

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

