

## Five

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### On some preliminaries to the conduct of social inquiry

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You'll see in the catalogue of events that an abstract of what I think I might say during the next twenty-five minutes is not obtainable. Just so: after all – I couldn't obtain one – so why should the rest of you expect to get one.

I'll make one preliminary guess about what I think I'm likely to say. 'The connection with 'Medical Sociology' will be hard to discern' – that is, if you think that medical sociology is a distinct and separate field of inquiry with distinct and separate methods. If you don't think that – and I don't – maybe what I'll try to say is relevant to inquiry in this field.

Some days ago, I set out to write a paper for this conference. I thought of a title – The Political Economy of Occupational Reputations – which I was very taken with, so much so that I'm extremely reluctant to abandon it. However, I have to admit that I have failed to produce anything, given the speed at which I habitually utter words, I could deliver in less than half an hour, which said anything much about political economy or occupational reputations, still less about the Political Economy of Occupational Reputations. What I have done – I suppose – is to go through the preliminary motions of grinding an axe. Perhaps more accurately, I've collected some of the materials which might be required to make the axe and the grindstone and have performed a few simple exercises, for which I'm indebted to the work of F.W. Taylor on the science of shovelling, just to find out what it would be like to grind an axe if I had an axe to grind and the means to grind it. Let me present you without further ado with a fragment of the materials which I originally assembled.

Once upon a time – for those of us who prefer to address ourselves to that kind of 'history that ain't got no dates' – in 1947 for the benefit of those of us who do prefer an element of conventional chronology, the National Opinion Research Centre in the USA – which you may regard as a fore-runner and front for the CIA, as an international conspiracy of positivists, as a society for the propagation of empiricism (or maybe

not) – published an item entitled ‘Jobs and Occupations: a population evaluation’. I don’t think I can possibly simulate the studied blandness of the introduction to this piece in summary so I shall quote it verbatim.

A man’s job – occupying nearly one third of his daily life – is more than just a means of livelihood or an outlet for his creative energy; it is a vital influence on his existence even beyond working hours. His social position, his economic welfare, and even his daily habits are all determined by the kind of job he holds.

*A man’s job; nearly one third of his daily life; an outlet for his creative energy; a vital influence in his existence; his social position, his economic welfare, even his daily habits are all determined by the kind of job he holds. Poor old man; bound to the Ixion’s wheel of gainful occupation, and paid employment; women – it would seem – escape this fate.*

We may want to return to discuss the implications of the words ‘men’ and ‘determine’ later on for this, and any other kind of enquiry, into social life. For the moment, let me simply remark that this particular enquiry appears to be cast in an explicitly deterministic male mould, until we consider the paragraph which immediately follows it.

On what basis do people choose their work? On what basis should they choose it? These are questions which each individual must answer for himself, not only to his personal satisfaction, but – considering the importance of balanced employment to the national economy – to the benefit of society as a whole.

Where before we had ‘man’, we now, at least fleetingly, have people who ‘choose their work’ in such a way that it is possible to ask ‘on what basis should they choose it’, a question to be asked in relation not only to ‘personal satisfaction’ (whatever that is) but to the ‘benefit of society as a whole’ (and we could conceivably want to discuss subsequently the implications of supposing that society constitutes ‘a whole’ – and what costs and benefits attach to such suppositions).

Now what sort of ‘determinism’ can it be which apparently admits of choice and, what’s more, some kind of ethical or moral criteria in the assessment of such choices?

Are these statements hopelessly muddled, inherently inconsistent, crassly contradictory?

I suggest that, in view of much of the discussion that's been going on in the misty, murky, mysterious, not to say mystifying realms of social philosophy and sociological theory especially during the past decade or so, we may want to regard these statements with the very gravest suspicion. However, before we do give full rein to our suspicions and embark on a witch-hunt, let us pause momentarily to consider where we might hope to land up. Where's the finishing post and what are the stakes? Before we pull the plug, are we sure that we know just which luscious babies and potable bathwater we're assigning with other good deeds past, as so many alms, for oblivion. Do we want to get rid of the 'determinism' and 'retain' the 'choice', or declare ourselves incorrigible determinists who want to know what determines the 'choices'? Do we, well-mannered methodological individualists which we may have been brought up to be, wish to retain some conception of personal satisfaction while consigning the apparently metaphysical holist notion of 'the benefit of society as a whole' to the incinerator of Popperian critical theory? What will we be letting ourselves in for if we do – or don't? How can we know? How can we know if we can know at all? How would we know when we knew?

Let's try picking promising looking titles at random; – I can't speak for you, but I'm a sucker, perhaps the archetypical sucker, when it comes to titles like *New Directions in Sociological Theory*<sup>1</sup> and *On the Beginnings of Social Inquiry*<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps, by considering carefully enough prospective 'new directions in sociology', I can arrive, by a process of elimination, at some knowledge of what the old directions are or were. Maybe someone's already done that for me. For instance, Silverman *et al* have drawn our attention to four respects in which old ways may be unsatisfactory

1. A view of theory as something constructed and negotiated from the armchair and presented to students as something quite separate from an understanding of the every day world.

I would observe, parenthetically (I see no reason why phenomenologists should have a complete monopoly of brackets), that I've passed many agreeable moments and had the most delightful experiences in armchairs. Perhaps that qualifies me as an armchair empiricist. At all events (events?) I'd be most reluctant to get rid of the old armchair. Perhaps that's because whatever else I may have been doing in the armchair, it was not constructing and negotiating theory and presenting it to students. The armchair, I'd claim, is an integral part of my dealings

with the everyday world: NOT '*Cogito, ergo sum*' but rather '*Sedeo, ergo sum*'.

2. A view of methodology as a set of techniques to be used to catch the unchanging properties of a 'solid' factual world.

I'm at some disadvantage here. I would certainly admit to that absence of philosophical sophistication which is the fourth item in Silverman's list – except that applied, say, to myself, I'd call it simple-mindedness, and maybe sometimes, plain absent-mindedness. Maybe it's this which leads me to wonder just what a 'solid factual world' is – that's to say, what the terms refer to, if anything. Is it by any chance a reference to the commonly held supposition that there is indeed a universe which contains clusters of events called matter, a 'lumpy universe' if you like (as Kish apparently does)? If so, does this 'solid' factual world include, as matter, not only the armchair from which I might construct and negotiate, for instance, a view of theory, but also brain cells and central nervous systems which may be the material pre-conditions of our being able to think at all, and the structure of languages, which we use to communicate with one another? If so, does this supposition of matter in the universe entail the view that a 'solid factual world' must consist of unchanging properties?

Isn't the supposition of a 'solid' factual world, at least to the extent that we are considering the material elements of that world, its solidity and its factual character, entirely compatible with a view of the changeableness, the transitoriness, the historical character of that world, and hence 'a view of methodology' as a set of techniques to be used to catch the changing properties of a 'solid' factual world? Matter can think. Matter has a history.

Item (3) on Silverman's list.

A reliance on the unexplicated assumptions of commonsense knowledge expressed in a preparedness to impute 'reasonable' motives to actors and to make phenomena non-problematic items of 'what everybody knows'.

I don't think I'm a consistent behaviourist or determinist, nor, so far as I can tell, psycho-analytically oriented – indeed my entire use of language so far seems to point in a completely different direction, but I very much doubt if 'a preparedness to impute 'reasonable' motives to actors and to make phenomena non-problematic in terms of what everybody knows' can be seriously imputed to those most lovable of actors,

consistent behaviourists, proponents of operant conditioning, classical determinists, and psycho-analysts. At best, they seem bent on imputing unreasonable motives to actors and making phenomena highly problematic in terms of what everybody does not know, – i.e. of which they (and we) are unconscious.

4. It is absence of philosophical sophistication in focusing on 'things' taken to be unquestionably obvious within a world through which our minds can roam at will.

But supposing that our lack of philosophical sophistication leads us to focus on things as extremely puzzling and very far from obvious within a world in which the word 'mind' is just one more dead metaphor in that great graveyard of dead metaphors, the English Language?

OK – so I must read the book, but not now, and certainly not aloud. There is a more urgent task to undertake – that of locating... 'The Beginning of Social Inquiry'... which, as it turns out, 'is a treatment of certain important ideas in sociology and social science, among them positivism, art, and common sense', but which also turns out to be 'a collaboration', a collaboration rendered necessary by a particular conception of analysis. For McHugh and his co-producers:

Analysis depends on that which enables it to be done in any case, not on the contingent description which, as product, serves to obscure its origins. Analysis, for us, is operative. It is not finding something in the world, or making sense of some puzzling datum, or answering an interesting question, or locating a phenomenon worthy of study or resolving a long standing disagreement or any other essential empirical procedure. To analyse is, instead, to address the possibility of any finding, puzzle, sense, resolution, answer, interest, location, phenomenon *etcetera, etcetera*.

(I for one boggle somewhat at the possibility of addressing the possibility of any *etcetera*, but never mind – it doesn't matter, depending on your point of view, or maybe your address at the time.)

Analysis is the concern not with anything said or written but with the grounds of whatever is said – the foundations that make what is said possible, sensible, conceivable.

For any speech, including, of course, speech about speech, our interest is reflexive...

(But why 'of course'? That our interest in speech about speech is reflexive may be contingent, problematic, highly uncertain – by no means a matter of course. But perhaps this doubt will be cleared up on the instant, or at least in the next sentence.)

...For the analyst any speech, including his own, is of interest not in terms of what it says but in terms of how what it says is possible, sensible, rational in the first place. Our interest in what we call the grounds or auspices of phenomena rather than in the phenomena themselves is exemplified in every chapter in this volume. To analyse the subject of research bias, for example, we do not identify instances or propose remedies. Instead we try to show the deep auspices – positivism in this case – which makes sensible any actual charge of bias or urge to remedy it. Similarly, snubs become for us not a kind of behaviour that goes on between persons in the real world, but a version of common sense which makes it conceivable that snubs would be sensible at all.

So our interest in analysis is our interest in auspices.

Now my first reaction (reaction?) to these remarks is to find them persuasive and plausible. What are my grounds for that? I'm construing this passage as a version of the injunction – let's think what the hell we're doing – or trying to do – (especially if what we think we may be trying to do is to engage in some kind of social enquiry). What indeed are the grounds which enable us to speak of engaging in any kind of enquiry, such that our speech appears intelligible? I leave open the issue of whether the assertion that 'analysis, for us, is generative' is grounded in practice, and if so, in what kind of practice. I do find puzzling, though not a datum, the contention that analysis does not depend 'on the contingent description which as product, serves to obscure its origins'. For the time being, I would imagine as itself contingent whether or not 'the contingent description ... as product... serves to obscure its origins'. I don't, that's to say, know what the grounds are for ruling out in advance the possibility that examination of a product is a necessary element in any attempt to discover the processes which have generated that product. If I can construe the term 'analysis' as a synonym for reasoning, for abstract thought, for theory, then the assertion that it – analysis – 'is not finding something in the world' is true by definition, but I'm led to doubt that I can construe the statement in this way when among those items which analysis, defined negatively, is not – is

'answering an interesting question'... or 'any other essentially empirical procedure'.

What is an essentially empirical procedure, and is 'answering an interesting question' an instance of an essentially empirical procedure? I don't know – or at least I know that I think that answering an interesting question may sometimes take the form of providing a theoretical answer to a theoretical question, and that in 'locating a phenomenon worthy of study' we may have to undertake the task of constructing the phenomena theoretically, abstractly, by a process of reasoning, and I haven't yet been able to resolve or dissolve this difficulty by appeal to the subsequent statement that 'analysis is the concern not with anything said or written but with the grounds of whatever is said' – because the grounds turn out, or at least on my construction turn out, to be the reflexivity of our interest in speech 'including, of course, speech about speech'. I now begin to suspect either that we're trapped in a circle from which we can't escape or that we're accelerating headlong down the slope of infinite regress of speech about speech about speech about speech about speech ad infinitum.

Let me try to consider a little further what may be involved. I'll take the word 'motive'.

...Motive is a public method for deciding upon the (sociological) existence of action. In this image, motive is an observer's rule of relevance in that it represents a sociologist's decision (his election) as to how items of concrete behaviour are to be reformulated as instances of social action...

(What items of concrete behaviour?)

For example, the sociological import of economic determinism in Marx is not the impersonal effects of brute facts upon an organism, but rather his formulation of a meaningful environment constructed by and seen from the perspective of a typical actor. To say 'economic determinism exists' is to decide to formulate actors as oriented to selected particular features of their socially organised environments in such a way as to enable this orientation (now called the economy) to produce their actions. To describe economic determinism is then to assign a rule of relevance to actors which serves the purpose of explicating

social structure by reference to their grounds of action (the economy) as a set of sociologically intelligible events of social structure (economic determinism).

Is it? Let me suggest that, on the contrary, Marx's 'formulation' – whether or not we construe it as an 'economic determinism' – addresses those forms of human activity, which we may also call social life, as a process in which, in the course of producing the means, the conditions of our life, people (and perhaps we may sometimes wish to include ourselves in that term), produce and reproduce themselves as certain kinds of people; and thereby the possibility, among much else, of 'assigning rules of relevance to actors which serve the purpose of explicating social structure by reference to their grounds of action'. Producing and reproducing the conditions of social life is none other than constituting the very grounds of action. What may be gained or lost by calling this 'economic determinism' I can't guess.

What I guess I may find useful in my perplexity is to confront these passages with another, which I shall construe as an outline programme for generative analysis. Just in case you don't have this particular message nailed up over your kitchen sink, or pasted on to the mirror on the bedroom ceiling or wherever you put your texts – I'll quote some excerpts verbatim.

In the social production of their life, men ... [I do apologise; I am, it seems, incapable of inflecting that word in such a way as to do full justice to its ideological redolence. Perhaps you'll have better luck]... In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness...

(So – on this argument there could be a political economy of occupational reputations – though I've lamentably failed to produce one.)

...The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.