Three

On the question of questions
**some thoughts on the conduct of social inquiry, together
with a comment on questioning answers, the whole
constituting a plea for curiosity in sociological research**

I take the English language – which is a convenient way of referring to
the means which *my* selves use in communicating with one another and
occasionally with other people's selves – to be, among other possibili-
ties, a battleground in which those who care to listen may hear the
grunts, groans and cries of dying metaphors, the regular thud of
platitudes falling from various heights upon the ground, the high-
pitched whine of the stations of the Central Truisms Generating Board,
and a great deal of erratic noise, sometimes referred to as 'meaning'.
I've no reason to suppose that Chinese, Mayyor, or Ubehe languages are
markedly different, not to mention Nuer, and its European counterpart,
Swedish. A variant of English just happens to be the one I think I can
use.

In the medley of sounds it is sometimes possible to distinguish ut-
terances which are referred to as questions. Generally, they appear to
be attempts to acquire information; it is sometimes held that certain
other utterances correspond to these questions; if so, they may be
described as answers. There are even those who assert that there exist
rules which enable the determination of the relationship between
questions and other utterances, let us agree for now to call them
statements, such that a particular statement constitutes an answer to a
question. I know no grounds, *a priori*, either for believing or disbeliev-
ing this claim; my own view is that it is a matter for inquiry.

My own experience also suggests that people often proceed *as if*, in
the course of verbal transactions, there *are* correspondences between
one utterance and another, such that a statement is indeed taken to
constitute an answer, or a failure to answer, a question. There are even,
I gather, those who take some answers to be true and others false,
although the principles by which such classification is undertaken are
often far from clear; and I should be interested to learn of investigations
which have demonstrated that the allocation of statements generally to
either of the two categories TRUE or FALSE departs from a random

distribution, other than in highly specialised sequences of operations, for instance, in tautological arguments like arithmetic, in calculus or in the procedures suggested by Boole and others.

This is not to deny the usefulness of such fictions, more especially the fiction of a true observation as an imaginary event to which our observations may approximate – indeed this fiction seems to be indispensable if we wish to adopt the procedure of successive approximations. Moreover, by the simple equation of truth with beauty, we may obtain aesthetic pleasure too.

Let us now introduce two of my favourite questions:

HOW DO YOU KNOW?

and SO WHAT?

While you are, perhaps, wondering whether there are any statements which could constitute answers to these questions – in other words, whether they are indeed questions – I should perhaps say that my affection for these remarks is probably related to their adaptability; they can turn up in an astonishing variety of situations, and the kinds of statements that may serve as answers to them are likely to vary from one situation to another. Let me attempt to confine further discussion to our immediate situation; what kinds of statement could serve as answers to the questions 'HOW DO YOU KNOW?' and 'SO WHAT?', in a gathering which meets from time to time to talk about the methods and procedures of social research and the methodology of the social sciences, more especially as these are applied to the study of work and organisations.

I suggest that the question 'HOW DO YOU KNOW?' can be construed as a request for information about the procedures employed to make observations which are held to constitute the warrant and the ground for assertions about social life; for instance, supposed changes in the values of two or more variables, and the possible connections between these. 'The educational opportunities available to children vary directly with parental income and wealth'. How do you know? Because there is a substantial amount of information available about the distributions of educational opportunities, of income and wealth, and of the possible relationships between these; analysis of this information suggests that it does not support the alternative possibilities – that there is no relationship between educational opportunities and parental income and wealth, or that the relationship between them is inverse – and it does support the initial assertion.

So what? Some people, it seems, would prefer to live in a society where educational opportunities are distributed independently of parental circumstances. If it appears that some connection exists between wealth and educational opportunity, they may wish to reorder society so that this connection is broken and no longer obtains; they may for instance wish to see educational opportunities, viewed as a scarce resource, allocated to maximise the economic growth of some definable social unit, commonly the nation state.

A few eccentrics, who are likely to be disproportionately represented in gatherings like this one, may wish to take a particular question – how is educational opportunity distributed in a particular society? (and any statements which may constitute parts of the possible answer to the question) – and seek to relate them to other questions (and partial answers) about the distribution of this, that and the other, and to more general questions about equality and inequality in human societies – by what processes and structures these phenomena are generated, sustained, and changed. Answers to the question – so what? – may then be stated in terms of a context of information and ideas (facts and theories as some would say) about social stratification.

The investigation of social stratification is one major activity in that sub-set of all possible questions and answers conventionally and conveniently designated sociology.

There has, I suggest, been a sufficient accumulation of information about social stratification for statements purporting to answer the question – so what? – to refer to this existing stock of ideas, information and misinformation. Thus, at least within the context of sociological discussions, an intelligible answer to the question – so what? – could well be the statement that a particular investigation aims to replicate earlier investigations, to refute a set of hypotheses or theses which is thought to be untrue. For instance, the thesis that with improvements in the real standard of living of the labour force, the best paid section of manual workers buy washing machines, vote Conservative and become middle class; or to investigate and, if possible, explain, some apparently puzzling observation – for instance, why has there been no proletarian revolution in Britain? Answer – because the range of individual comparisons which we ordinarily make is extraordinarily limited (Question – does the range of reference groups contract with increasing poverty and decreasing temperatures?).

At this point it may be useful to distinguish two kinds of questions: those which we address to the existing stock of information and ideas – which it may be convenient to call 'problems' – and all other questions, which for the time being, we might as well go on calling questions.

The point of this distinction is to simplify the business of saying – given that the problem to be investigated is X, i.e. a set of questions about social stratification, what further questions do we need to ask? i.e. what kinds of information are required to solve the problem?

And just as we may be able to answer the question – So what? – by referring to an existing stock of information and ideas, we may be able to furnish intelligible statements in answer to the question – How do you know? – which contain references to procedures used in other inquiries; incidently, such references to procedures already in use may be of some assistance in concealing and dissimulating our embarrassment if we are asked the further question – and how do you know that you know? – though they won't, I think, be of much help when we get to that more interesting series of questions which begins – how do you know that you know that *you* know? and continues – And how do you know that you know that he knows? – How do you know that he knows that you know? How do you know that he knows that he knows? How does he know that you know that you know? – I now invite you to imagine a row of dots terminating in an N.

These questions indicate those barren hills – or fertile plains, depending on your preference of the moment – where epistemology and sociology merge, and the nomadic Jean Piaget tends his flock of genetic epistemologies with the aid of his faithful sheepdog – Structuralism. True, Piaget himself claims to have seen Chomsky striding purposefully along the sky-line, and there are other travellers who assert that Berger and Luckman were here – though not for long. It is even held, especially, I am told, in Frankfurt, that a large and blackened crater is a material monument to a heated exchange of views between Marx and Engels on the nature of dialectics – or was it the dialectics of nature? Be that as it may – a splendid phrase which I commend to the attention of all epistemologically-minded sociologists – the works of Jean Piaget provide a convenient, brief, and simple introduction to the methods and procedures of social research; as a rule of thumb – a heuristic if you prefer – never ask a question until you have considered the implication of Piaget's assertion that:

it is impossible to reduce a perceptual system to a 'grouping', except by turning inequalities into equalities by introducing 'uncompensated changes' P, which measure the extent of distortions (illusions) and bear witness to the non-additivity and non-transitivity of perceptual relations, to their irreversibility, to their non–associativity and to their non-identity.

The senses in which this passage may be construed are indicated in the preceding 69 pages of this particular essay ('The Psychology of Intelligence') which you may care to consult at leisure – yours, not mine.

Thus equipped, let us turn to the question of questions in the study of social stratification. If you find this act of rotation as difficult to accomplish as I do – try to imagine what we may find when we get round to it. Perhaps things will not be noticeably different from the state of affairs to be observed in other fields of sociological inquiry. For instance, we may find investigations wobbling unsteadily between two kinds of approach – F1 and F2 – which constitute limits beyond which inequalities do not get turned into equalities by the introduction of uncompensated changes P – and perceptual relations become additive and transitive.

The specifications of F1 are to be found in any decent, wholesome, nourishing text on research methods in the social sciences. First define the problem for investigation; choose the appropriate methods for investigation, apply them; analyse them; and then – without a word to your friends, especially your best friends, summarise your observations, write them on a postcard and send it to the editor of *Nature*. While you're waiting to be elected to your well-deserved Fellowship of the Royal Society, buy your friends a drink and enquire how *their* research is going. If the events you think you have observed are social events –do not bother to write to the editor of *Nature* – nor waste time waiting for election to the Royal Society; instead, sell your piece to one of the Bank Reviews – or the colour supplement of a Sunday paper; if even that fails – try the editor of *Sociology*.

What I have so far called F1 represents the imaginary limit to which social inquiry can be pushed when investigators wish to approximate to the supposed ideal of controlled laboratory experiments. The reason, I suggest, why sociologists don't ordinarily want to go beyond this limit is because they don't want to give up one of the advantages of studying social phenomena – namely the supposed ability of human beings to communicate with one another. Instead of hanging around somewhere

with television cameras and recording apparatus for fifty years when it all happens somewhere else in the space of twenty minutes – why not just ask the actors? In other words, exploit the capacity of human beings to recall, report and comment on what happens to them. What a splendid idea – do let's try.

So casting a glance over our shoulders every so often, we draw up a lot of questions to ask people; for instance:

1.   What is your occupation?
2.   Does the workshop in which you are employed belong to a capitalist or to a joint stock company? (Give the names of the capitalist employers or of the directors of the company).
3.   State the number of persons employed.
4.   State their ages and sex.
13.   Give details of the division of labour in your industry.
62.   What is your daily and weekly wage rate in money?
70.   Try to draw up a budget of the weekly and annual income and expenditure of yourself and your family.
76.   Compare the price of the article you produce, or the services you provide, with the price of your labour.
83.   How many strikes have occurred in your trade in the course of your career?
100.   What is the general physical, intellectual, and moral condition of men and women workers employed in your trade?

These eleven questions are taken from a list of 100 items – or more exactly 101 – the 101th being General Comments, which constitute a self-administered questionnaire devised by Marx, for publication in the *Revue Socialiste* and for distribution to 'all the workers' societies, and other bodies and individuals who asked for it'. Nothing has been published about the inquiry *yet* – but no doubt a copy of Marx's rough draft of his analysis of this material will turn up in a second-hand book shop in Istanbul – together with a few of Engels' animadversions on Dahrendorf. Now Marx assumed, as indeed most sociological investigators assume, that he could communicate directly with his respondents – either, as in Marx's case, in writing (which presupposes that respondents are literate), or orally – by interviewing.

This assumption itself rests on the further assumption that interrogator and respondent are members of the same language community – that they can indeed speak one another's language. I take this to be a problem susceptible to investigation. Commonly in social research the investigators put themselves in a position to learn the language of their respondents – the position of an anthropologist studying an alien culture – or seek confirmation of their supposition that their respondents speak their language by interviewing some of them; in other words by carrying

out a pilot study. Having reassured themselves of the propriety of their
initial assumptions and weeded out some ambiguously worded ques-
tions in the test interviews, they carry out the main part of the research,
analyse the results and publish them.

Now I think there may indeed be some questions which are
relatively unambiguous, by virtue of the information they convey to
potential respondents about the type of information required and the
terms in which it should be stated, for instance, please tell me the year
and day of the month on which you were born. Of course, the
respondents may not possess the required information, or they may
have been misinformed themselves, but at least the question itself
seems unequivocal. And highly equivocal questions – for instance –
Who are you? – can be translated into less equivocal ones – for instance,
please tell me the names recorded on your birth certificate, passport or
other official papers which may establish who other people think you
are – if this is indeed what we want to know.

Matters become slightly more complicated if we wish to elicit infor-
mation about the kinds of job respondents have – which is a desirable
item of information in a study of stratification. Consider for instance,
the following:

What is your job?

What is your occupation?

What is your work?

What do you do for a living?

Are you employed? If so, what is the nature of your employ-
ment?

In the instruction to interviewers interrogating employees at Vauxhall,
Skefko and Lapeste, Goldthorpe *et al* bid them:

'distinguish carefully 'job' in the sense of working for a specific
firm and in the sense of the actual work–task carried out.'

Splendid – and how do we do that small thing? And how – when we
come to ask later in the same interview, about respondents' fathers – do
we carry out the injunction –

'be sure to get skill level' –

in eliciting answers to:

Q.7 a) What sort of work does your father do, or what was his
last job, if he is no longer alive or retired?

b) Has/had he been in that kind of work for most of his
life? (If 'No': probe for other main jobs done, be sure
to get skill level.)

Now I think we can begin to see creeping into the transactions of the interview – if not all seven of Emerson's types of ambiguity – at least in rudimentary form, two or three of them. Sociologically, the complex of job, occupation, work, employment, what people do for a living, is a composite of elements – which may indeed vary in number from one 'occupation' to another; can we assume that the term job refers to the set of tasks to be performed at the workplace (however *that* is defined) and what about instances when these tasks and the circumstances in which they are performed turn out to be highly variable?   Can we suppose without further ado that the term 'occupation' refers to the role bestowed upon those engaged in particular 'jobs' – and if so, what happens when different people bestow different occupational descriptions on what appear to us to be one and the same job?   What do we do if the same occupational description is applied to what appears to be different jobs?   It is indeed the case that the term 'work' refers to the nature of the employment followed.   More to the point, even if *we* are prepared to make assumptions of this kind, can we also assume that respondents drawn from diverse jobs, occupations and types of employment will?   I doubt it.

So let us move on to a further consideration.   Unlike nuclear particles or cumulous clouds, people appear to have opinions, hold views, entertain beliefs, and bring their orientations with them – especially into the workplace.   Perhaps they have opinions, views, beliefs, about social stratification.   They may even think that they're middle class – indeed, I gather this belief is widely held among some sections of the population.   Who knows – perhaps they have communicable images of the class structure – so let's by all means ask them.

But how?   Answer: – just like Uncle George and Auntie Mildred all those years ago.

Would you care to tell me a little more about your work?   What does it involve?

Or: What on earth are you doing?

Or: Do you enjoy your work?

Or: Which social class do you belong to?

Or: Which social class do you think you belong to?

Or – if that seems a bit abrupt – 'there's quite a bit of talk about different social classes these days – which would you say you belong to?

And perhaps – just to put those whose answers may not fall into our coding categories in their place –

And if you *had* to say upper class, middle class, or working class which would you say?

Or how about, 'People often talk about there being different classes – what do you think?'

Or maybe – 'Do you think that people in Britain are divided into social classes?'

(If yes – what classes would you say they are? If no – do you think that people in Britain used to be divided into social classes?)

Or: 'Many people do talk about social classes existing today. What classes do you think they have in mind?'

I don't think there will be any shortage of replies to these questions. I do sometimes wonder how far the replies can be construed as *answers* to the same question. Thus – I may share membership of the same language community with someone to the point of being confident that if I ask them how old they are and what they do for a living – never mind questions like – how far is it from here to London? – or what time is the next high tide at Dover? – I shall find their replies intelligible – which doesn't mean they will be accurate or true. But if I ask them what social classes they think there are in Britain today and to which one they belong, I would hesitate to claim that, if they say – Upper, Middle, and Working Class – and that *they* are middle class – that they are using the terms class, upper class, middle class, and working class, in the same ways as me. For instance – *I* don't happen to think that there *is* a middle class in Britain today, although I am perfectly prepared to suppose that many people hold a different view and that it is unlikely that I shall be able to persuade them to the contrary. Now whatever the grounds for my suggestion that there is no middle class in Britain today, it does have one useful consequence, for me at least: it obliges *me* to consider how a respondent who *does* assert that there is a middle class in Britain today is using the term class, and in particular, the term *middle class*. Incidentally, I think I can do this without supposing that my imaginary respondent has some communicable image of the class structure concealed about his person. What I have to do now is to enquire about how respondents are using terms.

One way of doing this is to consider *meanings* – and here, backs to the wall, stiff upper lip and all, we approach that other limit to social inquiry to which I referred earlier, and which for the time being I will designate as F2, the limit of meaning – or more exactly, the limit to the possibilities of examining meanings.

Now, just as the approximate whereabouts of F1 are indicated in all kinds of sound and wholesome reading matter – so are the possible whereabouts of F2. Not, let me hasten to say, that *sociological* writers are all that much in evidence: most of the recognisable tunes come from the other side of the imaginary fence – and a good deal of the heavy breathing too – though this in itself may be no matter for astonishment in an array of aspirants including Hobbes, Hume, Hegel, and Husserl. Parenthetically, if you think it odd to find Hume and Husserl planted as palings in the same fence, it was someone else, not me, who said:

> Hume suffers from the delusion that he is an empirical psychologist when in fact he is engaged in a pure phenomenological analysis of the mind, interpreting directly the essence of the various mental states.

> (How are your essences today, dear – and would you care to have them directly interpreted? Possible answer: piss off.)

The solution to the problem of locating F2 most commonly adopted by sociologists is to treat meaning like any other communicable disease: in other words, if you want to catch it, it's yours – if you can't it must belong to the philosophers. Ignoring the unworthy thought that symbolic interaction ends where the action begins, I would suggest that *if* we limit ourselves to a consideration of communicable meanings, *then* there is no reason why the same methods and procedures of research employed by those bashing the boundary demarked by F1 should not be turned upon the problems clustering around F2; indeed, I am inclined to think, in my more malicious moments, (like the salt on the table – there is positively no extra charge for alliteration) that the problems in the region of F2 – problems of investigating communicable meanings – may be *more* accessible to those engaged in the attempt to scale F1 than all those interesting geriatric questions about how old are you, which the text books commonly recommend to our attention.

Does this mean that those currently besieging F2 should transfer their attentions to F1? – I'm inclined to think that it does – if only in the interests of reciprocity. After all, when you've asked someone how old

they are and they say '22' or '63', I can only record my entire agreement; I must add that I do not wish to do another working man out of a job and I await results of his – or perhaps her – assertions with pleasurable anticipation.

But where, I must ask, as the candle flickers, is the pay-off for those investigating social stratification? In reply – let me ask some further questions. How else can we amplify the venerable distinction between a class 'in itself' and a class 'for itself'? Can we otherwise describe more fully the circumstances which appear to lead respondents to answer questions about class as if they'd been reading Max Weber rather than Karl Marx? Is Runciman entirely wrong about the limited range of comparisons which many people commonly make about the circumstances of their lives and the inferences which he – and they – draw from this? What kind of evidence can otherwise be brought to bear on the assertion by Goldthorpe and his colleagues in reviewing their Luton study that:

> The striking feature was undoubtedly the infrequency with which the language of 'us' and 'them' was used – the language which, one [which one?] may note, has been represented by writers such as Ossowski and Dahrendorf as common to men who experience their position in society as one of subjection and exploitation.

All these examples are deliberately insular; as soon as we look outside Britain, to consider the work of, say, Touraine and Willener in France and Switzerland, of Popitz and his colleagues in Germany, and the vast bulk of material published on social stratification in the USA – it becomes, I think, impossible to avoid some consideration at least of the categories which respondents use in the special context of interviews.

I suggested earlier that I find it useful to think in terms of two limits to the scope of social inquiry, with most investigations tottering uncertainly between them. Approaches which do approximate to these limits are very different from one another, but this, I suggest, constitutes them neither as alternatives nor as complementary opposites to one another. Let me select some of their respective metaphors. The proponents of that approach I have called F1, use a number of terms to indicate approbation – even on occasions, pleasure: they love facts – especially *hard* facts – though we are rarely given any indication of how *we* should recognise a fact if we stumbled over one, never mind how to assess its hardness; objectivity is highly prized; so are rigour, and

science, especially when combined to yield scientific rigour; logic and deduction are esteemed – especially in their applications to the endless tasks of testing, refuting, verifying, even confirming, hypotheses. What, it is hoped, will emerge from all this is – knowledge certainly – and perhaps TRUTH. Measurement is a prime aim, and some will hardly settle for less than a ratio scale.

Disparaging and pejorative terms include 'anecdote', 'impressions', and 'subjective'; to describe something as metaphysical is apparently most abusive; theory, when decently constructed and properly applied – as in a deductive system for the purpose of explanation – is fine – but theorising is suspect, and when performed in an armchair, damnable (on no account must the covering law model of explanation be mistaken for the operations performed by the upholsterer on the material basis for the production of conjecture, speculation and surmise).

The proponents of F2 have *their* array of metaphors of approval: cries of joy and pleasure attend the application of such terms as creativity, empathy, insight, interpretation, intuition, understanding, and verstehen. How better to grasp the meanings which actors attach to events, and what their experiences mean to them? If such processes can be described as dynamic, as part of a dialectic – this may earn extra points; however it's not always clear what we would be allowed to count as genuine interpretations of meaning structures, although if we end up with a reification we should be sent back to square one to start again, and if we do it too often we shall be classified as incorrigible structural functionalists (whoever they are – probably just another reification).

Somewhere between these limits, social inquiry occurs, information and ideas are constructed, accumulated and communicated. Ways of answering the questions – 'How do you know?' and 'So What?' – change, though not perhaps as rapidly as some sociologists would like.

Perhaps we should allow ourselves a little more time and effort for the exploration of possibilities, and the examination of the principles for constructing puzzles. Questions contain information too – perhaps we should question questions – and answers. We could even revive the ancient vices of reliability and validity in social research.