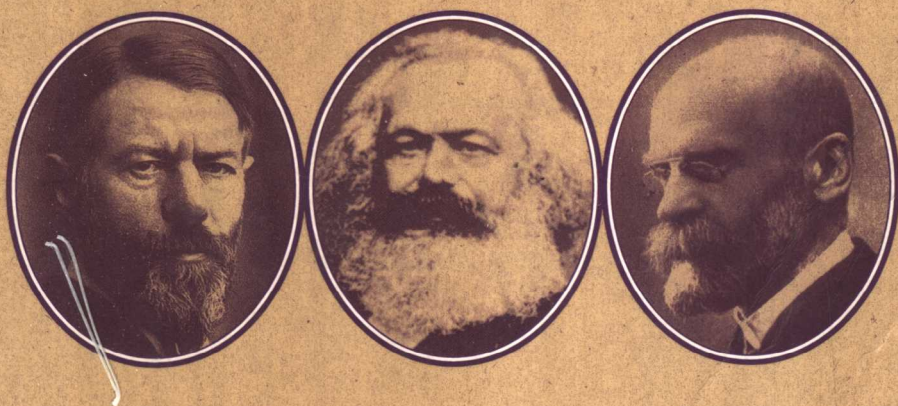


The
DISCOVERY
of
SOCIETY

RANDALL COLLINS
MICHAEL MAKOWSKY



F I F T H E D I T I O N

The Discovery of Society

Fifth Edition

Randall Collins

and

Michael Makowsky

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THE DISCOVERY OF SOCIETY

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Preface

As sociology moves into the 1990s, some things change while other things continue to keep their relevance. The downfall of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in 1989–1991 is one of the major social revolutions of modern history, drawing a kind of close to the 20th century, much as the Russian Revolution of 1917 marked a key point near its beginning. Throughout its history, sociology has been attuned to the great social conflicts of the time. The sociology of economic struggle and conflict remains relevant to understanding both of these revolutions; though our analysis has changed in some ways, we will continue to need the accumulated insights of sociology to understand the world of the future. Another, longer and slower change that makes a difference in sociology is highlighted in this new edition. The women's revolution in our society has been going on for several decades. In the 1970s and 1980s, women became more than a small minority within sociology; today women are almost half the discipline. It is no surprise that women have had a major intellectual impact on today's sociology. We review some women sociologists whose works are now moving forward on the cutting edge of the discipline.

The main thrust of *The Discovery of Society* continues to be the development of the great classical tradition. Its central channel has flowed for almost two centuries now, and we have tried to mark its course clearly amid the complexities of surrounding argument and research. For it is our conviction that the central sociological tradition makes up one interrelated revelation of the nature of social reality; and sociology has gradually increased its explanatory power, even as it uncovers new facts and issues. There has been a great intellectual adventure going on, and we continue to be part of it. If the reader captures from this book some sense of this drama, where this flow of ideas and discoveries is coming from, and where it may be going, the book will have accomplished its purpose. It will have accomplished it doubly so for every reader who realizes the reality of the intellectual world it points to. The discoverers of society were, and are, real human beings living in social and intellectual settings analogous to our own. We hope some, seeing this, will join in creating for themselves the next chapter of the discovery of society.

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INTRODUCTION

Society and Illusion

We all conceive of ourselves as experts on society. In fact, however, the social world is a mystery—a mystery deepened by our lack of awareness of it. Society is our immediate, everyday reality, yet we understand no more of it merely by virtue of living it than we understand of physiology by virtue of our inescapable presence as living bodies. The history of sociology has been a long and arduous effort to become aware of things hidden or taken for granted: things we did not know existed—other societies in distant places and times, whose ways of life make us wonder about the naturalness of our own; things we know of only distortedly—the experiences of social classes and cultures other than our own; the realities of remote sectors of our own social structure, from inside the police patrol car to behind the closed doors of the politician and the priest; things right around us unreflectingly accepted—the network of invisible rules and institutions that govern our behavior and populate our thought, seemingly as immutable as the physical landscape but in reality as flimsy as a children's pantomime. Most obscure of all, our own feelings, actions, thoughts, and self-images—the tacit bargains that we make and remake with friends, lovers, acquaintances, and strangers and the paths we steer amid emotions, habits, and beliefs. All these things are beneath the usual threshold of our awareness.

We think of ourselves as rational, choice-making masters of our actions if not of our destinies; in reality, we know little about the reasons for either. And if the social world is shrouded from us today, it becomes even more illusory the further back we go into our history. We need go only a few hundred years back in European history to an era when authority of kings and aristocracies was legitimized by divine right, when unexpected behavior from our fellows was attributed to witchcraft and seizures of the devil, and foreign lands were populated not merely by bloodthirsty Communists or the terrible Turk but by werewolves and Cyclopes. "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake!" James Joyce declared. Sociology has been part of that very slow awakening.

The social world as we know it and have known it is mostly illusion. Yet, if we were all completely deluded, there would be no point in trying to investigate and explain, and this writing as well as any other would be worthless. The existence of illusions is not incompatible with the existence of facts and of the principles of logic. But facts and logic are inextricably

mixed with concepts and theories, and in the study of society the concepts and theories involved are ones that we daily act upon as well as use to explain how things are and why.

Sociology is not an impossible science, but it is a very difficult one. It has progressed by disengaging the web of everyday belief, not all at once but little by little, as one taken-for-granted assumption after another has been questioned and replaced. As was once said of philosophy, sociology is like rebuilding a boat, plank by plank, while floating on it in the middle of the ocean. The history of sociology is a progression of worldviews, each an advance on some other in that it asks some previously unasked question, avoids some previous confusion, or incorporates some previously unobserved fact. Each worldview, including our own, has its illusions; waving the banner of science is no more absolute a guarantee of truth than any other. Nevertheless, there has been a series of major breakthroughs in understanding, including some quite recent ones, and we can be confident now that we are on the right path.

THE SOURCES OF ILLUSION

At the center of the web that clouds our vision is the realization that our knowledge is both subjective and objective. "Facts" are things that independent observers can agree upon; but we must look for facts in order to see them, and what we look for depends on our concepts and theories. What questions we can answer depends on what questions we ask. But the form of the question cannot be the only determinant of the answer, or else our knowledge would never go beyond the subjective point of view of the particular questioner. Any completely subjective viewpoint undermines its own validity, since there is no reason for anyone else to accept it. If there are no objective standards, then the person who claims that there are no such standards can never prove that claim to be true.

There is a realm of objectivity, then, based on shared observations and the exigencies of logical communications. We do not know, however, whether any particular theory or even any particular belief about the facts is true. The problem of separating illusions from reality has been an especially difficult one for sociology, since it begins in the midst of the social world of everyday ideas and ideologies. Until we begin to notice phenomena and ask questions about them, we cannot start to check our theories against the facts or even to check our assumed facts against careful observations. It took many centuries of controversy about ideological and practical issues before some people realized that their ordinary ideas might not be accurate and hence were in need of logical ordering and empirical testing. Even after there arose a community of individuals dedicated to this purpose, much of the raw material of human illusion remained mixed in with the more solid part of sociological knowledge. Progress has come not because sociologists were convinced that a particular theory was right, but be-

cause the scholarly community generated a cutting edge of objectivity out of its own controversies and research efforts that has moved it onward in the right direction.

We cannot usually notice something unless we have a name for it. This is true of the physical world—the botanist notices dozens of species of plants where the layman sees only a field—and it is especially important in understanding society. No one has ever seen a “society,” although we have all seen the people who belong to one; no one has ever seen an organization, only its members, the buildings and equipment that belong to it, and its name or emblem written on signs and pieces of paper. We live in a social world of symbols: of symbolic entities such as “property”—land that would “belong” to no one but for a social convention, a set of rules as to how various people must behave toward it and what words they must use in talking about it—and of symbolic acts such as “marriage”—a recorded ceremony that enables middle-class Americans to recognize the otherwise indiscernible difference between a couple “illicitly” living together and a “respectable” family. These symbols are by no means obvious if one has never thought about them. The fish apparently does not notice the water until he is out of it. The idea of a *society*, as distinct from the *state*, did not develop until the commercial and industrial changes of the eighteenth century and the French Revolution woke people up to the recognition that there were two different forms of social institutions, each going its own way. One hundred years later, thinkers such as George Herbert Mead came to recognize the symbolic nature of society and thus provided us with concepts with which to analyze the operations of this world that we have so long taken for granted.

Much of sociology has developed by uncovering facts that had not previously been known, either because they were remote from ordinary experience or because they had been deliberately ignored. The earliest efforts at sociology were inspired by European explorations in the Orient, the Americas, Africa, and the South Seas. Familiar ways of life in Europe could no longer be accepted as the natural order of God but had to be explained in light of practices now found to exist in vastly different cultures. The first efforts in this direction were naive and consisted mainly of doctrines of progress, which accounted for the European culture simply as a social advance over other cultures. Such theorizing, nevertheless, began a tradition of thought concerned with explaining society. It was an early thinker on social evolution, Auguste Comte, who first gave sociology its name and thus helped to create that “invisible college” of thinkers who have ever since asked questions about society.

Many facts, to be sure, could have been discovered without the voyages of Captain Cook. But the voyage to the other side of town is harder to make than a trip around the world, and a voyage of discovery in one’s own home is the hardest of all. Conventional biases against looking for or recognizing facts that touch on one’s life have been greater impediments to sociological understanding than the lack of facts themselves. These same biases that

have kept most of social reality obscure have prevented us from seeing that they *are* biases. Not the least important aspect of an illusion is the fact that one believes it to be the truth. The great sociologists have contributed to the sociology of knowledge as an intrinsic part of their work. They have broken through illusions by analyzing the ways in which the conditions of social life determine the contents of our consciousness. The history of sociology has been a progressive sophistication about our own thought, uncovering sources of bias that we did not know existed.

The uncovering began with Karl Marx, the first great thinker to see life from the standpoint of the common worker. Marx did not discover social classes, of course; ancient and medieval law as well as social thought spoke openly of the various ranks of society, which indeed everyone knew about from daily experience. Ideological denial of stratification is an innovation of modern America. What Marx discovered was that our own thought is a product of our social circumstances and that much of what we believe to be reality is but a reflection of our socially determined interests. Marx may have defined "interests" too narrowly in economic terms, but there is no doubt of the validity of this general principle. Marx was not the first to notice that governments tell lies or that newspapers, writers of books, and individuals in conversation put forward alleged facts and explanations that are actually selected and distorted according to the interests of their formulators. Much of the thought of the Enlightenment is epitomized by Voltaire's effort to unmask the absurdity of supernatural explanations for human events. Marx went beyond Voltaire when he pointed out how the socially conservative attitudes adopted by the Church were only to be expected from the leaders of a wealthy, landowning institution whose higher ranks were filled from the aristocracy and whose leaders, like Cardinals Mazarin and Richelieu, often served in the government of the kings.

Marx's dictum "Religion is the opiate of the masses" is a puzzle in its own terms, however: If ideas reflect material interests, how could the lower classes hold ideas that did not reflect their own interests? It took Max Weber's analysis of the relation between ideas and power and Emile Durkheim's recognition of the effects of ritual on solidarity to provide the keys to this paradox. But the opening wedge first driven by Marx has never been retracted, even though there is a constant danger that our ideas will be molded in keeping with the prevailing political orthodoxy.

We know now that ideas are upheld as conventions within particular social groups and that the ideas of the group tend to take the form that will most enhance its status and advance its interests. We know that people associate closely only with persons of similar outlook and that individuals modify their ideas to fit the groups they join. And we also know how it is possible for people to have some freedom from ideological bias by institutionalizing a *competition* of ideas, especially among those whose interests are based on their achievements within the collective enterprise of science or scholarship.

Marx's recognition of ideological bias in social ideas is not a counsel of despair. The bias cannot be wished away, but it can be gradually pushed back by continuous effort to examine our own and others' ideas for their adequacy in explaining the full range of facts about society. This is not to say that biases cannot be found in modern social science. They are deeply embedded, especially in the areas of politics, deviance, and stratification. But we can have some faith that the search for the most powerful explanatory theory will lead us away from ideological distortion, whether from the right, the left, or the center.

One result of Marx's unveiling of ideology has been a distinction (first emphasized by Max Weber) between depictions of reality and evaluations of it, between "facts" (here used broadly to refer both to empirical data and to theories summarizing and explaining the data) and "values." This seems obvious enough: It is one thing to find out what the state of affairs is in the world, another thing to decide whether we think it is good or bad, just or unjust, beautiful or ugly. This distinction is important because most of our thought about the social world is evaluative: We are more interested in finding wrongdoers to condemn and heroes to praise than in explaining what happens or even in ascertaining the facts. Just after World War II it was popular to point to the "big lie" techniques of propaganda as a sign of totalitarian regimes and to stereotypes and distortions as the warning signs of extremist political thought. A closer acquaintance with serious sociology would have shown that such distinctions are naive: that all governments try to manipulate their own legitimacy, that all politics deals in slogans and ideology, and that the popular worldview is made up of stereotypes. If we are to expose the authoritarian and the brutal, deeds are much better indicators than words.

The distinction between facts and values thus has a twofold usefulness: It warns us to note which statements are saying something about reality and which are only assuming something about that reality in order to arouse our feelings about the good or evil of it, and it points us to the hard discipline of separating out and testing a body of knowledge whose validity does not depend merely on our moral point of view.

In the history of sociology the struggle against value biases is far from won. Indeed, controversy currently rages over this very issue. There is a strong tendency, especially among younger sociologists whose personal sympathies are vehemently on the side of dominated racial minorities in America and oppressed peasants in the Third World, to declare that all sociology must be value-biased and hence that the only choice is the moral one: Which side are you on? In support of this position, it is pointed out that academic social scientists have claimed to be value-neutral and yet have created theories that extol the virtues of American democracy, minimize the plight of oppressed groups, and rationalize military support for brutal dictatorships in Chile, Central America, and elsewhere. But the lesson is not clearly drawn. Propaganda for the left is no more valuable *intel-*

lectually than propaganda for the right or the center, whatever one may think of its *moral* virtue.

The distinction between facts and values remains crucial, even in this context. If we do not make an effort to uphold the ideal of intellectual objectivity in assessing theories and facts, no valid knowledge is possible—even the sort of knowledge that practical and activist people claim to have about the problems of the world. If objectivity is not maintained, both serious theory and intelligently guided action will be impossible. A successful explanatory theory is universally acceptable as knowledge; but in the realm of value judgments, everyone's basic values are as good as everyone else's, and no logical argument can force people to change their minds. This means that *applied* sociology will be much more diverse than *pure* sociology; and it is for applied sociology that the arguments of radical sociologists hold true: It comes down to the moral question of in whose interests you choose to apply the arguments. The attack on some of the older sociologists, then, is a legitimate attack only on their applied work; their pure sociology, on the other hand, must be judged by the standards of scholarly objectivity, comprehensiveness, and consistency, and if mistakes are made here, they will be corrected by normal advances in research. If some of these people have misleadingly claimed value-neutrality in an effort to make others accept the conclusions of their applied work, carried out in the interests of cold-war politics, the blame cannot fall on the doctrine that distinguishes between facts and values but on the misuse these individuals have made of that doctrine. In the end the fact-value distinction remains absolutely crucial, and not only for the development of objective sociological theory. Whatever our values may be, only by taking a position of detachment are we able to see society realistically enough to act on it with any insight into our chances of success.

The fact-value distinction is important to keep in mind in the following chapters. We have attempted throughout to present the successive developments in sociological theory and to assess their objective validity. Since most of these developments are far from complete in terms of formalizing the logic of their arguments and testing their factual predictions, our judgments on them must reflect the balance of existing evidence and the most promising prospects for future elaboration. But all this is an attempt to move forward within the realm of objective sociological knowledge. We have also tried from time to time to discuss some applications of these theories to particular practical issues of today. It should be clear that these applications are made from a particular point of view and in that sense we cannot make a claim on others to agree with us unless they happen to share our particular sets of values. These values are heavily on the side of maximizing personal liberty and are slanted toward the point of view of those coerced by systems of power. There are, of course, many other points of view from which theory could be applied; we have given little attention to practical questions as seen from the viewpoints of military officers, politi-

cians, businessmen, administrators, or dominant classes and status groups. For the theoretical side of sociological knowledge presented here, we would like to claim as much objectivity as the considerable progress of the sociological enterprise allows. For our practical applications, we claim no more than that an effort has been made to see the world accurately as it bears on our particular values.

The fate of Karl Marx's insights warns us of how arduous the path to sociological understanding is. The fact that one person, even a famous one, makes an advance is no guarantee that other social thinkers will maintain it. Marx's thought had little impact on the respectable thinkers of his day. It lived on mainly in the underground until a twentieth-century generation of German sociologists (Ferdinand Toennies, Max Weber, Robert Michels, Karl Mannheim) recaptured some of its key insights. Marx's contributions did not fare much better in the revolutionary underground. Instead of being treated as a theory to be developed and refined as new facts and new insights became available, Marxism became a dogma to be polemically defended against all revisions. Near the end of his life, Marx was moved to cry out against his own followers, "I am not a Marxist!" When the Russian Revolution enshrined Marxism as an official state ideology, Marx's thought virtually ceased to be a fruitful source of new insight except, ironically, for non-Marxists or for Marxist heretics. The lesson applies not only to Marx; the uncompromising political realism of Weber and Michels has also proved too much for most respectable thought to incorporate, and it remains semihidden in an academic underground.

Marx found one source of illusion about society in the realm of ideology; Sigmund Freud made an analogous discovery at the turn of the twentieth century when he discovered repression. Freud struck even closer to home. If ideology prevents us from understanding the larger processes that link us to countless others through the economy, politics, and social stratification, repression prevents us from seeing what is right before our eyes, including the motivations for our own actions. Again, the discovery was more in the way of seeing than in the sight itself. Freud was not the first one to notice that men lust for women who are not their wives (and vice versa) or that people can bitterly hate each other even while carrying on polite, and even intimate, relationships. Freud's insight was to see how widespread such desires and feelings are and to see that they can exist even in people who would be ashamed and guilty to realize that they felt anything of the sort. Freud unmasked the respectable society of the nineteenth century at its most vulnerable point—the place that was kept most hidden. Repression, like layers of clothing upon bodies, points to what is concealed by the very act of covering it.

Respectable social thought of the nineteenth century, epitomized by Herbert Spencer and the British utilitarians, saw people in modern society as rational and respectable, the upholders of contractual rules that regulated the individual for the common good. Freud looked into those conscious,

rationalistic beliefs and those proper, middle-class ideals and found that they could be explained in terms of something else: passions of love and hate turned in upon the self in response to the social restraints that kept them from being outwardly expressed. Where preceding thinkers saw a rational human making decisions to follow the rules, Freud discovered what had long been excluded from such a worldview: that the human is still a physical animal, a creature of instincts and emotions, and that the civilized, rational part shaped by socialization does not displace the physical creature, but only reshapes it, sometimes in a mutilated form.

The fate of Freud's insights has been much like the fate of Marx's. In some cases, his ideas have gained considerable notoriety among people who have heard of him only secondhand and who think that they can dismiss him with the observation that "obviously there's more to life than sex." In this way, his insight into repression has been itself repressed, along with the recognition that *anything* in the world is the result of sex, hate, or any other emotions impelling our rational behavior. Freud has also suffered from dogmatic followers who have given the theory a bad name in scientific circles, especially through polemics against equally dogmatic behaviorists in psychology. Between these two extremes, Freud has done much to orient us toward investigating how childhood socialization makes us members of society. The central insights—the view of humans as emotional animals who live in groups, the existence of repression and identification—are yet largely unexplored, but they are not lost. Freud's discoveries are more appropriately investigated in group interaction than individual behavior. It is in the socially oriented analyses, conducted by such thinkers as the psychiatrist Fritz Perls and the sociologist Erving Goffman, that Freud's insights are beginning to find their explanation and their place in an integrated body of social theory.

We have touched on a number of sources of illusion in our views of social reality: taking our social arrangements for granted because we know of no others, ideological distortions based on the interests and perspectives of our social positions, inability to detach ourselves from an evaluative stance, repression of things that make us feel shameful or guilty. By the time these sources of bias came to light, sociology was on the eve of the twentieth century. We shall touch on only two kinds of illusions and thereby bring ourselves up to the present: the fallacy of psychological reductionism and the misconceptions that a too-literal identification with physical science can engender. The man who cut through the first of these most strikingly was Emile Durkheim.

People will commonly attempt to explain social events by the actions of individuals: to look for great individuals in history, agitators in riots, traitors in defeats. By the end of the nineteenth century the dominant evolutionist thinkers—speaking especially in defense of a laissez-faire economic policy—described society as the interplay of individual decisions, in which deliberate social policy could have little effect. Nevertheless, their basic mode of explanation was individualistic. People struggle for a livelihood

and rise and fall according to their individual qualities; modern society itself exists because of contracts between individuals.

Durkheim struck through in a new direction: The distinctive thing about social institutions is that they persist while individuals come and go; they have a force of their own such that individuals who violate social norms not only do not change the norms but are punished as deviants. Furthermore, society can never be logically explained in terms of the motives of individuals. As Durkheim put it, society is a reality *sui generis*. "Social facts," such as the rules that people enforce upon each other, the forms of the institutions within which people act, and even the ideas that they hold, cannot be explained by examining the workings of an individual and multiplying the result a millionfold. These facts must be explained by *social*—that is, supraindividual—causes. Living organisms are made up of chemical molecules; yet physiology must be explained on its own level, in terms of the functioning of the parts in relation to each other. By the same token, society is made up of individuals but is not explicable simply in terms of individual psychology. With his emphasis on social structure as the subject matter of sociology, Durkheim gave the field a distinctive focus of its own. He also showed that such supposedly individual phenomena as suicide, crime, moral outrage, and even our concepts of time, space, God, and the individual personality are socially determined. With Durkheim nineteenth-century individualistic rationalism commits suicide. We know now that we are all social creatures and there is no turning back to the naive optimism of the nineteenth century that could see in the rational education of the individual the solution to all social ills.

The final major development of sociology took place in the early twentieth century, for the most part in the United States. Instead of relying on historians, newspapers, and their own speculations, sociologists began to go and see for themselves: first with community studies, then with surveys, participant observation of organizations, and small group experiments. This research tradition has done much to counteract illusions based on ideology and on other biases. We have discovered, for example, that the conservative claims that crime is due to hereditary degeneration or racial traits (theories once popular among biologically oriented sociologists of the evolutionist school) are false, as are liberal outcries that social mobility has been declining in the United States. The great merit of an active research tradition is that it is largely self-correcting; as long as we insist that theories must explain facts, their biases are likely to reveal themselves sooner or later.

But even this research tradition has its dangers and illusions. One of these is the problem of overspecialization and technicism. Sociology has become a large-scale cooperative enterprise; and, as in any large bureaucracy, the individual members tend to lose sight of the overall goals—producing and testing theories to explain all of social behavior and institutions—and become caught up in the immediate details of day-to-day research. One danger, then, has been the trivializing of research and a tendency to substi-

tute purely technical standards, such as statistical refinements, for substantial contributions to our knowledge about society.

The physical sciences provided a model for the modern research enterprise; they have also provided a final, distinctively modern illusion about society. Many American social scientists, especially those who have not fully absorbed the great breakthroughs of Durkheim, Weber, Freud, and Mead, still find their ideas in a version of nineteenth-century tradition. Like the British utilitarians and their American followers, they continue to take the natural sciences as an uncriticized model for understanding society. Utilitarian rationalism has been modernized as behaviorism, the doctrine that asserts that human behavior is to be explained in terms of external stimuli—rewards and punishments—without any reference to scientifically inadmissible concepts such as “mind.” In sociology, the old positivist doctrine shows up in the notion that the only valid material for a scientific theory is quantitative data, such as those collected in large-scale questionnaire surveys, carefully measured experimental behaviors, and census tabulations. Only “hard data,” consisting of observed and preferably quantified behaviors or enumerations, are valid; “soft data,” encompassing the experiences of participant observers, in-depth interviews, case studies, historical writings, and introspection, are excluded.

The merit of this distinction turns out to be an illusion. Human social behavior and social institutions are basically symbolic. Society exists and affects the observable behavior of individuals only through systems of invisible names, rules, and positions that individuals can identify with and orient toward. As might be expected, strictly behavioristic theories have not borne much fruit in psychology; rather, it has been in the area of cognitive development and functioning that progress has been made. In sociology the extreme positivists have been found mostly among researchers who have been caught up in short-run technical concerns and hence have contributed little to advancing theories that explain society. It has been by insisting on the principle that we be able to explain *all* the facts that social science corrects itself, even against illusions created by an excessive zeal to emulate the methods of the natural sciences. Symbolic reality is *the* empirical reality for sociologists; it is life as all individuals experience it. Numbers derived by totaling the answers of many individuals to a few short questions about what they believe or have done are quite a long way from the firsthand experience of those individual lives that we are ultimately trying to explain. In this sense Erving Goffman and his students, with their firsthand accounts of how people manipulate the social reality they present for each other to experience, are the latest of the important innovators in sociology.

We are coming to see that there is no necessary battle between “hard” and “soft” in the social sciences. Both quantitative but superficial data and direct phenomenological experience of a few situations have their values and weaknesses. When used to complement each other, they help us both to understand in depth and to check up on the generalizability of the understanding. Like a navigator plotting the position of a point from his or