The Substance of Sociology

DES, CONDUCT & CONSEQUENCES | EPHRAIM H. MIZRUCHI

THE SUBSTANCE OF SOCIOLOGY

Codes, Conduct and Consequences

Edited with Introduction and Notes by

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THE SUBSTANCE OF SOCIOLOGY

SOCIOLOGY SERIES

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TO MY PARENTS

PREFACE

THE DISCIPLINE OF SOCIOLOGY has undergone many changes since its founding by Henri St. Simon and August Comte early in the nineteenth century. The transformation from a concern with "stages" of societal development to a focus on social interaction and from a view of total societies as units of analysis to units as small as two-person groups has had profound influences on the several generations of students of society.

Sociology may be characterized as a field which has two basic methodological approaches and still only one fundamental objective. While the approaches to the study of sociology may be described as the *Verstehen,* or *intuitive understanding* method, on the one hand, and the *formal scientific,* on the other, all sociologists are primarily concerned with *understanding* societal processes and discovering the order which makes life in society possible.

Our objective in this collection of essays is two-fold: (1) to provide the beginning student of society with the kinds of materials which will markedly increase his *awareness* of the processes in which he participates; and (2) to stimulate greater *understanding* of these processes on an elementary level.

Avoiding Pitfalls. There are numerous problems associated with the learning of basic ideas in the social sciences yet few solutions to these problems. What is required of the student is the development of capacities of abstraction, precision, objectivity and generalization, in relation to a body of data which are really the stuff of ordinary life in society. Skepticism in relation to the kinds of observations made by social scientists is not uncommon and generalizations are often described by the layman as "common sense." Demonstration of the meaningfulness of sociological concepts is particularly difficult for the person who has only limited background in the literature produced by social science. Concepts which have meaning for a relatively limited group of knowledgeable students of society and its processes typically sift down to lower levels of shared understanding, i.e., lower common denominators in the process of communication (cf. Simmel, below). In time rough approximations of these concepts make their way into the everyday language of the lay public. Since the process reflects timely issues it is especially important that at least the educated in our society have clear conceptions of what is being communicated by the social scientist. There is, consequently, no substitute for careful, extensive reading and precise understanding of concepts.

At least three possible sources of misunderstanding may be anticipated in reading these essays: (1) taking a *concept* to mean what a similar

term means to the layman; (2) confusing statements of probability with "either-or" generalizations; and (3) accepting *ideal type* constructs as descriptions of reality.

On the most elementary level of interpretation, the problem of imprecise meaning in the usage of descriptive terms as synonyms for concepts typically revolves about words like: "culture," which does *not* simply refer to the aesthetic aspects of learning; "group," which may be defined in various ways depending upon the sociological context in which it is used; "institution," which is only rarely used by sociologists to refer to hospitals, prisons or sanatoria (cf. Hamilton, below); and "individual," which may refer to a variety of meanings. Careful reading of the essays included here will aid the student in his efforts to attain a more meaningful interpretation of sociological materials as well as a deeper understanding of the processes in which he is a participant.

On another plane is a problem which sociologists themselves often forget to make explicit. This refers to what Robert K. Merton has called "single term, diverse concepts," and "single concept, diverse terms" (c.f., *Social Theory and Social Structure,* New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1957, pp. 20-25). The term "alienation," for example, is often used to describe such diverse processes as social isolation (which has similarly been used to describe diverse concepts); personal feelings of apartness from others, things and processes; and mental disorders, e.g., psychiatrists were once called "alienists." Similarly the person who is described as being confused in complex, contemporary societies has simultaneously been characterized as suffering from "alienation," "meaninglessness," "anomie," and "loss of identity." Thus, for clarity of thought it is well to be alert to the problems of meaning which are necessary for adequate communication of idea and description.

Another possible pitfall to avoid is the tendency to confuse the limited generalizations of probability with the unlimited generalizations of absoluteness. We are not in this context suggesting a lack of confidence in the results of social scientific observation. What we are saying instead is that we very rarely make "either-or" generalizations in sociology. A statement, for example, that there is a direct relationship between level of education and membership in formal associations (lodges, P.T.A., and similar organizations) tells us not that all people with limited formal education will have no associational ties. To the sociologist such a statement means that if we systematically selected a cross-section of a population we would find that those with more formal education would be significantly, by mathematical standards, more likely to belong to associations than those with less formal education. The statement does not mean that a *particular person* with a great deal of formal education will necessarily belong to a great number of associations. Our generalizations in sociology refer not to what *particular* people will do but what people *in general* will do when acting in relation to one another. Because of the complexities of sociological gen-

eralizations and probability statements it is important to have a clear idea as to the units of analysis and the limits of generalizations.

Still another possible pitfall is confusing *ideal types* with descriptions of reality. Ideal types are mental constructs, conceptual tools, which provide baselines in relation to which realities may be described and intuitively measured. Thus, for example, if we characterize social relationships in contemporary urban areas as instrumental, i.e., people use their associations with others as *means* for achieving other ends (being friendly with people in order to sell them something, use them, etc.) as contrasted with relationships in nonurban areas in which associations are supposedly ends in themselves (being friendly for the sake of friendship), we would be using ideal type constructs in relation to types of social interaction. In reality we probably could not find an urban area in which we would find *instrumental* relations in a pure form as a dominant mode of interaction. Nor could we find nonurban areas in which relationships as ends were the dominant mode. We would find *approximations in reality* and we could place descriptions of dominant modes on a continuum from those which most closely approximate the ideal type to those which are most divergent. In this way we may discuss and understand ongoing processes in one setting as compared with another. (e.g., see Mizruchi and Perrucci, below).

In concluding this Preface we repeat that there is no substitute for careful, thoughtful reading. Reading from "the substance of sociology" can be a richly rewarding experience and it is the accomplishment of that experience which has guided us in our selection of materials.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The organization and preparation of this volume represents the efforts of a number of persons. While many have made direct and indirect contributions and will remain unmentioned here several are conspicuous as contributors. Professors Paul Meadows and Byron Fox made suggestions and assessments which were crucial to the final outcome of my efforts. Robert Morrison, Keith Johnson, George Christie, Katherine Rohrer and Marguerite Hurley located materials, saw them through the process of reproduction and typing and have contributed much in the form of research assistance. I thank also Mary Belle-Isle and Joy Meadows who typed some of the essays and correspondence relevant to this project. Without the generous response of my colleagues and their publishers, all of whom gave us permission to reprint the materials which follow, this book would not have been possible. The students at Syracuse University who used earlier versions of this collection, some of whom explicitly commented on the pedagogic value of the selections, are also to be thanked. Finally, although my

contributions to this work are dedicated to my parents, my wife Ruth and our children, Mark, David and Susan have aided my effort by their willingness to tolerate a sometimes absent and occasionally preoccupied husband and father.

Syracuse, New York

E. H. M.

A NOTE TO THE INSTRUCTOR

THIS BOOK has been used, in earlier forms, both as a text and as collateral reading with a standard text. We have attempted to provide the kind of organization which would assure coverage of major theoretical areas of sociological concern while at the same time including materials in a wide variety of substantive areas. Thus our selections have been made according to whether or not they represent a combination of sociological interests which we feel are of pedagogic value. A typical essay will provide coverage of a substantive problem and a methodological or theoretical approach. In Part I, for example, 4 types of methodologies are represented in the Johnson, Snyder, Stoodley and Lazarsfeld papers while at the same time providing interesting substantive contexts which illustrate the variety of problems which attract sociologists.

Throughout we have tried to cover as many approaches to the field as are pedagogically meaningful to the beginning reader. Conspicuously absent are advanced types of interests which revolve about mathematical and statistical models, scaling and the more esoteric aspects of substantive theory. A carefully selected bibliography provides direction for the student who desires to go beyond these materials to more specialized areas.

Finally, this is an intentionally eclectic book. There are several themes which make their way into the selection and organization process but these do not represent an attempt at a truly systematic work. The general course in sociology should, we believe, provide an introduction to the various viewpoints in the field, their vocabularies and sufficient guidance and stimulation for interest in reading and advanced study. It must contribute first to making of the student an educated and intelligent member of a cosmopolitan society. Second, it must convince the student that systematic scientifically derived knowledge about societal processes is more reliable and thus preferable to unsystematically gathered and assessed information. And, third, it must play a role in attracting outstanding students to the field as a major vocational area. Thus, this collection is directed to the preprofessional or premajor student. As in the case of all such books its primary value will ultimately be determined by its use in the hands of a critical and perceptive teacher.

E. H. M.

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Our deeds determine us, as much as we determine our deeds; and until we know what has been or will be the peculiar combination of outward with inward facts, which constitute a man's critical actions, it will be better not to think ourselves wise about his character.

GEORGE ELIOT, *Adam Bede*

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