

The reality of everyday life

Without the aid of prejudice and custom, I should not be able to find my way across the room.

William Hazlitt

The Wenhaston family is getting up to begin the working day. The parents, Alison and David, are almost always up first. Sophie, the younger child, is next and Tom, who is fifteen and unable to find his school tie, is inevitably last down to breakfast. The meal is rushed and everybody is soon out of the house. Sophie, who is eight, is taken to school by David, who then goes on to his work as a technician with a company manufacturing specialized computer systems. Alison drives herself to the offices of the insurance company where she is a claims supervisor. Tom meets a group of friends outside the local McDonald's and goes on to school by bus.

The working day passes quickly, mostly because it is rushed. A couple of Alison's staff are off sick and she has to arrange cover for them, which consists largely in dealing with customers herself. As far as David can see, there are never enough staff to sort out technical problems in his company. The school day drags a little more but, for both Sophie and Tom, the experience is improved by being able to talk to their friends. Tom, in particular, is looking forward to the evening as he is going out to a club where a band from the school is playing.

Since it is a Friday and not followed by a school day, Alison and David are not unduly concerned about Tom's clubbing, although they worry

about the possibility of drug-taking, but they do expect him to be back at home no later than one o'clock. Unexpectedly, Sophie's best friend has asked her to spend the weekend at her house and, excited, Sophie rushes off as soon as she can. As a result, Alison and David find themselves with an evening free of children. Alison wonders whether to go and see her parents who live a little bit less than an hour's drive away. However, she is tired by the day's work and decides, a little guiltily, not to do so. In addition, she has some washing and ironing to do. Although David is very good at helping her with the housework, she still finds that she does the bulk of it in addition to working full-time. Alison's decision not to visit her parents influences David's decision not to go to a meeting at the local community centre about the growth in local traffic. They both settle down in front of the television after a hurried evening meal and Tom finds them still there when he comes in.

This is a simple description of an ordinary day that would be perfectly recognizable to a large proportion of the population. As a rule, people go through the day without asking profound questions about their own conduct. They do not, therefore, wonder all day whether their behaviour is typical of the population at large, why they hold the beliefs that they do, or how their own behaviour influences that of their children. It is this apparently unquestioning quality of everyday life that intrigues or infuriates creators of fiction. For every character bar one in the film *Groundhog Day*, for instance, every day is exactly the same as the one before. Only the hero knows this. For everyone else, it is as if they started the day anew with no memory of previous events. The result is that everyday life is entirely unquestioned; the characters have no vantage point outside the everyday which would give an alternative perspective.

Of course, from time to time, particular circumstances may force people to reflect on their own lives. A row over who should do the washing up, for example, might prompt Alison and David to ask themselves how it is that men and women share out the housework in the way that they do and what justifies the distribution that they adopt. The very fact that everyday life is organized into provinces¹ may make us more self-reflective. Thus, everyday life at home, at work, or with friends is all very different. These are separate provinces which can be used to give a more distant perspective on one another. For example, the fact that Alison is treated as an important person at work may make her resent the way she is treated at home by her husband and children. More extensively still, serious illness or holidays may make the routines of everyday life seem precarious or drab. Great public events also have the effect of making us stop and think. For example, many people said, at the time, that the death of Princess Diana changed their lives. It is true that they will probably think otherwise now, since such events are a bit

like fireworks; they have powerful effects at the time but then die away all too quickly. All of these circumstances disrupt our everyday world temporarily and make us aware of the routine that is characteristically hidden.

Even more radically, people occasionally go through life-changing events that make their lives extraordinary for a time. Falling in love or religious conversion are examples of such changes. Very few people, however, live truly extraordinary lives all the time so that each day is different from the one before. For most people, most of the time, everyday life is simply *there*; it is an overwhelming fact of life and any disruptions to it are merely temporary. People's energies are focused on getting through the day, and, to do that, it is necessary to take the world around us for granted rather than to question it. There is, furthermore, a very important reason why people should avoid looking into their everyday lives too directly. Everyday life is a very significant source of *security*. People gain their sense of life's solidity precisely from their unvarying routine – going to work and coming home again, eating meals with the family, watching the television. There are limits to the extent that questioning and upsetting everyday life is psychologically tolerable.²

Despite the relative solidity, security and generally unquestioned nature of everyday life, the description of the Wenhastons' day does raise a multitude of sociological questions. For example, are Alison and David's fears about drug-taking a realistic assessment of the risks that Tom runs? Why is it that Alison is seeing her parents less as the years go by, and is she alone in that? How does Tom fit in with his friends? Why is David paid more than Alison? Has the pace of their working lives increased? Why is there such a gap in age between Sophie and Tom? Is the marital relationship between Alison and David characteristic of the twenty-first century? Will Sophie and Tom replicate the relationships of their parents? Why is the world around the Wenhastons reasonably ordered and regular?

Now, of course, one does not have to be a sociologist to ask these questions or to propose a few answers. They are, on the face of it, commonsense questions which could have, and do receive, commonsense answers. Many sociologists would like to think that this is because sociological thinking has become widespread and is influential in the media and public debate, and even in everyday conversation. This clearly is true to some extent. Thus, standard sociological ideas such as globalization or individualization, which will be discussed later on in this book, are frequently aired by newspapers or politicians. But it is more likely to be because such questions deal with the familiar world of everyday, and people will feel that, in this arena, they are experts and they have the capacity and experience to ask and answer them. This is not the world

of particle physics or microbiology which are realms where the unqualified might well fear to tread. If provoked, anyone can have an opinion about society.

The subject matter of sociology therefore creates a potential difficulty for sociologists. Because they deal with questions on which everyone can have an opinion, they can be accused of stating the obvious. The saying that the sociologist is someone who spends a million dollars to find his way to the whorehouse encapsulates that view. Actually, there is nothing wrong in investigating an issue in social life, gathering evidence and coming up with conclusions that seem perfectly obvious. We need to be sure, after all, that even obvious judgements are well supported by evidence. There is, however, a more serious point about the relationship between sociology and commonsense.

Our commonsense judgements may deceive. This is for two reasons. I have already pointed out that our everyday world, and the commonsense that goes with it, is very powerful. The world that we inhabit seems to be the only one that there is. It is the paramount reality. Such a view is confirmed by the information that we receive. Although we may appear to be bombarded by information about other ways of living from across the world, actually most of us do not come into contact with these alternatives at all regularly or profoundly. Our everyday lives, which are conducted in a fairly limited circle, are therefore self-confirming. It is a world of stereotypes and of 'what everybody knows'. This feature is, of course, fundamental to the frequent conflicts, in Northern Ireland or Palestine, for instance, that occur between different social groups, each of which has an everyday life which seems to them to be the only one. They literally do not understand each other. In fact, our larger social world has infinite variety, and it is the sociologist's task to understand that variety.³

The commonsense of our everyday lives misleads for a more fundamental reason, however. Because we take our everyday world for granted – it is simply *there* – we do not typically question it or ask *why* it takes the form that it does. In a sense, therefore, everyday life obscures its own conditions of production, obscures the social factors that have produced it. Sociology attempts to understand those conditions and to see each specific social situation as an example of a general type. One way in which this can happen is by comparing one everyday reality with another. For example, in the next chapter I will be describing the social structure of a group of punks. For the people concerned, their lives form a self-confirming whole which, to them, is special and unusual. However, this punk group is very like other youth cultures in its social structure. Furthermore, it is very like apparently profoundly different social groups such as those that form round a hobby of some kind or which adopt

extreme political or religious beliefs. All these groups have a hierarchy of prestige. Those with the greatest prestige form a core who are the most 'authentic', wholeheartedly adopting the way of life concerned.

These comparisons between sociological and commonsense reasoning show how disruptive sociology can be. Far from stating the merely obvious, the discipline challenges many of the assumptions on which our everyday lives are based. Those challenges can make people angry or surprised or intrigued or transformed – or even reassured. I will be giving examples of these responses in the pages that follow. They can also call into question official accounts. For example, it had long been thought that the unemployed were a section of the community more or less permanently in that state, through absence of local employment opportunities, lack of skill and education, or weakness of motivation. Government social policy was therefore organized towards the idea of long-term employment with measures designed to tackle lack of employment opportunities or to improve individual motivation or skill. Sociological research, on the other hand, has shown that a substantial proportion of the unemployed population are only without work temporarily and may move in and out of that state.⁴ Many people will experience a period of unemployment at some time in their lives. Such a conclusion suggests quite different social policies. It also, incidentally, may help to reassure those who do become unemployed. They are not somehow deficient as members of a sub-class but are much like many others, many of whom will find work again.

Sociology, therefore, does not promote *discovery* in the same sense as the natural sciences do. It does not produce the equivalent of a new galaxy or a new bacterium. But it *is* like the natural sciences in that it is curious about the world and does not take it for granted. It tries to identify and solve the puzzles that the social world throws up and, in doing so, provides the way of giving a different meaning to the cosy, everyday world around us. The chapters that follow illustrate how sociology addresses some of these puzzles.