interest remains in the world of men, their institutions, their history, their passions. And since he is interested in men, nothing that men do can be altogether tedious for him. He will naturally be interested in the events that engage men's ultimate beliefs, their moments of tragedy and grandeur and ecstasy. But he will also be fascinated by the commonplace, the everyday. He will know reverence, but this reverence will not prevent him from wanting to see and to understand. He may sometimes feel revulsion or contempt. But this also will not deter him from wanting to have his questions answered. The sociologist, in his quest for understanding, moves through the world of men without respect for the usual lines of demarcation. Nobility and degradation, power and obscurity, intelligence and folly—these are equally *interesting* to him, however unequal they may be in his personal values or tastes. Thus his questions may lead him to all possible levels of society, the best and the least known places, the most respected and the most despised. And, if he is a good sociologist, he will find himself in all these places because his own questions have so taken possession of him that he has little choice but to seek for answers.

It would be possible to say the same things in a lower key. We could say that the sociologist, but for the grace of his academic title, is

*[To be understood as people or persons.]

the man who must listen to gossip despite himself, who is tempted to look through keyholes, to read other people's mail, to open closed cabinets. Before some otherwise unoccupied psychologist sets out now to construct an aptitude test for sociologists on the basis of sublimated *voyeurism,* let us quickly say that we are speaking merely by way of analogy. Perhaps some little boys consumed with curiosity to watch their maiden aunts in the bathroom later become inveterate sociologists. This is quite uninteresting. What interests us is the curiosity that grips any sociologist in front of a closed door behind which there are human voices. If he is a good sociologist, he will want to open that door, to understand these voices. Behind each closed door he will anticipate some new facet of human life not yet perceived and understood.

The sociologist will occupy himself with matters that others regard as too sacred or as too distasteful for dispassionate investigation. He will find rewarding the company of priests or of prostitutes, depending not on his personal preferences but on the questions he happens to be asking at the moment. He will also concern himself with matters that others may find much too boring. He will be interested in the human interaction that goes with warfare or with great intellectual discoveries, but also in the relations between people employed in a restaurant or between a group of little girls playing with their dolls. His main focus of attention is not the ultimate significance of what men do, but the action in itself, as another example of the infinite richness of human conduct. So much for the image of our playmate.

In these journeys through the world of men the sociologist will inevitably encounter other professional Peeping Toms. Sometimes these will resent his presence, feeling that he is poaching on their preserves. In some places the sociologist will meet up with the economist, in others with the political scientist, in yet others with the psychologist or the ethnologist. Yet chances are that the questions that have brought him to these same places are different from the ones that propelled his fellow trespassers. The sociologist's questions always remain essentially the same: "What are people doing with each other here?" "What are their relationships to each other?" "How are these relationships organized in institutions?" "What are the collective ideas that move men and institutions?" In trying to answer these questions in specific instances, the sociologist will, of course, have to deal with economic or political matters, but he will do so in a way rather different from that of the economist or the political scientist. The scene that he contemplates is the

same human scene that these other scientists concern themselves with. But the sociologist's angle of vision is different. When this is understood, it becomes clear that it makes little sense to try to stake out a special enclave within which the sociologist will carry on business in his own right. Like Wesley the sociologist will have to confess that his parish is the world. But unlike some latter-day Wesleyans he will gladly share this parish with others. There is, however, one traveler whose path the sociologist will cross more often than anyone else's on his journeys. This is the historian. Indeed, as soon as the sociologist turns from the present to the past, his preoccupations are very hard indeed to distinguish from those of the historian . . . the sociological journey will be much impoverished unless it is punctuated frequently by conversation with that other particular traveler.

Any intellectual activity derives excitement from the moment it becomes a trail of discovery. In some fields of learning this is the discovery of worlds previously unthought and unthinkable. This is the excitement of the astronomer or of the nuclear physicist on the antipodal boundaries of the realities that man is capable of conceiving. But it can also be the excitement of bacteriology or geology. In a different way it can be the excitement of the linguist discovering new realms of human expression or of the anthropologist exploring human customs in faraway countries. In such discovery, when undertaken with passion, a widening of awareness, sometimes a veritable transformation of consciousness, occurs. The universe turns out to be much more wonder full than one had ever dreamed. The excitement of sociology is usually of a different sort. Sometimes, it is true, the sociologist penetrates into worlds that had previously been quite unknown to him—for instance, the world of crime, or the world of some bizarre religious sect, or the world fashioned by the exclusive concerns of some group such as medical specialists or military leaders or advertising executives. However, much of the time the sociologist moves in sectors of experience that are familiar to him and to most people in his society. He investigates communities, institutions and activities that one can read about every day in the newspapers. Yet there is another excitement of discovery beckoning in his investigations. It is not the excitement of coming upon the totally unfamiliar, but rather the excitement of finding the familiar becoming transformed in its meaning. The fascination of sociology lies in the fact that its perspective makes us see in a new light the very world in which we have lived all our lives. This also constitutes a transformation of consciousness. Moreover, this transformation is more relevant

existentially than that of many other intellectual disciplines, because it is more difficult to segregate in some special compartment of the mind. The astronomer does not live in the remote galaxies, and the nuclear physicist can, outside his laboratory, eat and laugh and marry and vote without thinking about the insides of the atom. The geologist looks at rocks only at appropriate times, and the linguist speaks English with his wife. The sociologist lives in society, on the job and off it. His own life, inevitably, is part of his subject matter. Men being what they are, sociologists too manage to segregate their professional insights from their everyday affairs. But it is a rather difficult feat to perform in good faith.

The sociologist moves in the common world of men, close to what most of them would call real. The categories he employs in his analyses are only refinements of the categories by which other men live—power, class, status, race, ethnicity. As a result, there is a deceptive simplicity and obviousness about some sociological investigations. One reads them, nods at the familiar scene, remarks that one has heard all this before and don't people have better things to do than to waste their time on truisms—until one is suddenly brought up against an insight that radically questions everything one had previously assumed about this familiar scene. This is the point at which one begins to sense the excitement of sociology.

Let us take a specific example. Imagine a sociology class in a Southern college where almost all the students are white Southerners. Imagine a lecture on the subject of the racial system of the South. The lecturer is talking here of matters that have been familiar to his students from the time of their infancy. Indeed, it may be that they are much more familiar with the minutiae of this system than he is. They are quite bored as a result. It seems to them that he is only using more pretentious words to describe what they already know. Thus he may use the term "caste," one commonly used now by American sociologists to describe the Southern racial system. But in explaining the term he shifts to traditional Hindu society, to make it clearer. He then goes on to analyze the magical beliefs inherent in caste tabus, the social dynamics of *commensalism* and *connubium,* the economic interests concealed within the system, the way in which religious beliefs relate to the tabus, the effects of the caste system upon the industrial development of the society and vice versa—all in India. But suddenly India is not very far away at all. The lecture then goes back to its Southern theme. The familiar now seems not quite so familiar anymore. Questions are raised that are new, perhaps raised angrily, but raised all the same. And

at least some of the students have begun to understand that there are functions involved in this business of race that they have not read about in the newspapers (at least not those in their hometowns) and that their parents have not told them—partly, at least, because neither the newspapers nor the parents knew about them.

It can be said that the first wisdom of sociology is this—things are not what they seem. This too is a deceptively simple statement. It ceases to be simple after a while. Social reality turns out to have many layers of meaning. The discovery of each new layer changes the perception of the whole.

Anthropologists use the term "culture shock" to describe the impact of a totally new culture upon a newcomer. In an extreme instance such shock will be experienced by the Western explorer who is told, halfway through dinner, that he is eating the nice old lady he had been chatting with the previous day—a shock with predictable physiological if not moral consequences. Most explorers no longer encounter cannibalism in their travels today. However, the first encounters with polygamy or with puberty rites or even with the way some nations drive their automobiles can be quite a shock to an American visitor. With the shock may go not only disapproval or disgust but a sense of excitement that things can *really* be that different from what they are at home. To some extent, at least, this is the excitement of any first travel abroad. The experience of sociological discovery could be described as "culture shock" minus geographical displacement. In other words, the sociologist travels at home—with shocking results. He is unlikely to find that he is eating a nice old lady for dinner. But the discovery, for instance, that his own church has considerable money invested in the missile industry or that a few blocks from his home there are people who engage in cultic orgies may not be drastically different in emotional impact. Yet we would not want to imply that sociological discoveries are always or even usually outrageous to moral sentiment. Not at all. What they have in common with exploration in distant lands, however, is the sudden illumination of new and unsuspected facets of human existence in society. This is the excitement and . . . the humanistic justification of sociology.

People who like to avoid shocking discoveries, who prefer to believe that society is just what they were taught in Sunday School, who like the safety of the rules and the maxims of what Alfred Schuetz has called the "world-taken-for-granted," should stay away from sociology. People who feel no temptation before closed doors, who have no curiosity about human beings, who are content to admire scenery without wondering

about the people who live in those houses on the other side of that river, should probably also stay away from sociology. They will find it unpleasant or, at any rate, unrewarding. People who are interested in human beings only if they can change, convert or reform them should also be warned, for they will find sociology much less useful than they hoped. And people whose interest is mainly in their own conceptual constructions will do just as well to turn to the study of little white mice. Sociology will be satisfying, in the long run, only to those who can think of nothing more entrancing than to watch men and to understand things human.

It may now be clear that we have, albeit deliberately, understated the case in the title of this chapter. To be sure, sociology is an individual pastime in the sense that it interests some men and bores others. Some like to observe human beings, others to experiment with mice. The world is big enough to hold all kinds and there is no logical priority for one interest as against another. But the word "pastime" is weak in describing what we mean. Sociology is more like a passion. The sociological perspective is more like a demon that possesses one, that drives one compellingly, again and again, to the questions that are its own. An introduction to sociology is, therefore, an invitation to a very special kind of passion.



## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What personal qualities does Berger argue will make for a good sociologist?
2. Why might we be shocked as sociology reveals its understanding of the world?

READING 2

C. WRIGHT MILLS

# The Sociological Imagination

Nowadays men often feel that their private lives are a series of traps. They sense that within their everyday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles, and in this feeling, they are often quite correct: What ordinary men are directly aware of and what they try to do are bounded by the private orbits in which they live; their visions and their powers are limited to the close-up scenes of job, family, neighborhood; in other milieux, they move vicariously and remain spectators. And the more aware they become, however vaguely, of ambitions and of threats which transcend their immediate locales, the more trapped they seem to feel.

Underlying this sense of being trapped are seemingly impersonal changes in the very structure of continent-wide societies. The facts of contemporary history are also facts about the success and the failure of individual men and women. When a society is industrialized, a peasant becomes a worker; a feudal lord is liquidated or becomes a businessman. When classes rise or fall, a man is employed or unemployed; when the rate of investment goes up or down, a man takes new heart or goes broke. When wars happen, an insurance salesman becomes a rocket launcher; a store clerk, a radar man; a wife lives alone; a child grows up without a father. Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.

Yet men do not usually define the troubles they endure in terms of historical change and institutional contradiction. The well-being they enjoy, they do not usually impute to the big ups and downs of the societies in which they live. Seldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history, ordinary men do not usually know what this connection means for the kinds of men

they are becoming and for the kinds of history-making in which they might take part. They do not possess the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world. They cannot cope with their personal troubles in such ways as to control the structural transformations that usually lie behind them.

Surely it is no wonder. In what period have so many men been so totally exposed at so fast a pace to such earthquakes of change? That Americans have not known such catastrophic changes as have the men and women of other societies is due to historical facts that are now quickly becoming "merely history." The history that now affects every man is world history. Within this scene and this period, in the course of a single generation, one sixth of mankind is transformed from all that is feudal and backward into all that is modern, advanced, and fearful. Political colonies are freed; new and less visible forms of imperialism installed. Revolutions occur; men feel the intimate grip of new kinds of authority. Totalitarian societies rise, and are smashed to bits—or succeed fabulously. After two centuries of ascendancy, capitalism is shown up as only one way to make society into an industrial apparatus. After two centuries of hope, even formal democracy is restricted to a quite small portion of mankind. Everywhere in the underdeveloped world, ancient ways of life are broken up and vague expectations become urgent demands. Everywhere in the overdeveloped world, the means of authority and of violence become total in scope and bureaucratic in form. Humanity itself now lies before us, the super-nation at either pole concentrating its most co-ordinated and massive efforts upon the preparation of World War Three.

The very shaping of history now outpaces the ability of men to orient themselves in accordance with cherished values. And which values? Even when they do not panic, men often sense that older ways of feeling and thinking have collapsed and that newer beginnings are ambiguous to the point of moral stasis. Is it any wonder that ordinary men feel they cannot cope with the larger worlds with which they are so suddenly confronted? That they cannot understand the meaning of their epoch for their own lives? That—in defense of selfhood—they become morally insensible, trying to remain altogether private men? Is it any wonder that they come to be possessed by a sense of the trap?

It is not only information that they need—in this Age of Fact, information often dominates their attention and overwhelms their capacities to assimilate it. It is not only the skills of reason that they need—although their struggles to acquire these often exhaust their limited moral energy.

What they need, and what they feel they need, is a quality of mind that will help them to use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves. It is this quality, I am going to contend, that journalists and scholars, artists and publics, scientists and editors are coming to expect of what may be called the sociological imagination.

## 1

The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. It enables him to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions. Within that welter, the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated. By such means the personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit troubles and the indifference of publics is transformed into involvement with public issues.

The first fruit of this imagination—and the first lesson of the social science that embodies it—is the idea that the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period, that he can know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in his circumstances. In many ways it is a terrible lesson; in many ways a magnificent one. We do not know the limits of man's capacities for supreme effort or willing degradation, for agony or glee, for pleasurable brutality or the sweetness of reason. But in our time we have come to know that the limits of "human nature" are frighteningly broad. We have come to know that every individual lives, from one generation to the next, in some society; that he lives out a biography, and that he lives it out within some historical sequence. By the fact of his living he contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of this society and to the course of its history, even as he is made by society and by its historical push and shove.

The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise. To recognize this task and this promise is the mark of the classic social analyst. It is characteristic of Herbert Spencer—turgid,

polysyllabic, comprehensive; of E. A. Ross—graceful, muckraking, upright; of Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim; of the intricate and subtle Karl Mannheim. It is the quality of all that is intellectually excellent in Karl Marx; it is the clue to Thorstein Veblen's brilliant and ironic insight, to Joseph Schumpeter's many-sided constructions of reality; it is the basis of the psychological sweep of W. E. H. Lecky no less than of the profundity and clarity of Max Weber. And it is the signal of what is best in contemporary studies of man and society.

No social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history and of their intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey. Whatever the specific problems of the classic social analysts, however limited or however broad the features of social reality they have examined, those who have been imaginatively aware of the promise of their work have consistently asked three sorts of questions:

(1) What is the structure of this particular society as a whole? What are its essential components, and how are they related to one another? How does it differ from other varieties of social order? Within it, what is the meaning of any particular feature for its continuance and for its change?

(2) Where does this society stand in human history? What are the mechanics by which it is changing? What is its place within and its meaning for the development of humanity as a whole? How does any particular feature we are examining affect, and how is it affected by, the historical period in which it moves? And this period—what are its essential features? How does it differ from other periods? What are its characteristic ways of history-making?

(3) What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society and in this period? And what varieties are coming to prevail? In what ways are they selected and formed, liberated and repressed, made sensitive and blunted? What kinds of "human nature" are revealed in the conduct and character we observe in this society in this period? And what is the meaning for "human nature" of each and every feature of the society we are examining?

Whether the point of interest is a great power state or a minor literary mood, a family, a prison, a creed—these are the kinds of questions the best social analysts have asked. They are the intellectual pivots of classic studies of man in society—and they are the questions inevitably raised by any mind possessing the sociological imagination. For that imagination is the capacity to shift from one perspective to another—from the political

to the psychological; from examination of a single family to comparative assessment of the national budgets of the world; from the theological school to the military establishment; from considerations of an oil industry to studies of contemporary poetry. It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self—and to see the relations between the two. Back of its use there is always the urge to know the social and historical meaning of the individual in the society and in the period in which he has his quality and his being.

That, in brief, is why it is by means of the sociological imagination that men now hope to grasp what is going on in the world, and to understand what is happening in themselves as minute points of the intersections of biography and history within society. In large part, contemporary man's self-conscious view of himself as at least an outsider, if not a permanent stranger, rests upon an absorbed realization of social relativity and of the transformative power of history. The sociological imagination is the most fruitful form of this self-consciousness. By its use men whose mentalities have swept only a series of limited orbits often come to feel as if suddenly awakened in a house with which they had only supposed themselves to be familiar. Correctly or incorrectly, they often come to feel that they can now provide themselves with adequate summations, cohesive assessments, comprehensive orientations. Older decisions that once appeared sound now seem to them products of a mind unaccountably dense. Their capacity for astonishment is made lively again. They acquire a new way of thinking, they experience a transvaluation of values: in a word, by their reflection and by their sensibility, they realize the cultural meaning of the social sciences.



## 2

Perhaps the most fruitful distinction with which the sociological imagination works is between "the personal troubles of milieu" and "the public issues of social structure." This distinction is an essential tool of the sociological imagination and a feature of all classic work in social science.

*Troubles* occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relations with others; they have to do with his self and with those limited areas of social life of which he is directly

and personally aware. Accordingly, the statement and the resolution of troubles properly lie within the individual as a biographical entity and within the scope of his immediate milieu—the social setting that is directly open to his personal experience and to some extent his willful activity. A trouble is a private matter: values cherished by an individual are felt by him to be threatened.

*Issues* have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of his inner life. They have to do with the organization of many such milieux into the institutions of an historical society as a whole, with the ways in which various milieux overlap and interpenetrate to form the larger structure of social and historical life. An issue is a public matter: some value cherished by publics is felt to be threatened. Often there is a debate about what that value really is and about what it is that really threatens it.

This debate is often without focus if only because it is the very nature of an issue, unlike even widespread trouble, that it cannot very well be defined in terms of the immediate and everyday environments of ordinary men. An issue, in fact, often involves a crisis in institutional arrangements, and often too it involves what Marxists call "contradictions" or "antagonisms."

In these terms, consider unemployment. When, in a city of 100,000, only one man is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the man, his skills, and his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million men are unemployed, that is an issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual. The very structure of opportunities has collapsed. Both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals.

Consider war. The personal problem of war, when it occurs, may be how to survive it or how to die in it with honor; how to make money out of it; how to climb into the higher safety of the military apparatus; or how to contribute to the war's termination. In short, according to one's values, to find a set of milieux and within it to survive the war or make one's death in it meaningful. But the structural issues of war have to do with its causes; with what types of men it throws up into command; with its effects upon economic and political, family and religious institutions, with the unorganized irresponsibility of a world of nation-states.

Consider marriage. Inside a marriage a man and a woman may experience personal troubles, but when the divorce rate during the first four years of marriage is 250 out of every 1,000 attempts, this is an indication of a structural issue having to do with the institutions of marriage and the family and other institutions that bear upon them.

Or consider the metropolis—the horrible, beautiful, ugly, magnificent sprawl of the great city. For many upper-class people, the personal solution to "the problem of the city" is to have an apartment with private garage under it in the heart of the city, and forty miles out, a house by Henry Hill, garden by Garrett Eckbo, on a hundred acres of private land. In these two controlled environments—with a small staff at each end and a private helicopter connection—most people could solve many of the problems of personal milieux caused by the facts of the city. But all this, however splendid, does not solve the public issues that the structural fact of the city poses. What should be done with this wonderful monstrosity? Break it all up into scattered units, combining residence and work? Refurbish it as it stands? Or, after evacuation, dynamite it and build new cities according to new plans in new places? What should those plans be? And who is to decide and to accomplish whatever choice is made? These are structural issues; to confront them and to solve them requires us to consider political and economic issues that affect innumerable milieux.

Insofar as an economy is so arranged that slumps occur, the problem of unemployment becomes incapable of personal solution. Insofar as war is inherent in the nation-state system and in the uneven industrialization of the world, the ordinary individual in his restricted milieu will be powerless—with or without psychiatric aid—to solve the troubles this system or lack of system imposes upon him. Insofar as the family as an institution turns women into darling little slaves and men into their chief providers and unweaned dependents, the problem of a satisfactory marriage remains incapable of purely private solution. Insofar as the overdeveloped megalopolis and the overdeveloped automobile are built-in features of the overdeveloped society, the issues of urban living will not be solved by personal ingenuity and private wealth.

What we experience in various and specific milieux, I have noted, is often caused by structural changes. Accordingly, to understand the changes of many personal milieux we are required to look beyond them. And the number and variety of such structural changes increase as the institutions within which we live become more embracing and

more intricately connected with one another. To be aware of the idea of social structure and to use it with sensibility is to be capable of tracing such linkages among a great variety of milieux. To be able to do that is to possess the sociological imagination.

## 3

What are the major issues for publics and the key troubles of private individuals in our time? To formulate issues and troubles, we must ask what values are cherished yet threatened, and what values are cherished and supported, by the characterizing trends of our period. In the case both of threat and of support we must ask what salient contradictions of structure may be involved.

When people cherish some set of values and do not feel any threat to them, they experience *well-being*. When they cherish values but *do* feel them to be threatened, they experience a crisis—either as a personal trouble or as a public issue. And if all their values seem involved, they feel the total threat of panic.

But suppose people are neither aware of any cherished values nor experience any threat? That is the experience of *indifference,* which, if it seems to involve all their values, becomes apathy. Suppose, finally, they are unaware of any cherished values, but still are very much aware of a threat? That is the experience of *uneasiness,* of anxiety, which, if it is total enough, becomes a deadly unspecified malaise.

Ours is a time of uneasiness and indifference—not yet formulated in such ways as to permit the work of reason and the play of sensibility. Instead of troubles—defined in terms of values and threats—there is often the misery of vague uneasiness; instead of explicit issues there is often merely the beat feeling that all is somehow not right. Neither the values threatened nor whatever threatens them has been stated; in short, they have not been carried to the point of decision. Much less have they been formulated as problems of social science.

In the 'thirties there was little doubt—except among certain deluded business circles—that there was an economic issue which was also a pack of personal troubles. In these arguments about "the crisis of capitalism," the formulations of Marx and the many unacknowledged re-formulations of his work probably set the leading terms of the issue, and some men came to understand their personal troubles in these terms. The values threatened were plain to see and cherished by all; the

structural contradictions that threatened them also seemed plain. Both were widely and deeply experienced. It was a political age.

But the values threatened in the era after World War Two are often neither widely acknowledged as values nor widely felt to be threatened. Much private uneasiness goes unformulated; much public malaise and many decisions of enormous structural relevance never become public issues. For those who accept such inherited values as reason and freedom, it is the uneasiness itself that is the trouble; it is the indifference itself that is the issue. And it is this condition, of uneasiness and indifference, that is the signal feature of our period.

All this is so striking that it is often interpreted by observers as a shift in the very kinds of problems that need now to be formulated. We are frequently told that the problems of our decade, or even the crises of our period, have shifted from the external realm of economics and now have to do with the quality of individual life—in fact with the question of whether there is soon going to be anything that can properly be called individual life. Not child labor but comic books, not poverty but mass leisure, are at the center of concern. Many great public issues as well as many private troubles are described in terms of "the psychiatric"—often, it seems, in a pathetic attempt to avoid the large issues and problems of modern society. Often this statement seems to rest upon a provincial narrowing of interest to the Western societies, or even to the United States—thus ignoring two-thirds of mankind often, too, it arbitrarily divorces the individual life from the larger institutions within which that life is enacted, and which on occasion bear upon it more grievously than do the intimate environments of childhood.

Problems of leisure, for example, cannot even be stated without considering problems of work. Family troubles over comic books cannot be formulated as problems without considering the plight of the contemporary family in its new relations with the newer institutions of the social structure. Neither leisure nor its debilitating uses can be understood as problems without recognition of the extent to which malaise and indifference now form the social and personal climate of contemporary American society. In this climate, no problems of "the private life" can be stated and solved without recognition of the crisis of ambition that is part of the very career of men at work in the incorporated economy.

It is true, as psychoanalysts continually point out, that people do often have "the increasing sense of being moved by obscure forces within themselves which they are unable to define." But it is *not* true, as

Ernest Jones asserted, that "man's chief enemy and danger is his own unruly nature and the dark forces pent up within him." On the contrary: "Man's chief danger" today lies in the unruly forces of contemporary society itself, with its alienating methods of production, its enveloping techniques of political domination, its international anarchy—in a word, its pervasive transformations of the very "nature" of man and the conditions and aims of his life.

It is now the social scientist's foremost political and intellectual task—for here the two coincide—to make clear the elements of contemporary uneasiness and indifference. It is the central demand made upon him by other cultural workmen—by physical scientists and artists, by the intellectual community in general. It is because of this task and these demands, I believe, that the social sciences are becoming the common denominator of our cultural period, and the sociological imagination our most needed quality of mind.



## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How would you explain the relationship between "troubles" and "issues"?
2. What do you think Mills means when he says, "Ours is a time of uneasiness and indifference"?

READING 3

W. RICHARD STEPHENS, JR.

# Careers in Sociology

## Step #1: "Why am I in Sociology Anyway?"

If you are like most students, sociology is a new and somewhat strange discipline to be studying. It is new in that few students entering college have even heard of it, and even fewer intend to major in it. It is strange in that there is virtually no topic which sociology does not touch and therefore it is difficult to see where the discipline is distinct from others. It is probably also the case that you are reading this book, and therefore taking this course because the degree you are interested in requires it. Or, it is part of the general education requirements for all students at your college. In other words, you *have* to take this course. Have you wondered why?

The answer lies in the fact that sociology is such a topically broad discipline. If there is a central focus it is the issues, problems, trials, and triumphs of people trying to get along with each other; in other words, human relationships. So, the discipline has something to say to people trying to get along in a structure called a family, or members of a team, or neighbors, or employees trying to figure out work relations. The point is, sociology is relevant wherever human relations are at work. It follows then, that an improved understanding of human relations should translate into better conduct of those relations. There are exceptions, of course, such as the manipulation of those relations for the benefit of some while at the expense of others. But the general point remains, sociology provides insights which are applicable to a wide array of human circumstances. . . .

Over the course of a semester most students will have one or both of the following experiences.

The first experience is that you will identify personally with one or more of the topics explored. You will see clearly what the discipline has to say about some aspect of human relations because you have actually experienced the phenomenon in question. For example, Emile Durkheim used the term *anomie* to describe the effects of radical social change on people. He was writing about the effects of mass migration from the countryside to the city in early 20th century France. On the surface such ideas seem remote, but in class they become real as the concept is applied to our own experiences. In the case of students, nearly all experience some degree of anomie when they first encounter college or, for that matter, when they are "clueless" as to the reason they have to take sociology! The point is, the sociological concept does apply to your life. On a more topical level you have experienced sociologically relevant phenomena such as family, socialization, peer pressure, intergenerational relations, being hired and/or fired, death, crime and deviance, religion, commercials, prejudice, etc., etc., etc. Only if you have not experienced such phenomena is sociology irrelevant to you.

The second experience is that most students will take a genuine interest in at least one of the topics covered. It could be the role of women in big business, the changing demographic face of America, the impact of new technologies on work, family life, and leisure, or issues such as universal health care and social security for the aged. Related to this last point, my introductory students participate in a one-hour a week elder visitation program. In this program students are paired with senior citizens from all over town and they simply visit. Most students groan, excessively, about this assignment prior to engaging in it. However, most report that the experience was a valuable one by the time the semester is completed. Often, students continue visiting their new friend after the course is completed. They found that something they had not really considered, intergenerational relations, really was interesting. The point here is, you will most likely find *something* interesting to the point that study of it is no longer a chore, but becomes an aspect of study and life you actually like or enjoy.

Now, take the two experiences, coming across something you have personally experienced and discovering something of special interest, and combine them. The result, while not necessarily an epiphany. . . , it is nonetheless potentially significant. Your level of interest in sociology, or at least some topic within the field has been raised. Evidence of this comes from friends and often family who notice a difference in the way their friend or child (you) now sees and talks about the world. Some will

say that now you use "big" words! This will most likely happen to you. As this happens you then begin to raise questions about yourself and your place in the scheme of things. This is natural, it is to be expected, and it is an indicator of maturity. You are becoming more conscious of what is happening to and around you. You are now in a position to be an active participant in your and other people's lives, rather than being primarily acted upon by others. We call this empowerment.

## Step #2: "OK, I'm Interested, But is There a Future for Me in Sociology?"

It is the *extremely* rare student who comes out of high school with their mind made up to study sociology in college. The number is something like 3 out of every 10,000 (Howery, 1985). Yikes! If it were not for the requirements most colleges impose on students you would find a lot of academic sociologists roaming the streets. . . .

What I am suggesting, is it could happen to you; you could choose to major in sociology. It has happened to others. The question is, how should you respond? What type of questions should you ask? How does one go about pursuing sociology as a major? Is there a future in sociology? This choice, making sociology your major, or part of a double major, is a critical choice, and should not be made lightly. . . .

In my experience once the typical student decides on sociology there develops a sense of energy and anticipation about the future. But the future is as much on the collective minds of parents as it is on the mind of the son or daughter. At some point the student tells Mom and Dad what their interests are and what their decision is. And, Mom and Dad do what good parents should do; they test the decision. Recently I had lunch with a parent of [a] junior sociology major who is interested in a career in criminal justice. This parent and I have had several in-depth discussions about his son. At one point the father said, "The bottom line is, will my son be able to get a job when he graduates? By that time we will have spent $60,000 on his education. That's quite an investment. We want to make sure he has a future." Such sentiment is valid and is to be expected. . . .

Now back to the question regarding the future. The short answer is, yes, there is a future. And it is a future which is bright and growing brighter as time passes. It is bright because people with vision have begun to take the central and universal ideas of sociology and have

begun looking for ways to put them into action. This effort in itself is neither new nor unique. Many other disciplines have been doing this for decades or centuries. Some have been doing this for years, but with tools and concepts derived from sociology. Marketing experts, political pollsters, etc., have been employing basic survey research techniques and statistical procedures developed over time in sociology for very practical purposes. It is also the case that sociology has developed and given birth to whole new disciplines such as criminal justice/criminology, gerontology, women's studies, black studies, demography, and social work. Each of these has put the discipline to work in very specific ways. Now sociology as a discipline, and sociologists as a profession are asserting their collective strengths. And, we find that more and more these strengths are finding expression and applications outside the classroom. . . .

In 1988 the U.S. Office of Personal Management established a position-classification standard for sociology. This means that the federal government officially recognizes the specific contributions which sociology can make. The standard for "Sociology GS-184" begins with the following statement:

> *This series includes positions which involve professional work requiring a knowledge of sociology and sociological methods specifically related to the establishment, validation, interpretation, and application of knowledge about social processes. Sociologists study specialized areas such as: changes in the character, size, distribution, and composition of the population: social mechanisms for enforcing compliance with widely accepted norms and for controlling deviance; social phenomena having to do with human health and disease; the structure and operation of organizations; and the complex interrelationship of the individual and society.*
>
> *Sociologists are concerned primarily with the study of patterns of group and organizational behavior, social interaction, and social situations in which interaction occurs. The emphasis is on the patterns of behavior that are characteristic of social groups, organizations, institutions, and nations. Some sociologists perform sociological research, others apply sociological principles and findings, and some perform a combination of both kinds of work.*

Based on this standard five specializations are recommended, including demography, law and social control, medical sociology, organizational analysis, and social psychology. In addition the standard advises

prospective applicants that sociology is appropriate education for work in other areas such as but not limited to:

| | |
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| GS-020 | Community Planning Series |
| GS-101 | Social Work Series |
| GS-131 | International Relations Series |
| GS-135 | Foreign Agricultural Affairs Series |
| GS-140 | Manpower Research and Analysis Series |
| GS-142 | Manpower Development Series |
| GS-160 | Civil Rights Analysis Series |
| GS-185 | Social Work Series |
| GS-230 | Employee Relations Series |
| GS-685 | Public Health Program Specialist Series |
| GS-696 | Consumer Safety Series |
| GS-1150 | Industrial Specialist Series |

The prospects have further brightened to the point where over the last ten years new associations of sociologists who work primarily in non-academic settings have been established and are flourishing. These would include organizations such as:

The Society for Applied Sociology
The Sociological Practice Association
The Chicago Sociological Practice Association
The District of Columbia Sociological Society
The Sociologists in Business
The Sociological Practice Section of the American Sociological Association

What follows is a partial listing of non-academic settings where sociologists are currently employed, compiled from the directories of the associations just referenced (Stephens, 1994):

**Where Sociological Practitioners Work:**

A.C. Neilsen
American Bar Association
American Express
American International Group
American Medical Association
Argone National Laboratory
Army Research Institute
AT&T
Atari
Avon Products Inc.
Boys Town Center
CBS, Inc.
Citibank, N.A.
City of Chicago Department of Housing

Cleveland Clinic
Equitable Life
Federation of Protestant Churches
Financial News Network
G.S. Searle Laboratories
General Accounting Office
General Electric
General Foods
General Motors Research Laboratories
Hughes Aircraft Co.
Hutchings Psychiatric Center
Illinois Criminal Justice Authority
Internal Revenue Service
KMPG Peat Marwick
Litigation Sciences, Inc.
Mayatech Corporation
NASA
National Analysts
National Institutes of Health
NBC
New York Business Group on Health
New York City Fire Department
New York City Human Resources Administration
Rand Corporation
Rockefeller Foundation
Rubbermaid Inc.
Saint Vincents Hospital
Sears, Roebuck, & Co.
Standard and Poor
The Equitable
The Gallup Organization
The Public Health Foundation
The Vanderveer Group
U.S. Bureau of the Census
U.S. Department of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Energy
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Wells Fargo Bank
Xerox
Young & Rubican

As you can see, there is great variety to the job settings. There is similar variety to non-academic job titles, as evidenced by the GS-184 series standard. But how do you translate the potential of a discipline like sociology into an actual career? The parent with the $60,000 invested in his son appreciates potential, but how can his son go from degree to job? Does one just look for "sociologist wanted" job ads? Is graduate school necessary? Even if a job is available and you take it, can you make a living? . . .

## Step #3: "What Will I Achieve?"

. . . The goal is not to make you into a professional sociologist per se. It is to pass on to you significant skills and perspectives, and a legacy which makes you a thoughtful, and therefore an empowered, person.

Whatever career dreams you have, consider the following. Your work options can be divided broadly into two categories, or worlds. One is the world of people. The other is the world of things. Now examine your interests and your dreams. Do you see these as focused primarily on people, or is your focus primarily on technical matters, things? My brother used to say that he was going into medicine so that he could deal with concrete issues, exact answers. He could not stand the ambiguity of any of the other "philosophies." Now he has been a practicing rural family physician for nearly 10 years. When asked about concrete issues he admits that nearly all of what he does is a matter of judgement. His position in the community and his reputation are as much a part of his profession as knowing how to deliver babies. The point is, you must think hard and creatively to come up with a career that does not bring you into close contact with others. The argument could be made that on this basis there is no career that cannot be profited by a sociological perspective. This is not to say that sociology should therefore be your degree of choice. But it does suggest that there is a significant contribution sociology can make to any career. . . .



## Step #4: "Now . . . What Do I Do Next?"

. . . You are beginning! So, in what ways can you begin? Let's start by noting three common elements among the CP's [character profiles of employed sociologists].

First, the CP's evidenced an increasingly common development in modern careers: they are characterized by change. If you do not expect change in your work life then you will most certainly be left "holding the short end" when it comes to career development. In fact, the idea of a career developing implies change. The difference now is that the changes to be expected are generally more radical than in the past. Look back at the CP's and you will see frequent career turns and shifts. These occur within and across job categories. This means both advancement within a job type and organization, as well as movement from one type of work to another. Besides job changes, CP subjects are primed for life changes. The fact is, our lives are made complicated by the presence of others. Because of this we can expect circumstances, especially our relations to others, to be always in some state of flux. As some CP subjects suggested, ten years ago the issues were not AIDS, sexual harassment, diversity in the workplace, a world turned upside-down by

the collapse of the Soviet Union, an aging population, foreign economic competition, etc. The sociologist, because of his/her ability to see the "big picture," is in a favorable position to see, or anticipate these trends in their early stages.

A second common element among CP's is a commitment to education and continued learning. In fact, the CP's evidence great diversity, and therefore breadth of perspective, in degrees earned. Bachelor level degrees were earned in fields such as biology, education, nuclear engineering and physics, history, chemistry, and business, as well as sociology. Advanced degrees were earned in fields such as law, criminal justice, business, and communications. Besides, formal degrees, many CP subjects have taken advantage of seminars and professional associations in order to stay on top of their professions. The point is, sociology is a discipline which promotes continuation of the learning process, both in perspective and practice.

The third element in common is what I call opportunism. Because sociologists combine both an anticipation of change with an orientation and an ability to learn, opportunism is produced. For many of us, an opportunity is something which simply happens. However, an appropriate orientation can produce opportunities. There are three important steps to producing opportunities. These are 1) actively looking for opportunities, 2) recognizing opportunities when they appear, and 3) taking advantage of opportunities once they are recognized. For example, networking is one way in which opportunities are produced. We all have networks but the question is whether the network is actively operated. If you understand the concept you can employ it; if not, then opportunities are limited. . . .

The three elements in common among the CP's, understanding change, pursuing education, and being opportunistic, are only part of the story. Other characteristics possessed by those with successful careers include personal traits such as perseverance and a willingness to work hard. . . .

The reason for reviewing these characteristics is to emphasize that your career is the result of a set of *conscious choices* and *actions*. The better your insights and information about the circumstances you are in, the better your choices and subsequent actions will serve your interests. But this is likely only when you begin the process of taking responsibility for your own future. If you recall, . . . I told you about a parent who was concerned about the career prospects of their son's $60,000 college education. The problem is, dollars invested and career development do

not smoothly correlate; that is, one does not automatically translate into the other. You must put yourself in a position where you can exercise opportunism. . . . But how is this done?

## Step #5: The Objective is Relevance

. . . It has not been my intent to talk you into making sociology your academic major or your career. I do believe, however, that sociology can significantly enhance any career you choose. . . . But more than this, take what you learn from the classroom . . . to your life outside the classroom. Be aggressive about it. Ask questions. See what others who have gone before you have experienced. Ask your professor to bring alumni to class. Write to the ASA and begin researching the careers of other sociologists. Ask the questions you have written in the margins. Challenge the common assumptions. Expect change. Learn about your world. Be opportunistic. Your future is not a simple statistical function of chance. It is a function of conscious choice and intentional action. Therefore, look for the opportunities, see the opportunities, and seize the opportunities.

Ultimately the objective is relevance. You want yourself, your life, your work and career to be meaningful, to make a difference. . . . And that is the beauty of the discipline. It can be relevant regardless of the circumstance. However, you must be prepared, you must be responsible, you must articulate some values around which your future can be focused. Mere activity is meaningless. A job for a job's sake will not take you far. But through this course . . . you have begun a process of consciously choosing and producing a life characterized by relevance and meaning.



### REFERENCES

Carla Howery. "Teaching High School Sociology." ASA Footnotes, p. 13, no. 4. 1985.
W. Richard Stephens, Jr., from "What Now? The Relevance of Sociology to Your Life and Career," in *Using Sociology* (2nd ed.), Roger A. Straus, Editor. General Hall, Inc., 1994.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the typical jobs sociologists do with their degree?
2. What are the prospects for "income" and for "meaning" with a career in sociology, according to Stephens?