

THIRD EDITION

# The Sociologically Examined Life

*Pieces of the Conversation*

"A superb teaching tool...Schwalbe's lively writing style and provocative examples captured my students' imaginations and helped them see the relevance of sociology to their lives."

—Betsy Lucal, *Indiana University at South Bend*

MICHAEL SCHWALBE



# The Sociologically Examined Life

Pieces of the Conversation

THIRD EDITION

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## Preface

The usual introductory text imparts a lot of facts and ideas but doesn't do a very good job of teaching students how to think sociologically, and that, more than anything, is what I try to get my students to do. My struggle in this respect has led me to write *The Sociologically Examined Life: Pieces of the Conversation*. I've half-jokingly called it an "anti-text," meaning that I want it to be everything that those ponderous hardcover texts are not: readable, provocative, personal, and ethically challenging. Through this book I'm trying to gently yet firmly teach readers how to think sociologically. In the tradition of Peter Berger (*Invitation to Sociology*) and C. Wright Mills (*The Sociological Imagination*), I believe that this requires not only a change in consciousness but also a change in how we live.

When standard introductory texts include a chapter on "the sociological perspective," the chapter usually boils down to either a list of concepts or a tip-of-the-iceberg account of sociology's conventional trinity: functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. I suspect that this standard fare leaves many students wondering how, if at all, everyday life looks different if you come at it sociologically. Here I try to get this across by deemphasizing the institutional discipline of sociology. Instead of saying "Sociologists think such and such about so and so," as if students should care about what sociologists think, I simply jump into the work of taking the social world apart sociologically. Rather than display the contents of our shiny intellectual toolbox, I try to put the tools to use.

The risk in this approach is that some teachers of sociology won't like how I've chosen to take things apart. Courting that risk—and I don't see how I could avoid it and still write an honest book—is another reason I've thought of *The Sociologically Examined Life* as

an anti-text. Most texts play it safe, not pushing the implications of sociological thinking to the point of arousing much discomfort. My goal is certainly not to provoke for the sake of provoking, but nor have I tried to play it safe to make the book palatable to all political tastes. Many of the analyses here treat American society quite critically, and I'm sure this is going to bother some folks.

My hope is that the bother will be productive. I'd like this book to spark conversations between teachers and students and among students themselves. My examples and analyses are intended to stir thoughts and feelings that will impel discussion. In this sense, I think that *The Sociologically Examined Life* will appeal to teachers who want serious interaction with students, even if this means working through some disagreements. It seems to me that that's what intellectual conversation is about and that whatever gets us into such conversations offers us a chance to move toward better understanding of, and ultimately changing, the world we live in.

## How to Use the Book

If you are reading this book to learn how to think sociologically, you have already figured out how to use it. Just continue to read. I suppose I could also suggest that you "keep an open mind," as the saying goes. But beyond that, no more instructions are necessary. Follow my sentences with reasonable care and you will do fine. If you are using this book to *teach* sociological thinking, your task is a bit more complicated, and so perhaps some suggestions will help.

Above all, I urge that this book be used to stimulate thought and conversation in the classroom. Inviting and posing questions about the meaning of what's in the book are good starting points. Beyond this, I suggest guided conversations that call for practicing and extending the kind of thinking being taught here. As an aid to doing this, I have created what I call Paths for Reflection, three of which appear at the end of each chapter. Each path sets up a situation, problem, or conundrum and then poses two or three questions that can be used to structure classroom discussion (or written work, such as keeping a journal). If you would like reflection to move along other paths, consider using mine as models for creating your own.

My other suggestions are about making productive use of reactions to the book. Reactions of pleasure and enthusiasm are not the problem; such reactions, and I hope they are not too rare, will gener-

ate their own good results. It is predictable, however, that readers unaccustomed to looking critically at U.S. society will be irritated or made defensive by parts of the book. I do not think this is such a bad thing, since feelings, if handled well, can be great propellants to learning.

My suggestion, then, is that readers be taught to examine their feelings in a sociological way. Readers should be asked first to identify precisely what is troubling to them. For example, my remarks about “personal choices” (in Chapter 4) and violent sports (also in Chapter 4) are sure to anger some people. But exactly what is it I say or imply that arouses this feeling? Pausing to answer this question may clear up misunderstandings. It will also prepare readers for the next step, which is to see how their feelings are rooted in social life.

To get at this link between self and social life, readers will need to be equipped with some questions. I suggest that they be encouraged to ask themselves, *What belief or practice that I value is being challenged here? How did I learn to value this belief or practice? and What relationships or privileges might be lost by giving up this belief or practice?* These questions, and an honest search for answers, can turn anger or irritation into a resource for fostering sociological thinking and for achieving self-knowledge. The goal is to help readers learn to see their feelings as data rather than as things that cannot or need not be analyzed.

By a defensive reaction I mean one that might, if articulated, sound like this: Yes, I see what you’re getting at with this sociological way of looking at things, but I’m not going to work very hard to get my mind around it, because it makes me feel guilty for being [white/male/middle-class/straight/married]. This reaction is understandable. A critical sociological perspective can shine a discomfiting light on members of privileged groups, if only by making their privileges visible. It becomes harder, then, to teach sociological thinking when such thinking induces guilt and seems like putting one’s self in for blame.

If this sort of reaction occurs, one point to make is that blaming individuals is contrary to sociological thinking, which sees social arrangements as the products of history and collective action. Another point is that racism, sexism, and capitalism are inheritances from the past and that sociology helps us understand how we are all shaped by and caught up in these oppressive systems through no fault of our own. It can also be said that a critical sociological view makes it possible to see why unjust arrangements persist and are

hard to change, despite the humane and progressive *intentions* of some members of dominant groups.

These ideas can help open the intellectual doors locked by privilege and individualism. But then resistance can also arise from a desire to evade the moral pinch that comes with awareness of how one is implicated in reproducing oppressive arrangements. The internal logic now goes something like this: Okay, I see why I don't have to feel guilty for conditions I didn't create. I also understand that inequalities persist when members of privileged groups simply accept the systems that provide those privileges. But there's nothing I can do about this. I'm just one person. And so I can't take sociology too seriously, or else I'll constantly feel bad about living my life in the way I've planned.

A reaction like this arises when conscience collides with individualism and fear. By way of response, you might point out that sociology rejects the notion of one person single-handedly slaying the dragons of oppression. If we think sociologically, we realize that change can't be accomplished that way, and so it makes no sense to berate ourselves for failing to do it. Sociological thinking, you might also say, helps us to see that power derives not from money or guns but from organization and cooperation. And so if we truly desire change, the best strategy, sociologically speaking, is not to work ourselves up to acts of heroism but to work with others who share our values and goals.

A second point to make is that while an individual acting alone cannot change society, an individual can be a *catalyst* for change. Both history and sociology tell us that, in the right time and place, even small acts of resistance—as little as saying no—can have huge consequences because of how others are inspired to think, feel, and act. Keeping this in mind can be an antidote to the despair-inducing notion that nothing one person does can matter. It might be added, once again, that acts of resistance are made more likely by the support of others.

A final suggestion is to apply the foregoing principle about individual action to the teaching of sociology, especially when progress seems slow. It is tempting sometimes to think that we are getting nowhere and that it doesn't matter anyway. The temptation arises for good reasons, too; considering the forces opposing it, critical sociological thinking will probably not take deep root in some places. But since we don't know ahead of time where those places are, we

just have to keep planting. May these pieces of the conversation, if you will forgive the mixing of metaphors, be the seeds that grow.

## ◆ ◆ DIALOGUE ◆ ◆

### About Dialogue Sections

When I told a friend that I had been asked to produce a third edition of *The Sociologically Examined Life (TSEL)*, she smiled and said, "That's nice. Will you be incorporating all the latest breakthroughs in how to think sociologically?" She was teasing me. We both knew that there were no such breakthroughs and that the real reason for producing a third edition was to keep the book alive in the marketplace. But even as I laughed at my friend's joke, I wondered, "What *am* I going to do for a third edition?"

I should explain about "keeping a book alive in the marketplace." It is like this: If a textbook publisher cannot sell enough *new* copies of a text, it will go out of print. A publisher makes no money when used copies are bought and sold, so there is pressure to produce new editions, which are presumably better in some way that will lead people to prefer them to the older editions. For a writer, this means either producing new editions or watching one's book fade away.

Naturally I wanted to keep *TSEL* alive and available to students and other readers. A book can't do its work if people can't get hold of it. But what could I do if I had nothing new to say about how to be sociologically mindful? Some reviewers suggested adding graphs and charts, or more references, or cartoons, or discussions of current events. These ideas were well intended, but to me they seemed like gimmicks.

As I tried to figure out how to make a new edition honestly better and more useful, a student e-mailed me a question about religion. He had been reading *TSEL* in his class and wondered whether science wasn't based as much on faith as was his belief in God. Over the years since *TSEL* was first published, readers have asked me all kinds of questions. I always try to answer (even if it takes a while). After I replied to the student, I realized that I had found a solution to the problem of what to do for a new edition.



The subtitle of *TSEL* is *Pieces of the Conversation*. I used this phrase to suggest that thinking sociologically means *thinking along with others* who have looked at social life in an analytic way. *TSEL* is my way of joining this kind of conversation with far more people than I can talk to in person. The problem, however, is that a book, once written, is static—it can't reply when a reader poses a question or raises an objection. But what an author can do is take note of questions and objections and, when the possibility arises, use new editions to reply.

So what's new here are more pieces of the conversation, pieces inspired by questions that students and teachers have raised in response to things I said in previous editions of *TSEL*. I will call these replies Dialogue sections. In this edition, there is one at the end of each chapter. If *TSEL* continues to be widely used, future editions may include more Dialogues in response to new questions. As with the new edition problem, it is ongoing conversation with readers that will help me figure out how to keep *TSEL* alive and well.

## Acknowledgments

Much of the help I had in writing this book came before I sat down to do it. I could make a long list of the people who taught me—in the classroom, in print, and in conversation—and the list would be hopelessly incomplete (see Chapter 4 on the social nature of individual lives). Perhaps all I can do is to offer a wide, beaming gratitude to all the minds—within and beyond the sociological universe—whose thoughts have informed my own.

I can, however, be more specific about the people who helped during the process of writing. My editor at Mayfield, Serina Beauparlant, was an unflagging supporter, even when I was being a difficult author. I am also indebted to Serina for her willingness to take risks with this project and hope that the debt ends up being repaid many times over. I owe thanks to a slew of reviewers whose comments helped me nip and tuck the manuscript into better shape. The reviewers for the third edition include

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Cynthia J. Bogard, Hofstra University

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Rosemary F. Powers, Eastern Oregon University

Jane A. Rinehart, Gonzaga University  
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 Yung-mei Tsai, Texas Tech University  
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The reviewers for the second edition included Cynthia J. Bogard, Hofstra University; Peter Callero, Western Oregon University; Russell Crescimanno, Piedmont Virginia Community College; Raymond DeVries, St. Olaf College; Charles Lawrence, Seattle University; Kathleen E. Miller, The George Washington University; Yaw Oheneba-Sakyi, State University of New York at Potsdam; Harry Ann Pearce, University of Albany, State University of New York; David L. Preston, San Diego State University; Barbara Katz Rothman, Baruch College, The City University of New York; Caroline Schacht, East Carolina University; and Martha E. Thompson, Northeastern Illinois University. Reviewers for the first edition included Peter Adler, University of Denver; Chet Ballard, Valdosta State University; Conrad L. Kanagy, Elizabethtown College; Donileen Loseke, University of South Florida; Claus Mueller, Hunter College, The City University of New York; Laura E. Nathan, Mills College; Samuel M. Richards, Pennsylvania State University; Rik Scarce, Montana State University; Rhonda Singer, Smith College; Clifford L. Staples, University of North Dakota; Vegavahini Subramaniam, Western Washington University; and Becky Thompson, Simmons College.

I should have kept better track of the people who sent me questions or forwarded comments in response to things I said in the first two editions of *The Sociologically Examined Life*. If not for their help, I would still be wondering what to say here. To the students and teachers who took seriously the idea of carrying on a conversation about how the social world works, I owe the idea for Dialogue sections. You all know who you are, and to you all, my thanks.

My deepest thanks go to my partner, Sherryl Kleinman, who helped me maintain a consistent voice throughout the text and a clear sense of purpose while I was writing. I am grateful, too, for her help in becoming more mindful of the patterns and connections that constitute our lives as social beings and, especially, our life together.



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# Making Sense of the World Differently

Not much was happening in the shoe department. Elsewhere in the store people fussed over backpacks, tents, plastic kayaks, and other outdoor gear. But the two young men who sold hiking boots were enjoying a break. I was a few feet away, looking at hats, and could hear their conversation. One of them, leaning back against the counter, arms folded across his chest, was telling his coworker about college.

"It was a lot of fun," he said, "but I didn't learn anything I didn't already know."

"Yeah?" said his partner, a bit of wonderment in his voice.

"Yeah, my business communication class was good. We learned how to write memos. But most of the rest of it, pretty much all my classes—it was all just common sense. If it wasn't for getting the degree, it would have been a waste of time."

Hearing this took my mind off the hats. I imagined asking the young man how he had gotten so smart at eighteen that he could listen to professors and read books for four years and not learn anything new. I wanted to puncture his arrogance and scold him for wasting the time of those who had tried to teach him. Other college professors might have felt the same way.

My anger faded as I realized that the boaster could not have meant what he said. Surely he had learned *something* in college. So what was he saying? Perhaps he belittled his education because he was angry that it hadn't gotten him a better job. Or perhaps he was trying to say to his buddy, "I'm no better than you for having gone to college. Common sense is what matters." If this is what he meant, it was not such a bad message.