SECOND EDITION

THE practical skeptic

Readings in Sociology

Lisa J. McIntyre

The Practical Skeptic

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Second Edition

Lisa J. McIntyre
Washington State University

Boston Burr Ridge, IL Dubuque, IA Madison, WI New York
San Francisco St. Louis Bangkok Bogotá Caracas Kuala Lumpur
Lisbon London Madrid Mexico City Milan Montreal New Delhi
Santiago Seoul Singapore Sydney Taipei Toronto

McGraw-Hill Higher Education
A Division of The McGraw-Hill Companies

6 7 8 9 0 DOC/DOC 0 9 8 7 6 5 4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The practical skeptic : readings in sociology / [edited by]
Lisa J. McIntyre. — 2nd ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-7674-2078-0
1. Sociology. 2. Social problems. 3. United States—
Social conditions. I. McIntyre, Lisa J.
HM585 .P73 2001
301 — dc21

2001030549

Sponsoring editor, Serina Beauparlant; production editor, April Wells-Hayes; manuscript editor, Jan McDearmon; design manager, Susan Breitbard; text designer, Joan Greenfield; cover designer, Laurie Anderson; manufacturing manager, Randy Hurst. The text was set in 10/12 Book Antiqua by ColorType, San Diego, and printed on 45# Scholarly Matte by R. R. Donnelley and Sons.

www.mhhe.com

Preface

There are dozens of anthologies available for introductory-level sociology classes, but I think that this one is different. It's different because as I compiled and edited these articles, I kept the needs of introductory students in mind. That's important. When sociologists write for their professional colleagues, they take for granted (as they should) that their readers are equipped with a great deal of knowledge. Student readers, by contrast, generally lack this sort of preparation; consequently, many students find that reading the works of sociologists is not so much a challenge as an onerous chore. I suspect that beginning students assigned to read sociology feel much like the theatergoer who stumbles into a foreign film that lacks subtitles. No matter how dramatic or comedic the action, unless one can follow the dialog, the movie is boring.

In this volume, I have tried to bridge the gap between the sociologists who wrote these articles and the students who will read them. Each article begins with a brief introduction to help orient students to the author's aims and point of view, includes footnotes containing explanations of concepts that are likely to be unfamiliar to novice sociologists, and concludes with some questions that will help students sort through and make sense of what they have read. My goal is to replace boredom with intellectual challenge, to make sociology not "easy," but accessible.

Both classic and contemporary articles were selected because they help to illustrate the importance of understanding the social contexts through which people move and to highlight some of the core concepts that sociologists and other social observers use to make sense of the social world. The classic articles especially were selected to illustrate the foundational concepts that most contemporary writers take for granted. But while these fundamentals might seem old hat to professional sociologists, they still contain important revelations for beginners.

New to This Edition

Since the initial publication of this volume, I've received a great deal of feedback on the contents. In response to readers' suggestions, I added several

articles that demonstrate the nature of interpersonal relationships within social institutions (to complement the new chapter in the companion text). There's also a reading about the ethical responsibilities of social researchers, and one about individualism as an American cultural value. Most important, this edition of the reader contains all of the articles that students reported as being the best of the first edition.

Accompanying Test Bank

For the benefit of instructors, I have written a test bank to accompany the reader. The test bank includes multiple-choice, true-false, and short answer/essay questions as well as suggested short paper assignments.

The Practical Skeptic: Core Concepts in Sociology

Created to serve as a companion to the reader, *The Practical Skeptic: Readings in Sociology,* this text focuses on core concepts as the central building blocks for understanding sociology. Written in a lively, conversational style, this text includes numerous pedagogical features to help students grasp key sociological concepts.

Acknowledgments

The following colleagues reviewed the manuscript and choice of articles for the first edition and made many helpful suggestions: Sheila Cordray, Oregon State University; Rebecca Erickson, University of Akron; Allen Scarboro, Augusta State University; and Martha L. Shockey, St. Ambrose University. For the second edition, the following individuals provided thoughtful reviews and recommendations: Deborah J. Baiano Berman, Framingham State College; Jerry Barrish, Bellevue Community College; Valerie S. Brown, Cuyahoga Community College; Margo Rita Capparelli, Framingham State College; Debra Cornelius, Shippensburg University; Jamie Dangler, SUNY Cortland; Laurel R. Davis, Springfield College; Gloria Y. Gadsden, Fairleigh Dickinson University; Alan G. Hill, Delta College; Susan E. Humphers-Ginther, Moorhead State University; Katherine Johnson, Niagara County Community College; Barbara Karcher, Kennesaw State University; Debra C. Lemke, Western Maryland College; Patricia A. Masters, George Mason University; Susan McWilliams, University of Southern Maine; Kristy McNamara, Furman University; Dan Pence, Southern Utah University; Marcella Thompson, University of Arkansas; and Brenda S. Zicha, Charles Stewart Mott Community College.

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"'Why are women's brains smaller than men's?' asked a [male] surgeon of a group of students in the doctors' lounge . . . 'Because they're missing logic!'" It wasn't the sort of lesson Dr. Berman had expected to learn in medical school, but it was one they tried to teach her over and over again.

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The Promise

C. Wright Mills

"The Promise," published in 1959 by C. Wright Mills, is probably the most famous essay ever written by a modern sociologist. In this article, Mills captures the essential lesson of sociology: To truly understand people's behavior, we must look beyond those individuals to the larger social contexts in which they live. Individuals make choices, to be sure, but their choices are constrained by social, historical, cultural, political, and economic factors. Most important, people frequently do not even realize the extent to which their lives are affected by things that are external to them and outside of their control. Mills's point is that if we are to understand people's behavior, we must take into account these nonindividual factors. (This is not an especially easy article to read, but it is fundamental. You might find it helpful to read the section on Mills in *The Practical Skeptic: Core Concepts in Sociology,* chapter 2, before you tackle this reading.)

Nowadays men often feel that their private lives are a series of traps. They sense that within their everyday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles, and in this feeling, they are often quite correct: What ordinary men are directly aware of and what they try to do are bounded by the private orbits in which they live; their visions and their powers are limited to the close-up scenes of job, family, neighborhood; in other milieux[1] they move vicariously and remain spectators. And the more aware they become, however vaguely, of ambitions and of threats which transcend their immediate locales, the more trapped they seem to feel.

Underlying this sense of being trapped are seemingly impersonal changes in the very structure of continent-wide societies. The facts of contemporary history are also facts about the success and the failure of individual men and women. When a society is industrialized, a peasant becomes a worker; a feudal lord is liquidated or becomes a businessman. When classes rise or fall, a man is employed or unemployed; when the rate of investment goes up or down, a man takes new heart or goes broke. When wars happen, an insurance salesman becomes a rocket launcher; a store clerk, a radar man; a wife lives alone; a child grows up without a father. Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.

Yet men do not usually define the troubles they endure in terms of historical change and institutional contradiction.[2] The well-being they enjoy, they do not usually impute to the big

[1] *Milieux* is French; it means "social environments." (*Milieux* is plural; *milieu* is singular.) —Ed.

[2] Mills is using the term *institution* in its sociological sense—which is a bit different from the way this term is used in everyday or conventional speech. To the sociologist, institution refers to *a set of social arrangements, an accepted way of resolving important social problems.* Thus, the institution of the family is our society's way of resolving the important social problem of

ups and downs of the societies in which they live. Seldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history, ordinary men do not usually know what this connection means for the kinds of men they are becoming and for the kinds of history-making in which they might take part. They do not possess the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world. They cannot cope with their personal troubles in such ways as to control the structural transformations that usually lie behind them.

Surely it is no wonder. In what period have so many men been so totally exposed at so fast a pace to such earthquakes of change? That Americans have not known such catastrophic changes as have the men and women of other societies is due to historical facts that are now quickly becoming "merely history." The history that now affects every man is world history. Within this scene and this period, in the course of a single generation, one sixth of mankind is transformed from all that is feudal and backward into all that is modern, advanced, and fearful. Political colonies are freed; new and less visible forms of imperialism installed. Revolutions occur; men feel the intimate grip of new kinds of authority. Totalitarian societies rise, and are smashed to bits—or succeed fabulously. After two centuries of ascendancy, capitalism is shown up as only one way to make society into an industrial apparatus. After two centuries of hope, even formal democracy is restricted to a quite small portion of mankind. Everywhere in the underdeveloped world, ancient ways of life are broken up and vague expectations become urgent demands. Everywhere in the overdeveloped world, the means of authority and of violence become total in scope and bureaucratic in form. Humanity itself now lies before us, the super-nation at either pole concentrating its most co-ordinated and massive efforts upon the preparation of World War Three.

The very shaping of history now outpaces the ability of men to orient themselves in accordance with cherished values. And which values? Even when they do not panic, men often sense that older ways of feeling and thinking have collapsed and that newer beginnings are ambiguous to the point of moral stasis. Is it any wonder that ordinary men feel they cannot cope with the larger worlds with which they are so suddenly confronted? That they cannot understand the meaning of their epoch for their own lives? That—in defense of selfhood—they become morally insensible, trying to remain altogether private men? Is it any wonder that they come to be possessed by a sense of the trap?

It is not only information that they need—in this Age of Fact, information often dominates their attention and overwhelms their capacities to assimilate it. It is not only the skills of reason that they need—although their struggles to acquire these often exhaust their limited moral energy.

What they need, and what they feel they need, is a quality of mind that will help them to use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be

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raising children. The institution of the economy is how we resolve the problem of distributing goods and services (for example, in the case of the United States, capitalism). The concept of institutional contradiction refers to situations in which the demands of one institution are not compatible with the demands of another institution. For example, there is institutional contradiction when the institution of the family is based on the norm that dad goes to work and mom stays home with the kids but the institution of the economy is such that it takes two employed adults to support a family. You will find more examples of institutional contradictions in reading 2 by Stephanie Coontz. You can read more about the nature of institutions in *The Practical Skeptic: Core Concepts in Sociology*, chapter 9, "Society and Social Institutions."—Ed.

happening within themselves. It is this quality, I am going to contend, that journalists and scholars, artists and publics, scientists and editors are coming to expect of what may be called the sociological imagination.

1

The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. It enables him to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions. Within that welter, the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated. By such means the personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit troubles and the indifference of publics is transformed into involvement with public issues.

The first fruit of this imagination—and the first lesson of the social science that embodies it—is the idea that the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period, that he can know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in his circumstances. In many ways it is a terrible lesson; in many ways a magnificent one. We do not know the limits of man's capacities for supreme effort or willing degradation, for agony or glee, for pleasurable brutality or the sweetness of reason. But in our time we have come to know that the limits of "human nature" are frighteningly broad. We have come to know that every individual lives, from one generation to the next, in some society; that he lives out a biography, and that he lives it out within some historical sequence. By the fact of his living he contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of this society and to the course of its history, even as he is made by society and by its historical push and shove.

The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise. . . . And it is the signal of what is best in contemporary studies of man and society.

No social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history and of their intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey. Whatever the specific problems of the classic social analysts, however limited or however broad the features of social reality they have examined, those who have been imaginatively aware of the promise of their work have consistently asked three sorts of questions:

1. What is the structure of this particular society as a whole? What are its essential components, and how are they related to one another? How does it differ from other varieties of social order? Within it, what is the meaning of any particular feature for its continuance and for its change?

2. Where does this society stand in human history? What are the mechanics by which it is changing? What is its place within and its meaning for the development of humanity as a whole? How does any particular feature we are examining affect, and how is it affected by, the historical period in which it moves? And this period—what are its essential features? How does it differ from other periods? What are its characteristic ways of history-making?

3. What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society and in this period? And what varieties are coming to prevail? In what ways are they selected and formed, liberated and repressed, made sensitive and blunted? What kinds of "human nature" are revealed in the conduct and character we observe in this

society in this period? And what is the meaning for "human nature" of each and every feature of the society we are examining?

Whether the point of interest is a great power state or a minor literary mood, a family, a prison, a creed — these are the kinds of questions the best social analysts have asked. They are the intellectual pivots of classic studies of man in society — and they are the questions inevitably raised by any mind possessing the sociological imagination. For that imagination is the capacity to shift from one perspective to another — from the political to the psychological; from examination of a single family to comparative assessment of the national budgets of the world; from the theological school to the military establishment; from considerations of an oil industry to studies of contemporary poetry. It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self — and to see the relations between the two. Back of its use there is always the urge to know the social and historical meaning of the individual in the society and in the period in which he has his quality and his being.

That, in brief, is why it is by means of the sociological imagination that men now hope to grasp what is going on in the world, and to understand what is happening in themselves as minute points of the intersections of biography and history within society. In large part, contemporary man's self-conscious view of himself as at least an outsider, if not a permanent stranger, rests upon an absorbed realization of social relativity and of the transformative power of history. The sociological imagination is the most fruitful form of this self-consciousness. By its use men whose mentalities have swept only a series of limited orbits often come to feel as if suddenly awakened in a house with which they had only supposed themselves to be familiar. Correctly, or incorrectly, they often come to feel that they can now provide themselves with adequate summations, cohesive assessments, comprehensive orientations. Older decisions that once appeared sound now seem to them products of a mind unaccountably dense. Their capacity for astonishment is made lively again. They acquire a new way of thinking, they experience a transvaluation of values; in a word, by their reflection and by their sensibility, they realize the cultural meaning of the social sciences.

2

Perhaps the most fruitful distinction with which the sociological imagination works is between "the personal troubles of milieu" and "the public issues of social structure." This distinction is an essential tool of the sociological imagination and a feature of all classic work in social science.

Troubles occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relations with others; they have to do with his self and with those limited areas of social life of which he is directly and personally aware. Accordingly, the statement and the resolution of troubles properly lie within the individual as a biological entity and within the scope of his immediate milieu — the social setting that is directly open to his personal experience and to some extent his willful activity. A trouble is a private matter: values cherished by an individual are felt by him to be threatened.

Issues have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of his inner life. They have to do with the organization of many such milieux into the institutions of an historical society as a whole, with the ways in which various milieux overlap and interpenetrate to form the larger structure of social and historical life. An issue is a public matter: some value cherished by publics is felt to be threatened. Often there is a debate