

# **INTRODUCTION: THE DISCIPLINE OF SOCIOLOGY**

In this chapter we wish to examine the idea of thinking sociologically and its importance for understanding ourselves, each other and the social environments in which we live. For this purpose we are going to consider the idea of sociology as a disciplined practice with its own set of questions for approaching the study of society and social relations.



## **In Search of Distinction**

Sociology not only encompasses a disciplined set of practices, but also represents a considerable body of knowledge that has been accumulated over the course of its history. A glance at the section in libraries entitled ‘Sociology’ leads one to see a collection of books that represents sociology as a binding tradition. These books provide volumes of information for newcomers to the field, whether they want to become practising sociologists or merely to expand their understanding of the world in which they live. Here are places in which readers can avail themselves of whatever sociology may offer and so consume, digest, appropriate and expand upon this body of knowledge. In this way sociology becomes a site of constant flux with newcomers adding new ideas and studies of social life to those same shelves. Sociology, in this sense, is a site of continuing activity that tests received wisdom against new experiences and so adds to knowledge and changes the form and content of the discipline in the process.

The above seems to make sense. After all, when we ask ourselves ‘What

is sociology?’ we may well refer to a collection of books in a library as indicative of the output of the discipline. Such ways of thinking about sociology seem obvious. After all, if asked ‘What is a lion?’ we might take a book on animals and indicate a particular picture. In this way we are pointing to links between certain words and objects. Thus, words refer to objects. Such objects become a word’s referent and thus we make links between a word and an object under particular conditions. Without this process of common understanding, everyday communication, which we take for granted, would be inconceivable. This, however, does not suffice for a fuller, more sociological, understanding of this connection.

The above does not give us knowledge about the object itself. We now have to ask supplementary questions: for example, in what ways is this object peculiar? In what ways does it differ from other objects, so that referring to it by a separate name is justified? If calling this animal a lion is correct, but calling it a tiger is not, there must be something that lions have that tigers do not. There must be some distinguishing differences between them. Only by discovering this difference can we know what characterizes a lion – as distinct from knowing what the object the word ‘lion’ stands for. So it is with trying to characterize a way of thinking that we call sociological.

We are satisfied that the word ‘sociology’ stands for a certain body of knowledge and for certain practices which employ this accumulated knowledge. However, what is it that makes the knowledge and practices distinctly ‘sociological’? What makes them different from other bodies of knowledge and other disciplines that have their own practices? Going back to our lion example to answer this question, we could seek to distinguish sociology from other disciplines. In most libraries we might discover that the closest shelves to sociology carry the labels ‘History’, ‘Anthropology’, ‘Political science’, ‘Law’, ‘Social policy’, ‘Accounting’, ‘Psychology’, ‘Management studies’, ‘Economics’, ‘Criminology’, ‘Philosophy’, ‘Social policy’, ‘Linguistics’, ‘Literature’ and ‘Human geography’. The librarians who arranged such shelves might have assumed that the readers browsing through the sociology section would occasionally reach for a book on one of these subjects. In other words, the subject matter of sociology might have been assumed to be nearer to those bodies of knowledge than others. Perhaps the differences between sociology books and the books placed in their immediate vicinity are then less pronounced than those between, say, sociology and organic chemistry?

A librarian cataloguing in this way makes sense. The neighbouring bodies of knowledge have much in common. They are all concerned with the human-made world: that which would not exist but for the actions of human beings. These subjects are concerned, in their different ways, with human actions and their consequences. However, if they explore the same

territory, what sets them apart? What makes them so different that they justify different names?

We are prompted to give a simple answer to these questions: divisions between bodies of knowledge must reflect the divisions in the world they investigate. It is the human actions (or the aspects of the human actions) which differ from each other, and the divisions between bodies of knowledge simply take account of this fact. Thus, history is about the actions that took place in the past, whereas sociology concentrates on current actions. Similarly, anthropology tells us of human societies that are assumed to be at different stages of development from our own (however that may be defined). In the case of some other close relatives of sociology, political science tends to discuss actions relating to power and the government; economics tends to deal with actions related to the use of resources in terms of the maximization of utility for individuals who are held to be 'rational' in a particular sense of the word, as well as the production and distribution of goods; law and criminology are interested in interpretation and application of the law and the norms that regulate human behaviour and in the way such norms are articulated, made obligatory, enforced and with what consequences? However, as soon as we begin to justify the boundaries between disciplines in this manner, the issue becomes problematic, for we assume that the human world reflects such neat divisions that then become specialist branches of investigation. We now reach an important issue: like most beliefs which appear to be self-evident, they remain obvious only as long as we refrain from examining the *assumptions* that underpin them.

So where do we get the idea that human actions may be divided into certain categories in the first place? From the fact that they have been classified in such a way and that each file in this classification has been given a separate name? From the fact that there are groups of credible experts, regarded as knowledgeable and trustworthy people, who claim exclusive rights to study aspects of society and then furnish us with informed opinions? Yet does it make sense, from the point of view of our experiences, that society can be split into economics, politics or social policy? We do not live now in the realm distinguished by political science, then in economics, nor do we move from sociology to anthropology when travelling from England to part of, say, South America, or from history to sociology when we grow a year older!

If we are able to separate these domains of activity in our experiences and so categorize our actions in terms of the political at one moment and the economic at another, is it because we have been taught to make such distinctions in the first place? Therefore, what we know is not the world itself, but what we are doing in the world in terms of how our practices are informed by an image of that world. It is a model that is put together from the building blocks derived from the relations between *language*

and *experience*. Thus, there is no natural division of the human world that is reflected in different scholarly disciplines. It is, on the contrary, a division of labour between the scholars who examine human actions and this is reinforced by the mutual separation of respective experts, along with the exclusive rights that each group enjoys to decide what does and what does not belong to their areas of expertise.

In our quest to find the ‘difference that makes the difference’, how do the practices of these branches of study differ from each other? There is a similarity between their attitudes towards whatever they selected as their objects of study. After all, they all claim obedience to the same rules of conduct when dealing with their respective objects. All seek to collect relevant facts and ensure that they are valid and then check and recheck those facts in order that the information about them is reliable. In addition, they all try to put the propositions they make about the facts in a form in which they can be clearly, unambiguously understood and tested against evidence. In so doing they seek to pre-empt or eliminate contradictions between propositions in order that no two different propositions can be true at the same time. In short, they all try to live up to the idea of a systematic discipline and to present their findings in a responsible manner.

We can now say that there is no difference in how the task of the expert and their trademark – scholarly responsibility – is understood and practised. Those people claiming to be scholarly experts seem to deploy similar strategies to collect and to process their facts: they observe aspects of human actions, or employ historical evidence and seek to interpret them within modes of analysis that make sense of those actions. It seems, therefore, that our last hope of finding our difference is in the kinds of questions that motivate each discipline: that is, those that determine the points of view (cognitive perspectives) from which human actions are observed, explored, described and explained by scholars belonging to these different disciplines.

Consider the types of questions that motivate economists. Here, consideration would turn to the relationship between the costs and benefits of human action. They may consider human action from the point of view of the management of scarce resources and how these may be used to their best advantage. Also, the relationships between actors would be examined as aspects of the production and exchange of goods and services, all of which is assumed to be regulated by market relations of supply and demand and the desire of actors to pursue their preferences according to a model of rational action. The findings would then be arranged into a model of the process through which resources are created, obtained and allocated among various demands. Political science, on the other hand, is more likely to be interested in those aspects of human actions that change, or are changed by, the actual or anticipated conduct of other actors in

terms of power and influence. In this sense actions can be viewed in terms of the asymmetry between power and influence and so some actors emerge from interaction with their behaviour modified more significantly than other partners to the interaction. It might also organize its findings around concepts like power, domination, the state, authority, and so on.

The concerns of economics and political science are by no means alien to sociology. This is readily apparent from works within sociology that are written by scholars who may self-identify as historians, political scientists, anthropologists or geographers. Yet sociology, like other branches of social study, has its own cognitive perspectives that inform sets of questions for interrogating human actions, as well as its own principles of interpretation. From this point of view we can say that sociology is distinguished through viewing human actions as elements of wider figurations: that is, of a non-random assembly of actors locked together in a web of mutual dependency (dependency being a state in which the probability that the action will be undertaken and the chance of its success change in relation to what other actors are, do or may do). Sociologists ask what consequences this has for human actors, the relations into which we enter and the societies of which we are a part. In turn, this shapes the object of sociological inquiry and so figurations, webs of mutual dependence, reciprocal conditioning of action and expansion or confinement of actors' freedom are among the most prominent preoccupations of sociology.

Individual actors come into the view of sociological study in terms of being members or partners in a network of interdependence. Given that, regardless of what we do, we are dependent upon others, the central questions of sociology, we could say, are: how do the types of social relations and societies that we inhabit relate to how we see each other, ourselves and our knowledge, actions and their consequences? It is these kinds of questions – part of the practical realities of everyday life – that constitute the particular area of sociological discussion and define sociology as a relatively autonomous branch of the human and social sciences. Therefore, we may conclude that thinking sociologically is a way of understanding the human world that also opens up the possibility for thinking about the same world in different ways.



## **Sociology and Common Sense**

Thinking sociologically is also distinguished by its relationship with so-called 'common sense'. Perhaps more than other branches of scholarship, sociology finds its relation with common sense informed by issues that are important for its standing and practice. Physical and biological sciences do not appear to be concerned with spelling out their relation-

ship to common sense. Most sciences settle for defining themselves in terms of the boundaries that separate them from other disciplines. They do not feel that they share sufficient ground to concern themselves with drawing boundaries or bridges with this rich yet disorganized, non-systematic, often inarticulate and ineffable knowledge that we call common sense.

Such indifference may have some justification. Common sense, after all, appears to have nothing to say of the matters that preoccupy physicists, chemists or astronomers. The subjects they deal with do not fall within the daily experiences and sights of ordinary women and men. Thus, non-experts do not normally consider themselves able to form opinions about such matters unless aided by the scientists. After all, the objects explored by the physical sciences appear only under very special circumstances, for example, through the lens of gigantic telescopes. Only the scientists can see them and experiment with them under these conditions and so can claim a monopolistic possession of the given branch of science. Being the sole owners of the experience that provides the raw material for their study, the process, analysis and interpretation of the materials are within their control. Products of such processing then have to withstand the critical scrutiny of other scientists. They will not have to compete with common sense for the simple reason that there is no commonsensical point of view with respect to the matters they pronounce upon.

We now have to ask some more sociological questions. After all, is the characterization as simple as the above implies? The production of scientific knowledge contains social factors that inform and shape its practice, while scientific findings may have social, political and economic implications that, in any democratic society, are not for scientists to have the last words upon. We cannot, in other words, so easily separate the means of scientific research from the ends to which it may be put, nor practical reason from science itself. After all, how research is funded and by whom may, in some instances, have a bearing upon the results of that research. Recent public concerns over the quality of the food we eat, the environment in which we live, the role of genetic engineering and the patenting of genetic information on populations by large corporations, are just a few of the matters that science alone cannot determine for they are about not only the justification of knowledge, but also its application and implications for the lives we lead. These matters are about our experiences and their relationship to our everyday practices, the control we have over our lives and the direction in which our societies are unfolding.

These issues provide the raw material for sociological investigations. All of us live in the company of other people and interact with each other. In the process we display an extraordinary amount of *tacit knowledge* that enables us to get on with the business of everyday life. Each of us is

a skilled actor. Yet what we get and what we are depend on what other people do. After all, most of us have lived through the agonizing experience of a communication breakdown with friends and strangers. From this point of view the subject matter of sociology is already embedded in our everyday lives and without this fact we would be unable to conduct our lives in the company of others.

Although deeply immersed in our daily routines, informed by practical knowledge oriented to the social settings in which we interact, we often do not pause to think about the meaning of what we have gone through; even less frequently do we pause to compare our private experiences with the fate of others except, perhaps, to have private responses to social problems paraded for all to consume on television chat shows. Here, however, the privatization of social issues is reinforced, so relieving us of the burden of seeing the dynamics of social relations within what are instead viewed as individual reactions.

This is exactly what sociological thinking can do for us. As a mode of thought it will ask questions such as: 'How do our individual biographies intertwine with the history we share with other human beings?' At the same time, sociologists are part of that experience and so however hard they may try to stand aside from the objects of their study – life experiences as objects 'out there' – they cannot break off completely from the knowledge that they seek to comprehend. Nevertheless, this may be an advantage to the extent that they possess both an inside and outside view of the experiences they try to comprehend.

There is more to the special relationship between sociology and common sense. The objects of astronomy wait to be named, placed into an orderly whole and compared with other similar phenomena. There are few sociological equivalents of such clean and unused phenomena which have not been endowed with meaning before the sociologists appear with their questionnaires, fill up their notebooks or examine relevant documents. Those human actions and interactions that sociologists explore have been given names and considered by the actors themselves and so are objects of commonsensical knowledge. Families, organizations, kinship networks, neighbourhoods, cities and villages, nations and churches and any other groupings held together by regular human interaction have already been given meaning and significance by the actors. Each sociological term has already been laden with meanings given by commonsensical knowledge.

For these reasons sociology is intimately related to common sense. With fluid borders between sociological thinking and common sense, their security cannot be guaranteed in advance. As with the application of the genetic scientists' findings and their implications for social life, the sovereignty of sociology over social knowledge is likely to be contested. This is why drawing a boundary between sociological knowledge proper

and the common sense is such an important matter for the identity of sociology as a cohesive body of knowledge. Not surprisingly, sociologists pay much attention to this issue and we can think of four ways in which these differences have been considered.

In the first place sociology, unlike common sense, makes an effort to subordinate itself to the rigorous rules of responsible speech. This is an attribute of science to be distinguished from other, reputedly more relaxed and less vigilantly self-controlled, forms of knowledge. In their practice sociologists are expected to take great care to distinguish – in a clear and visible fashion – between the statements corroborated by available evidence and those propositions that can claim the status only of provisional, untested ideas. The rules of responsible speech demand that one's 'workshop' – the whole procedure that has led to the final conclusions and is claimed to guarantee their credibility – be wide open to scrutiny. Responsible speech must also relate to other statements made on its topic and so it cannot dismiss or pass by in silence over other views that have been voiced, however inconvenient they may be to its argument. In this way the trustworthiness, reliability and eventually also the practical usefulness of the ensuing propositions will be greatly enhanced. After all, our belief in the credibility of science is grounded in the hope that scientists have followed the rules of responsible speech. As for the scientists themselves, they point to the virtue of responsible speech as an argument for the validity and reliability of the knowledge they produce.

Second, there is the size of the field from which the material for sociological thinking is drawn. For most of us in our daily routines this field is confined to our own life-worlds: that is, to the things we do, the people we meet, the purposes we set for our own pursuits and presuppose that other people set for theirs, as well as the times and places in which we routinely interact. Rarely do we find it necessary to lift ourselves above the level of our daily concerns to broaden the horizon of our experiences, for this would necessitate time and resources that many cannot afford, or are not inclined to embark upon. Yet given the tremendous variety of life conditions and experiences in the world, each experience is necessarily partial and possibly even one-sided. These issues can be examined only if we bring together and compare experiences drawn from a multitude of life-worlds. Only then will the bounded realities of individual experiences be revealed, as will the complex network of dependencies and interconnections in which they are entangled – a network which reaches far beyond the realm that may be accessed from the point of view of a singular biography. The overall result of such a broadening of horizons will be the discovery of the intimate link between individual biography and wide social processes. It is for this reason that the sociologists' pursuit of this wider perspective makes a great difference – not only quantitatively, but also in the quality and the uses of knowledge. For people like us, socio-

logical knowledge has something to offer that common sense, for all its richness cannot, by itself, provide.

Third, sociology and common sense differ in the way that each makes sense of human reality in terms of how they understand and explain events and circumstances. We know from our experiences that we are ‘the author’ of our actions; we know that what we do is an effect of our intentions even though the outcomes may not be as we intended. We normally act to achieve a state of affairs, whether in order to possess an object, to receive praise, or to prevent something we do not like or help a friend. Quite naturally, the way we think of our actions serves as a model for making sense of other actions. To this extent the only way we can make sense of the human world around us is to draw our tools of explanation solely from within our respective *life-worlds*. We tend to perceive everything that happens in the world at large as an outcome of somebody’s intentional action. We look for the persons responsible for what has occurred and once we have found them, we believe our inquiries to be complete. We assume that goodwill lies behind those events to which we are favourably predisposed and ill intentions lie behind those we dislike. In general, people find it difficult to accept that a situation was not an effect of the intended actions of an identifiable person.

Those who speak in the name of reality within the public realm – politicians, journalists, market researchers, commercial advertisers – tune in to the above tendencies and speak of the ‘needs of the state’ or the ‘demands of the economy’. This is said as if the state or economies were made to the measure of individual persons like ourselves with specific needs and wants. Similarly, we read and hear of the complex problems of nations, states and economic systems as the effects of the thoughts and deeds of a select group of individuals who can be named, pictured and interviewed. Equally, governments often relieve themselves of responsibility by referring to those things outside of their control, or speaking of what ‘the public demands’ through the use of focus groups or opinion polls.

Sociology stands in opposition to the particularity of worldviews as if they can unproblematically speak in the name of a general state of affairs. Nor does it take-for-granted ways of understanding as if they constituted some natural way of explaining events that may be simply separated from historical change, or the social location from which they emerged. As it starts its survey from figurations (networks of dependencies) rather than from individual actors or single actions, it demonstrates that the common metaphor of the motivated individual as the key to understanding the human world – including our own, thoroughly personal and private, thoughts and deeds – is not an appropriate way to understand ourselves and others. To think sociologically is to *make sense* of the human condition via an analysis of the manifold webs of human interdependency – that toughest

of realities to which we refer in order to explain our motives and the effects of their activation.

Finally, the power of common sense depends on its self-evident character: that is, not to question its precepts and to be self-confirming in practice. In its turn, this rests upon the routine, habitual character of daily life that informs our common sense while also being simultaneously informed by it. We need this in order to get on with our lives. When repeated often enough, things tend to become familiar and the familiar is seen as self-explanatory; it presents no problems and may arouse no curiosity. Questions are not asked if people are satisfied that 'things are as they are' for reasons that are not open to scrutiny. Fatalism may also play its role via the belief that one can do little to change the conditions in which we act.

From this point of view we could say that familiarity may be in tension with inquisitiveness and this can also inform the impetus to innovate and transform. In an encounter with that familiar world ruled by routines that have the power to reconfirm beliefs, sociology may appear as a meddling and irritating stranger. By examining that which is taken-for-granted, it has the potential to disturb the comfortable certitudes of life by asking questions no one can remember asking and those with vested interests resent even being asked. These questions render the evident a puzzle and may defamiliarize the familiar. With the daily ways of life and the social conditions in which they take place under scrutiny, they emerge as one of the possible ways, not *the* only way, of getting on in our lives and organizing relations between us.

Of course, this may not be to everybody's liking, particularly those for whom a state of affairs offers a great advantage. Equally, routines can have their place; here we may recall Kipling's centipede, who walked effortlessly on all her hundred legs until a sycophantic courtier began to praise her exquisite memory. It was this memory that allowed her never to put down the eighty-fifth leg before the thirty-seventh, or the fifty-second before the nineteenth. Having been made self-conscious, the poor centipede was no longer able to walk. Others may feel humiliated and even resentful that what they once knew and were proud of is devalued by virtue of being open to question. Yet however understandable the resentment that is generated, *defamiliarization* can have clear benefits. Most importantly, it may open up new and previously unsuspected possibilities of living one's life with others with more self-awareness, more comprehension of our surroundings in terms of greater self and social knowledge and perhaps also with more freedom and control.

To all those who think that living life in a more conscious way is worth the effort, sociology is a welcome guide. Although remaining in a constant and intimate conversation with common sense, it aims at overcoming its limitations by opening up the possibilities that can too easily become

closed down. When addressing and challenging our shared knowledge, sociology prompts and encourages us to reassess our experience, to discover new possibilities and to become in the end more open and less reconciled to the idea that learning about ourselves and each other has an end point, rather than being an exciting and dynamic process whose aim is greater understanding.

To think sociologically can render us more sensitive and tolerant of diversity. It can sharpen our senses and open our eyes to new horizons beyond our immediate experiences in order that we can explore human conditions which, hitherto, have remained relatively invisible. Once we understand better how the apparently natural, inevitable, immutable, eternal aspects of our lives have been brought into being through the exercise of human power and resources, we shall find it much harder to accept that they are immune and impenetrable to subsequent actions, including our own. Sociological thinking, as an antifixating power, is therefore a power in its own right. It renders flexible what may have been the oppressive fixity of social relations and in so doing opens up a world of possibilities. The art of sociological thinking is to widen the scope and the practical effectiveness of freedom. When more of it has been learnt, the individual may well become just a little less subject to manipulation and more resilient to oppression and control. They are also likely to be more effective as social actors, for they can see the connections between their actions and social conditions and how those things which, by their fixity, claim to be irresistible to change, are open to transformation.

There is also that which lies beyond us as individuals. We have said that sociology thinks relationally to situate us within networks of social relations. Sociology thus stands in praise of the individual, but not individualism. Thus to think sociologically means to understand a little more fully the people around us in terms of their hopes and desires and their worries and concerns. In this way, we may better appreciate the human individual in them and perhaps learn to respect that which every civilized society must entitle them in order to sustain itself: their right to do what we do, so that they may choose and practise their ways of life according to their preferences. This means selecting their life-projects, defining themselves and defending their dignity as we might defend ours in the face of obstacles that we all encounter in differing degrees. Thinking sociologically thus has the potential to promote solidarity between us: that is, a solidarity grounded in mutual understanding and respect and in a joint resistance to suffering and a shared condemnation of the cruelties that are its causes. Ultimately, if this is achieved, the cause of freedom will be greatly enhanced through being elevated to the rank of a common cause.

Going back to what we were saying about the fluidity of that which appears inflexible, sociological insight into the inner logic and meaning of forms of life other than our own may well prompt us to think again

about the boundaries that have been drawn between ourselves and others. A new understanding generated in this way may well allow our communications with 'others' to be easier and more likely to lead to mutual agreement. Fear and antagonism can be replaced by tolerance. There are no greater guarantees of individual freedom than the freedom of us all.

To note the connection between individual and collective freedom necessarily has a destabilizing effect on existing power relations or what are often called 'social orders'. It is for this reason that charges of 'political disloyalty' are all too often made against sociology by governments and other power-holders in control of the social order. This is very evident among those governments that seek to forge reality in their name by claiming to represent unproblematically the existing state of affairs as if it were natural, or by those who castigate contemporary conditions via nostalgic calls to a mythical bygone age in which all knew their place in society. When we witness yet another campaign against the 'subversive impact' of sociology, we can safely assume that another assault on the subjects' capacity to resist the coercive regulation of people's lives is in preparation by those who seek to govern by fiat. Such campaigns more often than not coincide with tough measures aimed at the extant forms of self-management and self-defence of collective rights; measures aimed at, in other words, the collective foundations of individual freedom.

Sometimes it is said that sociology is the power of the powerless. This is not always the case, particularly in those places where it is practised that find themselves under increasing pressures to conform to governmental expectations. There is no guarantee that having acquired sociological understanding, one can dissolve and disempower the 'tough realities' of life. Quite simply, the power of understanding is no match for the pressures of coercion allied with resigned and submissive common sense within prevailing political and economic conditions. Yet were it not for that understanding, the chance of the successful management of one's life and the collective management of shared life conditions would be slimmer still. It is a way of thinking whose value is often cherished only by those who cannot take-it-for-granted and when it comes to those who can, it is frequently undervalued.



### **The Content of *Thinking Sociologically***

This book has been written with the aim of helping people to understand their experiences through and with others. In so doing, it shows how the apparently familiar aspects of life can be interpreted in novel and different ways. Each chapter addresses issues that are part of our daily lives, even if they may not be at the forefront of our everyday understandings.

They concern ways of seeing and the dilemmas and choices that we routinely encounter, but often have little time or opportunity to reflect upon. Our aim is thus to prompt thinking in these terms and not to ‘correct’ knowledge. We wish to expand horizons of understanding, but not to replace some notion of error with the idea of an unquestionable truth. In the process we hope to encourage a questioning attitude in which understanding others enables us better to understand ourselves *with* others.

This book differs from many others because it is organized according to the issues that inform daily life. There are topics that occupy professional sociologists in the course of their practice that are mentioned only briefly or omitted entirely: for example, social research methods for the study of social life. This book is a sociological commentary on matters that directly inform our daily experiences and is divided into parts and chapters with that in mind. In this guide our sociological narrative will not develop in a linear manner because there are some topics to which we shall return throughout the book. For instance, issues of social identity will appear in many different guises in the following chapters, for this is how the effort of understanding works in practice. After all, as we examine new topics, they will reveal new questions and so bring to light those issues we had not previously considered. As we noted earlier, this is part of a process in which we gain a better understanding – a task without end.

