



SOCIAL THINGS

AN

INTRODUCTION

TO THE

SOCIOLOGICAL LIFE



CHARLES LEMERT

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for

SANG-JIN HAN

No one I know lives the sociological life more completely.

INTRODUCTION

Just around the corner from our apartment in Brooklyn there is a small deli we visit for milk and the morning papers. Until recently, the owner kept such long hours that we could drop in late Saturday evenings for the early sections of the *Sunday Times*. Since the sports and front pages are not available in that neighborhood until the morning, I would return for them the next morning. Being by nature always a little unsure of myself, I would on these occasions prepare in my mind a small account of why I now was taking some more paper. “It was I who last night . . .” But before I could finish, he’d wave me home. Though he never knew my name, he knew who I was. Once I had come out in the bitter cold without my money. Again, as I fiddled through empty pockets, he sent me along with my milk for breakfast. He trusted me to pay the next time.

Then one day he was gone. Murdered for the Friday night receipts, probably for drug money. Thereafter, life was changed—grotesquely for his wife and seven children, but also for me and my wife and everyone in the neighborhood. It was not just that we suddenly felt ourselves at a risk we had ignored until then but that this kind man, nameless to most of us on the block, was lost forever. His violent disappearance made life less than it had been.

He was Abdul Kareem Alsahybi. This I learned from newspaper accounts of his murder. He had come to the United States from Yemen to build the small business that would give life and possibility to his children. It is hard work to keep a local deli going. The profits are slim, painfully won. This is why Mr. Alsahybi and others in his trade are forced to install lottery machines. On a good day, these instruments of state-sponsored gambling can bring in a thousand dollars, far more than all the newspapers and sandwiches combined. These were the gains for which he died.

Had I not known him, and only read of the murder in the papers (had I, that is, even noticed the back-page story), his death would have remained in a vaguely realized state of distant occurrences. It would have remained, thus, amid the millions of events that fill and form daily life—

deeds and doings we notice, if at all, as we surf the channels of world news. Whenever we stop to think about them, these events—each one a triumph or tragedy to another in the sorority of humankind—rise up real before us.

Whatever our differences from each other, all of us live in society with others. In the abstract, society is a mystery. But in the press of daily life, society is an innocent bumping against others. They, like us, rush to buy their morning papers and get the coffee they had not taken time to brew at home; or, unlike many of us, they hustle for coins to buy whatever brew will warm bones chilled by a long, unsheltered night on the pavement.

When forced to think about it, we know that others go about their lives much as we do, even those who must beg their food and warmth. Others do their own things in their own ways. Somehow, the combined force of all these comings and goings, givings and gettings, can be said to be society. Since we hardly ever notice what others are doing, it is certain that we never actually see this so-called society in action, much less think about it, without some good reason.

Yet, society gets under our skins. It is ours to use, but it is not ours alone. It is in our heads and guts, but it reaches well beyond our psychologies. It is, thus, under our individual skins, but we also expect it to be under the skins of those we encounter—tugging, hinting, proposing, judging, punishing, comforting, and, yes, even depriving and frightening us. Amazingly, these social things work, imperfectly but well enough, to keep the social whole going.

Most of the time you and I have no good and practical reason to think about so abstract a consideration as “society.” Then, unexpectedly, something happens. One day, we are caught unawares by the unusual arising out of the ordinary and we are brought home to the reality of social things. When people are thus surprised, they become sociologists as best they can.

There are many different kinds of sociologies, some of them academic ones, but the most important ones are the sociologies whereby people make sense of their lives with others. Literally speaking, sociologies are nothing more than logics of social things. Though some persons are specially trained in the logic, or science, of social things, even this qualifica-

tion begins where it begins for us all. Advanced education is not required for a person to recognize the truth of some things.

Most people, most of the time, have a good enough common sense of what goes on in their social worlds. If they did not, their survival would be at even greater risk than for many it already is. Mr. AlsaHybi just “knew” that I was trustworthy. His trust was the elemental social glue of his business—it was the basic social logic whereby he dealt with people and inspired them to deal with him. He, thus, lived a sociological life even if he seldom had time at the end of the day to think through, much less read about, what that logic was. Everyone lives with sociologies of this kind. They might not always serve us well, as Mr. AlsaHybi’s might not have served him well late one Friday night when he met a man not to be trusted. Life is not perfect. It can even be deadly. But where life works, it works because most people live their sociologies. When they have the time to study the world of social things, and to work through what to think and say about them, they are able to lift their native and practical understandings of these things into the light of clear thinking, then perhaps even to change their worlds, thus to add power to the living of their lives.

The logic of social things always stumbles at first against the mysterious fact that all people, notwithstanding their varied and often separated neighborhoods or tribes, are connected to each other. Just how these connections come into being and maintain themselves is hard to say, but the saying of it, in plain or fancy words, is where the sociological life begins. Why did I feel such pain and loss at the murder of this good man? What were the social filaments that stretched from me and mine to a man from Yemen whose life was so utterly different as to be beyond my true, untutored understanding? They must have been stretched delicately by his unthinking trust of his neighbors, of people who were perhaps as strange to him as he was to them. But what of the more complicated social web in which we in the larger world, in spite of our severe differences from each other, are inexplicably suspended in uncertain, dependent reliance on each other? From the passing of coins or lives at the corner store to the mysterious whole of it all, we all live amid social things, which are, in turn, weirdly inside us as we bump about.

Individuals are who they are only partly because of what they do with

what they have. They are also who they are because of what the wider social world gives or takes away. My kind neighbor in the gentle passing of his days gave his children a life, for which his was taken away. Both the giving and the taking were, at different moments, given and taken not simply by the power of his own or his murderer's individual actions. They were equally, perhaps more so, the effects of the force of social things—of the commerce in that store, of the foolishness of state politics for which lotteries have become good public business, of the trade in drugs and desperation that brought a murderer to his door, of whatever transpired in the life of an unapprehended and unknown person that caused him to kill as well as steal, and of so much more that, it would seem, no one can describe it all. Yet these social things are described—by some who are professionally trained to the task, and by most of us when we try from time to time to think, as we usually do not, about those social forces that mysteriously inspire feelings for strangers who move our hearts to the realization that, whoever we are, we are not alone.

This is a book about the sociological life. It is, to some degree, a book of stories, some of them told out of my own experience. I speak openly of my life because stories of the kind I tell are the means by which we all discover our best, if imperfect, understandings of social things. Sociologies begin as people remember and talk, putting to words the sense and logic they are able to make of what has happened.

But do not allow yourself to be fooled into thinking that personal stories are merely personal, confined somehow to small interactions of local people. If the story of a man from Yemen contains trace effects of the large social world, no less is true of my story, or yours. Social things are, as I will explain, structured. In simple terms, this means that certain global forces brought Mr. AlsaHybi to Brooklyn just as others brought a murderer to his door. The world being what it is, it is possible that the same economic deprivations that urged him to move from Yemen are linked at close remove to those that drive others to steal and kill for drugs. He was killed by an individual. But neither he, nor we, would encounter the individuals who trust or threaten us were it not for social forces beyond our reach, though well within the pulse of daily life.

When people feel that pulse, and stop to think, then tell others about the experience, they are led into a wider world of things in which even

the smallest of local givings and takings carries the energy of the larger social forces. You may well want to suspend for a while the natural inclination to think of small and large social things as though they were of different orders. The distinctions we often make between the local and global, the personal and the larger structured world, are convenient to thought. But, in the living of lives, these things are impossible to distinguish, even when most of us find it easier to see the actions in the street below than the force of global structures that cause men and women to move about, sometimes under the cover of night, to find a way to feed their kids or their habits.

Books, even storybooks, have their logics. This one begins with the idea that a more exact name for sociology could be sociological competence. More often than not, people get by without thinking all things through. Rather, they simply tell the stories of their worlds. The power of stories to move life ahead is good evidence that, behind all the ways we screw up from time to time, there is an abiding competence—a knack for recognizing, or talking about, what is going on.

This sociological competence, even when it fails us (or we fail it), is what explains the remarkable fact that people are able, with very little instruction, to figure out how to practice their lives with others. This life is, after all, composed out of a series of habits and practices whereby, when we repeat and repeat, we often get it right. The grace of social life is that, within the limits of the law and other forms of public scrutiny, those fortunate enough to be fed and continuously sheltered with an address are free to practice their lives as they wish. Some practices—like killing for dope, even for food—are outside the rules. And, even in the course of mundane life, there is always some damn busybody ready to tell us where we went wrong. But, generally speaking, the lives we practice and play out are our attempts to contend as best we can, often quite inventively, with the pain and pleasure of the social things, great and small, with which we are presented.

Sociology is also an academic discipline. I assume that many, but not all, who read this book will read it because it has been assigned them by a schoolteacher. Others will assign it to themselves. While those subjected to formal instruction in sociology are likely to entertain the idea that sociology is a thing to be studied instead of lived, I believe that sociology

is, first of all, a thing lived. This conviction does not mean that I think the formal study of the living is somehow a false copy of the real thing. The academic study of sociology is, in itself, one of the more important cultural resources in any society. Thus, this book spends its middle part telling the story of how the academic discipline arose in the late nineteenth century, and since, from the practical demands of social life. Some might call this part of the book a history. And so it is. It is the story of the men and women who, in coming to terms with the lives they led and lead, found and find a way to tell their stories of social things—and to tell them in words of broad appeal to many beyond their own family picnics and neighborhood cafes.

Similarly, the third part of the book introduces the three powerful questions that all sociologies, whether academic or practical, must try to answer. How do people deal with the overwhelming power of social structures they cannot see? How do they live as subjects amid such big and mysterious social forces? And how do they measure the meaning of their lives against the array of social differences they encounter, even while rushing, coffee-less, for the last bus? These are the inquiries of the formal study of social things, just as they are questions the answers to which shape the events of the sociological life.

This, then, is a mystery book, a tale told of social things—a tale told in order to encourage others to tell their own from the heart of the sociological wisdom buried within anyone who carries his babies across the oceans; or, at the other extreme, within anyone who stumbles at early light into a small deli run by a kind man already smoking the first of a long day's cigarettes and trusting us not to be the one who takes it all away.



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THE SOCIOLOGICAL LIFE



O N E

IMAGINING SOCIAL THINGS, COMPETENTLY

He was amazing to me, a miraculous boy. In school, I tried to write as he wrote (he won the prize in penmanship), talk as he talked (he always had something confident to say), and walk as he walked (he had an awkward gait but he *always* knew where he was going). This was David Bennett.

In the 1940s in the less-than-classy western suburbs of Cincinnati there were few heroes. Our fathers had come back from the war bitter and broken, not at all brash and ready to build the American Century. But David Bennett, he was something else. We never knew what became of his mother. In those days, little white boys born to merchants or professionals of modest success knew almost nothing about separation or divorce. When our lives were disrupted, we were taught to look away in silence, even to pretend that everything was just fine. I remember my grandfather's wake as the best family party ever. His face, made over to cover lines the pain of cancer had etched, rose just above the edge of the coffin around which we children played as we always had in his presence. We knew of death, of course, but in our polite and polished bourgeois world, divorce was unheard of. One of the guys said that David's mother was living in Kentucky somewhere. Why?

Then it happened that his father grew ill and died. David was left with Gramps and his grandmother. Many years later, when we were all in college, Gramps was much beloved by the boys in David's fraternity house. Such a character! But not the kind of parent-substitute a small boy dreams of. We could never play with David on Saturday mornings because, we were told, he was required to mop and wax the kitchen floor. And he was never, never allowed out after seven in the summers, and this is just the beginning of a long list of what we thought were harsh domestic rules—rules we could comprehend no better than divorce or separation.

But, remarkably, David seemed to know just how to master all that befell him. He accepted his losses and obeyed the demands of his bringing up. He had the best grades. The teachers loved him. In spite of this, he was our friend. He beat me out for the last spot on the high-school basketball team. So what? When I last heard of him, more than twenty years ago, he was a successful doctor, living somewhere outside Chicago.

Some people are like that. They know just how to get by, often with a grace that cannot be taught. When I grew up a little more, I was surprised to learn that I too had some of that grace. Still later, when I was able to think about it even more, I realized that most people, even those who could never hope to go to medical school, had this surprisingly durable human quality that allowed David to overcome and thrive.



This quality—one might even call it a competence—turns out to be widely distributed among humans. Not only do most people enjoy the benefits of this competence, but it seems to come to the fore especially when things are as bad as they can get.

Across the world from Cincinnati where David and I dealt with the losses and pains of our otherwise secure worlds, other children of our generation faced far worse terrors. Some children, like many today who suffer the violence of poverty and dangerous streets, were exposed to the brutality of political terrors they could barely understand, even when they had to. One such child of my generation grew up to write a book about his childhood in Poland under the reign of Soviet military police during the gathering storm of the Second World War.

Since the time of our house search, Mother does not let us take off our clothes at night. We can take off our shoes, but we have to have them beside us all the time. The coats lie on chairs, so they can be put on in the wink of an eye. In principle we are not permitted to sleep. My sister and I lie side by side, and we poke each other, shake each other, or pull each other by the hair. “Hey, you, don’t sleep!” “You, too, don’t sleep!” But, of course, in the midst of this struggling and shoving we both fall asleep. But Mother really does not sleep. She sits at the table and listens the whole time. The

silence of our street rings in our ears. If someone's footsteps echo in the silence, Mother grows pale. A man at this hour is an enemy. In class we read in Stalin about enemies. An enemy is a terrifying figure. Who else would come around at this hour? Good people are afraid; they are sitting hidden in their homes.¹

These were Polish children in the village of Pinsk, sometime in 1939. The Soviet secret police had already deported their father. They were children just the same, able to play in the dark against a fear they understood well enough. Like them, millions of people lie awake at night, terrified that terrible men will come. But many people facing such terrors get by, often with humor.

What is this quality of human resilience, this competence, that sustains and enriches human life, even against the odds? It is, to be sure, not a simple thing. Certainly, it encompasses what is often called the "human spirit," just as it embraces "tough-mindedness," "street smarts," "grit," and other such attributes associated with the best, most determined, and most transcendent powers of human creatures. But it also includes, in a significant way, something you may never have thought of, or even perhaps realized existed.

Even if the world in which they live is degraded by poverty or violence, most people get by because they are endowed with sociological competence. This seemingly native, highly practical, virtually ubiquitous capacity sustains us individually, but it also contributes mightily to our ability to form and keep social relations with others. Without it, social life would be impossible. Without it, every time we entered a new and different social situation, we would be forced to learn anew what to think of it and how to behave. But, most of the time, we understand what is going on and where we fit in.

Think of the number of different situations you may have encountered just in the day you are reading this book. If you happen to be a student, it is possible that earlier this day you met in a room with others with whom you are making a class. To no one's amazement you already knew just what to do. When your teacher entered, for example, it is likely that all the students, whatever their ages and backgrounds, realized it was time, gradually, to fall silent and listen. If you happen to be a mother or a father

stealing a few moments to read while the children play, it is likely that already more than once today you were required to referee some fight, kiss some bruised body part, or wipe away a tear. You may not feel entirely comfortable with how you did what you did, but it is likely you did it well enough. Most parents do this kind of thing as if by second nature.

It hardly makes a difference who you are, or what you do. Nearly all of us, most hours of most days, run into social situations filled with demands and potential risks we know, as if by instinct, how to handle. Greeting strangers, entering crowded rooms, asking the time of day, finding the right subway, ordering Big Macs without fries, meeting deadlines, getting deadlines extended—all these, much more, and virtually all the little events out of which we compose the course of daily life entail sociological competence.

The sociological competence of which I speak is not, at least not initially, the trained competence of the professional sociologist. But what the professionals know and have to say depends on a competence you already possess without the benefit of special studies. Indeed, there could be, and would be, no academic discipline organized under the name “sociology” were it not the case that sociology itself is a commonly held skill of untrained people and, thus, an important feature of social life itself. This may seem a bit odd to say. The more customary attitude in our society is to think of sociology as a sometimes complicated, often jargoned, though usually interesting, field of formal study and research. It is, of course, but, before it can be this, sociology is something else.

What is this miraculously effective and possibly universal human quality? Consider again those small Polish children, or others like them elsewhere in the world. What got them through the nights was an ability to imagine the reality in which they were caught. They understood, it is clear, that they were in danger. They knew that the police had carried off their father in the night. They knew why their mother kept them dressed, why she never slept at night. Straightforward? Not quite. Remember these were children for whom the ideas of oppressive police-states, of Soviet ideology and repressions, even of bad men and enforcers, were at best ill-formed. Their native sociological competence, though it served them well, could not have instructed them as to the subtleties of the