

AFTERWORD

The Sociological Eye and Its Blinders

Randall Collins

As we neared the end of the twentieth century, many people paused to take stock of where we had come from and where we might be heading. Randall Collins was among those moved to such millennial musings. He was asked by the editors of *Contemporary Sociology* to answer some hard questions: Is there a core to sociology? Should there be? What do sociologists have in common that makes them members of the same discipline?

Does sociology have a core? Yes, but it is not an eternal essence; not a set of texts or ideas, but an activity.

This is not the same as saying the discipline of sociology will always exist. Sociology became a self-conscious community only in the mid-1800s, about five generations ago, and has been an academic discipline for four generations or less. Disciplines go in and out of existence. The very concept of disciplinary specialization as we know it was created in the Napoleonic period at the time of reorganization of the French Academies, as Johan Heilbron has shown in *The Rise of Social Theory* (1995). There is no guarantee that any particular discipline will remain fixed. Biology, a discipline first recognized by Auguste Comte, has repeatedly shifted its boundaries, combining with physics and chemistry, or spinning off genetics and ecology, making up a shifting array of new fields. Discoveries do not respect administrative boundary lines. Major advances in research or theory tend to pull followers after

them, who institutionalize themselves in turn for a while in some organizational form, if only until the next big round of discovery.

In much the same way, sociologists keep forming hybrid communities on their borders, for example, with economics, literary theory, or computer science. In recent decades, hybrid disciplines have split off from, overlapped with, or encroached upon sociology as criminal justice, ethnic studies, gender studies, management, science and technology studies (i.e., what was once "sociology of science"), and no doubt more to come. There is nothing to lament in this. A glance at the history of long-term intellectual networks, and of academic organizations, shows that branching and recombining are central to what drives intellectual innovation. (The pattern of such long-term networks is documented in my *The Sociology of Philosophies* [1998].)

Sociology, like everything else, is a product of particular historical conditions. But I also believe we have hit upon a distinctive intellectual activity. Its appeal is strong enough to keep it alive, whatever its name will be in the future and whatever happens to the surrounding institutional forms. The lure of this activity is what drew many of us into sociology.

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One becomes hooked on being a sociologist. The activity is this: It is looking at the world around us, the immediate world you and I live in, through the sociological eye.

There is a sociology of everything. You can turn on your sociological eye no matter where you are or what you are doing. Stuck in a boring committee meeting (for that matter, a sociology department meeting), you can check the pattern of who is sitting next to whom, who gets the floor, who makes eye contact, and what is the rhythm of laughter (forced or spontaneous) or of pompous speechmaking. Walking down the street, or out for a run, you can scan the class and ethnic pattern of the neighborhood, look for lines of age segregation, or for little pockets of solidarity. Waiting for a medical appointment, you can read the professions and the bureaucracy instead of old copies of *National Geographic*. Caught in a traffic jam, you can study the correlation of car models with bumper stickers or with the types of music blaring from radios. There is literally nothing you can't see in a fresh way if you turn your sociological eye to it. Being a sociologist means never having to be bored.

But doesn't every discipline have its special angle on all of reality? Couldn't a physicist see the laws of motion everywhere, or an economist think of supply curves of whatever happens in everyday life? I still think sociology is uniquely appealing in this respect. What physicists or chemists can see in everyday life is no doubt rather banal for them, and most of their discoveries in recent centuries have been made by esoteric laboratory equipment. Fields like economics, it is true, could probably impose an application of some of their theories upon a great many things. But for virtually all disciplines, the immediate world is a sideshow. For sociologists, it is our arena of discovery, and the source at which we renew our energies and our enthusiasm.

In saying this, I don't mean to say that the only true sociologists are the practitioners of ethnographic or participant observation, or that the core of sociology is limited to

Goffman-style microsociology. I do think that all of us who are turned on by sociology, who love doing what we do, have the sociological eye. It is this that gives us new theoretical ideas and makes alive the theories that we carry from the past. The world a sociologist can see is not bounded by the immediate microsituation. Reading the newspaper, whether the business section or the personal ads, is for us like an astronomer training his or her telescope on the sky. Where the ordinary reader is pulled into the journalistic mode, reading the news through one or another political bias or schema of popular melodrama, the sociological eye sees suggestions of social movements mobilizing or winding down, indications of class domination or conflict, or perhaps the organizational process whereby just this kind of story ended up in print, defined as news. For us, novels depict the boundaries of status groups and the saga of social mobility, just as detective stories show us about backstages. Whatever we read with the sociological eye becomes a clue to the larger patterns of society, here or in the past. The same goes for the future: Today's sociologists are not just caught up in the fad of the Internet; they are already beginning to look at it as another frontier for sociological discovery.

I want to claim, in short, that all kinds of sociologists, microethnographers and statisticians, historical comparativists and theorists alike, have the sociological eye. I think that virtually all of the most productive sociologists among us do. We all went through a gestalt switch in our way of looking at the world, sometime early in our careers, that was the key moment in our initiation into sociology. Having become initiated, I suppose, one can also become burned out. The vision fades; everyday life becomes just everyday; the newspapers become just a little jolt of political clichés to go along with the morning orange juice; sociology becomes just life at the office, number crunching or writing reviews on yet another meta-critique on the lives of dead Germans. Sure, we can lose the vision and

the enthusiasm. But the initiation lingers; the gestalt switch is still there to be switched on. We can always reenergize ourselves by getting back to the source: Turn on the sociological eye and go look at something. Don't take someone else's word for what there is to see, or some common cliché (even a current trendy one), above all not a media-hype version of what is there; go and see it yourself. Make it observationally strange, as if you'd never seen it before. The energy comes back. In that way, I suspect, sociologists are probably more energized by their subject matter than practitioners of virtually any other discipline.

Now I want to thicken the plot. Turning on the sociological eye is the main way that many of us became sociologists, but it isn't the only way. There is another recruitment path, which also acts as a continuing source of energy and commitment. This is the path of social activism. Many, perhaps most of us, became interested in sociology because we belonged to social movements or had social commitments. We wanted to do something to change society, help people, fight injustice, and elevate the oppressed. This image of sociology has long been foremost in the public eye. In an earlier generation, people used to confuse "sociology" with "socialism," or more recently with "social work." The 1960s gave another radical jolt to this trajectory, along with a repetition of the pattern of putting down one's elders for not being up with today's crusade. We of the '60s generation have been experiencing the turn that comes, in time, of being on the receiving end of the same process.

There are complications in the career of activist commitment too; there can be burnout, and also institutionalization, so that researching one's favorite oppressed group also becomes just another day at the office. But here, too, it remains possible to reawaken the old energy surge by making contact with the source: that is, get in touch with a movement that is still mobilized, feed one's energies into it, and receive back the stepped-up current that comes from solidarity and commitment. Old lefties

(and, more precisely, old New Lefties) can get a surge in their commitment by intellectual action that carries forward the old targeting of opponents. World-system theory, for instance, is not just another academic specialty, for those who work in it; there is a political resonance that makes even such arcane topics as trade routes in the Ottoman Empire into opportunities to grapple with the history of the capitalist beast. Sociology is full of people who have passion, who care deeply about their subject, because so many of us came in through the activist side.

This is a second reason why sociology is so distinctive. Although politically committed persons and former or current activists work throughout the academic world, in few disciplines does activism mesh so directly with one's immediate work as in sociology. Sociology is nearly the most politicized and activist of all fields. (In recent years literature, which resembles sociology in several of the respects I have been discussing, has probably come to rival sociology in ideological intensity.) Probably the only disciplines that are even more thoroughly politicized than sociology are relatives of sociology, such as ethnic studies, black studies, and women's studies, which were created as hybrids between academic departments and activist movements.

Now to the crux of the drama. Sociology has two core commitments: what I have called the "sociological eye" and social activism. They can be combined; some people have both of them, simultaneously or in differing strengths at different times in their careers. And one can become burned out from both, so the entire population of those of us who are nominally called "sociologists" array ourselves all across this two-dimensional grid. Much of the conflict within sociology goes on between those who are at the peak intensities of the two different commitments.

In the late 1950s, C. Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* castigated mere "abstracted empiricists" and "grand theorists" for losing what Mills regarded as the true sociological commitment to an activist critique and

reconstruction of society. Today, James Rule in *Theory and Progress in Social Science* (1997) makes a parallel critique, charging that sociology is full of specialized intellectual movements caught up in self-generated problems, spinning technicalities of their own devising. For Rule, movements as diverse as rational choice, network analysis, and feminist theory all share the pathology of turning inward on themselves, surrounding themselves with a wall of esoteric vocabulary, and losing sight of the first-order questions of perennial concern: the conditions of stratification, social disruption, and violence. It is possible to be sympathetic to the spirit of Mills' and Rule's critiques and still to see the larger dimensions of the intellectual conflict. Mills' targets (Lazarsfeld, Parsons, Merton) and many of Rule's targets also had the sociological eye; these were (and are) sociologists who have turned on their vision, seeing something around us that the ordinary eye doesn't see, whether it be latent functions (in one of the older examples) or network structures (in one of the newer ones).

From the point of view of the committed activist, those sociologists who don't work on burning social problems seem like incomprehensible duffers or backsliding traitors to the cause; the activist commitment makes it hard to see that there is a driving commitment on the other side too, just an entirely different one. Erving Goffman, hiding out backstage in the mental hospital, was not merely seeing patients and psychiatrists through official or even counterofficial eyes, but was making his own distinctively sociological discoveries of how the construction of normalcy and of the self takes place. From the activist viewpoint, the judgment on other sociologists' work tends to be "if you're not part of the solution you're part of the problem." From the point of view of the voyager with the sociological eye, the activist is just someone who has already made up his or her mind and is no longer open to seeing anything new.

Perhaps the purest recent formulation of the viewpoint of the sociological eye is

the preface to the second edition of Donald Black's *The Social Structure of Right and Wrong* (1998). Black regards the activist mentality as the biggest blinder to seeing the social pattern: For right and wrong, the categories by which the activist works are themselves socially variable attitudes arising from particular configurations of conflict, social control, and conflict management. For Black, categories such as crime, or ethnic or gender identity, are mere folk concepts that need to be dissolved into the analytical space of "pure sociology." Black is positively glowing from his sociological eye, almost like a Hindu tantric seer looking down and through us mere mortals below.

The two versions of sociological commitment, at their most intense, are like opposing gestalts; one impedes even bare awareness of what can be seen through the other. A recent example of the contretemps that can result is the public reception of Arlie Hochschild's *The Time Bind* (1997). Throughout her career, Hochschild's work has been a blend of the sociological eye and activist commitment, although (Hochschild is a student of Erving Goffman) the sociological eye tends to predominate. Hochschild treads on dangerous ground, because she chooses to study topics that are at the heart of current public controversy; yet she does not let the commitment dictate what she sees, and she goes willingly down the pathways opened by unexpected discoveries.

Research on *The Time Bind* began with a puzzle: Hochschild noticed that relatively few people were taking advantage of family-friendly employment policies allowing shorter hours, part-time work, parental leave, or flexible time. A politically conventional diagnosis today would be to blame economic pressure or subtle organizational coercion. Hochschild instead began to see the situation through a new gestalt: For many middle-class people, work and home were changing places. The successes of the middle-class women's movement were now producing unforeseen consequences. Home was becoming more of a hassle

(already documented in Hochschild's previous book, *The Second Shift* [1989]), particularly as employed women work longer paid hours and still receive relatively little help from their husbands at home. One response, Hochschild perceived, was to gradually abandon the home battle, shifting the emotional center of one's life to one's work. Along with this has gone a large institutional shift: Family life has gotten deskilled, dependent upon commercial services for everything from food preparation to child care and entertainment. The Taylorized factory of the early twentieth century, with its efficiency-oriented speed-up, has invaded the home just at the time that modern participative management techniques have made middle-class workplaces more emotionally friendly. Hochschild perceives that the spate of services for children, of how-to books and courses on dealing effectively with family situations, even the very concept of "quality time" with one's children, are a kind of speed-up in the home, putting scientific home management to work to manipulate emotions as well as diets and minutes. For Hochschild, the entire gestalt of work and family is shifting; the divorce rate of broken marriages needs to be seen in the light of "marriages" to a place of employment, with job terminations as a second, sometimes counterbalancing "divorce rate."

My point is that Hochschild's sociological imagination was lit up at some point in her research. The starting point involved fairly standard feminist issues in the public arena, but what she came to see was filled with ironic resonances of a prior history of sociological discovery: the industrial management movement of the earlier part of the century, the "emotion work" that Hochschild herself had earlier uncovered in her study of airline flight attendants (*The Managed Heart* [1983]), the interplay between the official frontstage ideals (in this case, of how a contemporary parent is supposed to deal with one's children) and the backstage reality of how people make out amid the pressure of institutions. It is exploring these resonances, I am sure, that drew Hochschild

deeper and deeper into her research; the sociological eye has a way of pulling you down its wilderness paths. These same resonances give the book much of its appeal for sociologists.

At the same time, *The Time Bind* has been greeted with public controversy. Most people do not have the sociological eye; public political discourse is carried out in the language of parties and movements, and everything published is assessed as a move for or against a partisan position. Hochschild has been attacked for undermining the family leave act, for blaming working mothers for emotionally abandoning their children, for misperceiving the fight of working women against the pressures of corporate organization. Hochschild's response in the public press has been to stick to her vision: Her critics are closing their eyes on an unexpected reality they are afraid to see. Some of Hochschild's critics are sociologists, and some of the attack is not mere lay mentality against the professional sociologist: It is the perennial inner conflict of our discipline, the movement activist stance against the sociological eye. Some of the controversy over Hochschild's work mixes both dimensions; there are technical issues at stake involving research methods, the scope of interpretations based on Hochschild's particular slice of data, and underlying images of what kinds of families existed in an earlier historical period. Some of the activist critique of Hochschild's unwelcome findings is carried out on the terrain of technical argument. And indeed she may well be faulted in some of these aspects, such as the complexity of causes of why employees don't take off more time from work.

Yet the importance of Hochschild's vision remains; however specialized her research sample, she points to a cutting edge of social change. The puzzle over leave time was just the point of entry into a larger insight. Hochschild's sociological eye illuminates because it gives us a new gestalt, a way of making sense of what has happened to the entire complex of work-and-home as we pass a historical watershed. When examined analytically instead of

moralistically, it is not a question of denouncing or defending contemporary outsourcing of child care, home care, entertainment, and emotional support; nor of nostalgia for another era in which indeed middle-class women were confined to craft work or domestic labor. I think Hochschild's critics are mistaken in assuming that she has merely warped the activist scale of evaluations, and in not understanding the seriousness of a commitment to seeing as much as one can with one's sociological eye, however unsettling the news may be.

The two sources of sociologists' commitment often struggle against each other. If we have to choose between them, I say we must choose the sociological eye; if that is lost, all is lost. Without it, even sociological activists lose their creativity and their credibility with the public, appearing only as purveyors of facts chosen by persons whose minds are already made up. But unless there is all-out war between the factions, we can live with the struggle, and even prosper from it. Sociology is fortunate that it has so much built-in energy, so much intellectual commitment—even if those commitments sometimes are at cross-purposes.

Yet it is not always so. Sometimes the intentions are at more moderate levels, where blending is easier. And sometimes both commitments are high, but the sociological eye is wonderfully appropriate for what the social activist wants to reveal. Good examples are the urban ethnographies of street life by Elijah Anderson, *Streetwise* (1990) and *The Code of the Streets* (forthcoming). Anderson has a Goffmanian eye for the nuances of signals and

signs given off in public, at the same time that he presents the dilemmas of social interaction in a racially mixed, physically dangerous neighborhood. A good-hearted activist with no other resources than the best intentions, or an angry activist full of righteousness, could not have written these books; it takes a sociological eye. And what the sociological eye saw is now revealed to the rest of us who read Anderson's books. Probably the sociological eye will always be the possession of a little group of devotees within the larger society. But the border between sociologists and lay people isn't fixed, and some of what we see can cross over. Sometimes it expands other people's vision.

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