



A DEADLY EMBRACE: THE SOCIALIST APPROPRIATION OF SOCIOLOGY

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Sociological Notes No. 18

ISSN 0267-7113 ISBN 1 85637 239 1

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

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INTRODUCTION: THE GODFATHERS OF SOCIOLOGY

This paper is based on a talk I gave in November 1993 to a meeting of the Free Society at the Cambridge University Union Society. The location lead some to expect that I would be presenting a critique of the work of Professor Anthony Giddens, the Professor of Sociology at Cambridge University.

For two reasons I avoided the temptation. First it would have been discourteous for a visitor, even a visitor who is himself a Cambridge graduate, to trespass uninvited. Moreover, a systematic critique of Professor Giddens' complex theorising would be a more challenging task than can be accomplished effectively in a short talk. I readily admit that his work is altogether less crude and far cleverer than my primary target - the mainstream sociologists who mislead themselves, their readers, and their students by incorporating, explicitly or implicitly, a socialist platform into the body of sociological theory and social analysis.

On the other hand, Professor Giddens is — despite his relative sophistication and notwithstanding his persisting attention to the problematical relationship between structure and agency — a part of the problem I am addressing, and not part of the solution. Thus in *Sociology: A Brief But Critical Introduction* (page 169) he distances himself from the primary source of a constitutively socialist sociology somewhat less than robustly with his exhortation that we should “outflank Marx from the left”.

This is analogous, it seems to me, to giving up smoking by going on heroin. There is and can be no theoretical perspective to the left of Marx, nor indeed for a good way to his right, which is not opposed in principle to capitalism, negatively sceptical about the role of a free market, suspicious of business, fawningly supportive of an ever-expanding welfare state, careless of the national interests of the British as an autonomous people, or resistant to the liberal individualist concepts which Anglo-Saxon civilisation has uniquely fostered.

Again, more recently (*Sociology*, Vol 25, No 3, 1991) he has suggested apparently seriously that “the prospect of a war-free world is no longer wholly Utopian”. It seems to me that distinguishing shades of Utopianism is a difficult, and probably futile, art. In any case, the implication of this proposition that major war is less likely in the next three decades than in the three previous — presumably because of the collapse of socialism in the Soviet Union — is as implausible as it is politically dangerous.

It makes sense, other than in Utopian terms, only if we neglect the threat posed by communist China, the escalating challenge of militant Islam, the cauldron of chaos brewing in post-communist central and eastern Europe — of which the debacle in former Yugoslavia is a very modest foretaste, and the possibility that Germany may prove after all slightly less peaceable than your typical Hampstead sociologist.

BY THEIR FRUITS

There is, moreover, in addition to his own copious writing, his role as an influential patron of less than liberal sociology. I have elsewhere (*Seeds of Bankruptcy*, chapter 3) analysed in some detail the gross one-sidedness of Bilton and his associates' *Introductory Sociology*, a book which Professor Giddens commends as “simply the best ... introductory text currently available”. In 1988 I said of it after careful analysis that one might be forgiven for thinking it was written in Moscow rather than Cambridge.

Re-consideration of it five years later — still selling strongly, and widely used at A Level and in introductory courses in the Universities, suggests to me that Moscow is a mental rather than a geographical locus. Suffice it to say here that they interpret Britain as a deeply and unjustly unequal society in which inequitable subordination is maintained by a ruling class representing primarily capitalist forces.

The solution to the problem created by this situation, they claim, in a sentence which must be an unconscious echo of a motion from some long-distant party conference, “can only be social, national, and international, a matter of re-assessing and re-organising social priorities, and ultimately dependent on basic changes in socio-economic arrangements and ideologies”. Carried unambiguously, one suspects.

More recently, Polity Press has published, under Professor Giddens' aegis, a GCSE textbook by “Ken Browne” (sic) called *An Introduction to Sociology*. This volume does at least benefit from systematic disavowal of any of the alleged advantages in communism and unambiguous denial of the supposed attractions of Soviet society so widely praised in other textbooks. This leaves more than ample scope, however - perhaps indeed enhanced scope — for misleading young students aged 15 and 16 with a remarkably one-sided negativism about Britain.

After an introductory chapter which trades on the ritual distancing of the discipline from the polluting touch of mere common-sense, the book deals first with stratification, moves on directly in the next chapter to social class in modern Britain, and proceeds tirelessly to a further chapter on wealth, income and poverty. It turns next to two whole chapters on gender followed by a crescendo of the usual flatulence on “power”.

This is concluded by a section titled “Is Britain a democracy?” which emphasises what are described as “a number of weaknesses in British democracy”. The sub-text seems to be — “Double the number of weaknesses you first think of”. The chapter leaves readers with an invitation to “Discuss the extent to which Britain might be regarded as a democracy”. I particularly like that “might”, and also the implicit notion that the democratic status of different societies is a matter merely of opinion, rather than of institutional facts.

Thereafter, with the biased groundwork thoroughly laid in the first 144 one-sided pages, the book turns to a further 300 pages on the media; deviance — crime is not increasing, apparently; the family — including a mocking cartoon of the so-called “cereal packet” family, i.e. a normal, traditional family; and schooling, plus a separate chapter devoted, unsurprisingly enough by now, to inequality in education. This includes the following wonderful sentence (page 294):

A final problem for the principle of equality of educational opportunity in Britain is the continued existence of a fee-paying private sector of education — the independent schools.

One is rather surprised there isn't a paragraph on the “final solution” to this final problem, with independent schools hunted down like the last predators in a landscape made safe for sedentary socialists.

There are also four further chapters, including one on work and leisure which provides some gems of sociological miscomprehension such as I pick up from another context later in this paper.

Throughout Browne's book, as throughout Bilton's, and throughout many if not most current general and specialist texts, a picture is drawn of Britain as a land of helpless, oppressed, manipulated peasants, happily somewhat less poverty-stricken than in olden times, but subjected still to the inexplicably successful rule of capital. Who needs Marx if you can get away with sociology?

A PERSONAL VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

I turn next to approach the problem of the subversion of sociology from a more personal, autobiographical angle.

My latest, and probably last, book in the field of the sociology of youth has just been published (Marsland, 1993). Twenty years, five books, a dozen chapters in other people's books, thirty something papers, no end of book reviews, and more lectures and seminars on the topic than I can put a number to — all this since I started out in the field, and I seem to have made almost no impact on it.

Simon Frith was kind enough to propose in his elegantly written analysis of age and generation (1984) that my work comprises one of just two alternative theoretical perspectives in the sociology of youth which challenge the established, usual line seriously. However, since his other alternative is feminism, and since the dominant paradigm in the field — on his entirely correct analysis, the Marxist tradition of Stuart Hall — remains entirely immune to the challenge of my alternative “liberal perspective”, as Frith calls it, his recognition of my work is small comfort indeed.

The same old sociology of youth goes pontificating on as if I had never researched or written at all — a perfect exemplar of the general condition of orthodox British sociology. The sociology of youth, like sociology generally, is characterised by its being:

- obsessed with inequality;
- hypnotised by the concept of class;
- perversely resistant to understanding the nature of authority and to acknowledging its positive significance;
- naively dismissive of the genuine power of biological and psychological forces;
- and snobbishly contemptuous of our own society and its achievements.

In the mid-eighties I began to move towards the end of my involvement with the sociology of youth, and into the start of my attachment to a new specialty — the sociology of health. This is now the main focus of my research and writing. And what do I find but yet another instance of the usual sociology — inequality, class, utopianism, social constructionism, and intellectual treason all over again.

Of course, what is seen is bound to be coloured to some extent by perspective. Descriptions cannot escape entirely the shaping influence of the theoretical assumptions which frame and focus every account of anything.

Thus, it may be that I am still too much of an outsider to the sociology of health to appreciate the diversity which others apparently find in it. To me it seems to be pretty much of a muchness all through in important fundamentals. Again, perhaps it is my unusual liberal-individualist theoretical perspective which prevents me from seeing in the sociology of health anything much except irrelevancies, exaggerations, and errors.

However, even if it turns out that my outsider's perspective and my heretical assumptions are misleading me about the true condition of the sociology of health, it may be useful to set out what it looks like from where I stand.

MAINLINE ORTHODOXIES IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF HEALTH

I admit readily that the sociology of health is fortunately not all Navarro — author of an egregious and sadly influential book called *Medicine Under Capitalism* (1976, and also 1978, and, with Berman, 1981). However, to excuse the sociology of health of complicity in the vulgar Stalinism which Navarro's work represents is no great commendation. And even where sociologists of health distance themselves from the Navarros of the field, at the same time they do mostly report their absurd work fully, thrust it in front of students, take it deadly seriously, and half apologise for rejecting their bizarre ideas. Illness as a “capitalist disease” indeed!

And short of Navarro, there remains plenty of scope for the sociology of health to propagate some curious notions. Thus four typical postures routinely displayed by sociologists in their analysis of health and health care are as follows:

- exaggerated concern with health inequalities;
- unified resistance to the Government's health reforms;
- dogmatic antipathy to private medicine and independent health care;
- stubborn adherence to concepts characterised more by incoherence, implausibility, and political correctness than by their aptness for objective social analysis of illness, health, and health care.

I focus here on the first of these themes — inequality.

SOCIOLOGISTS OF HEALTH AND THEIR OBSESSION WITH INEQUALITY

It is hardly surprising that some students taking their first courses in sociology apparently believe that the celebrated analysis of health inequalities (1980) is called the *Black Report* not on account of the name of the chairman of the committee which produced it, but because of its unremittingly gloomy message and the unflagging negativism of its conclusions.

The Report was received in sociological circles with the same mixture of relief and acclaim as had greeted the alleged rediscovery of poverty announced by Coates and Silburn (1970) in *Poverty: The Forgotten Englishmen* amid the affluence of the nineteen sixties. Here at last, it seemed, was proof positive that — despite the NHS and quite contrary to the optimistic accounts of health and health care propagated by governments and their supposed agents — enormous inequalities in health had persisted unchanged, and these were attributable to class, structured inequality, and consequent poverty.

From the day of its delayed publication, the Report and its concerns became the central and fundamental focus of the sociology of health. The theme is presented in simpler and in more complex forms — to take account, for example, of gender and ethnic inequalities on top of class *tout court*. It appears not only in the naive form of Peter Townsend's original, but also in more sophis-

ticated versions incorporating the latest highly embroidered word from Foucault and his followers about the body, discipline, and control. It is balanced to some degree in general texts in the sociology of health by theoretical obeisance to Goffman and even to Parsons, and by descriptive attention to health care roles and systems.

Notwithstanding all this, however, the central and fundamental theme of the sociology of health is health inequalities. This is what student doctors and nurses, NHS managers, and the swelling ranks of health care ancillaries from Health Promotion Officers through Health Councillors to Health Surveillance Operatives primarily take from the courses, seminars, workshops, and conferences on the sociology of health to which they are increasingly subjected.

The sociology of education turned out, whatever theoretical vagaries happened fashionably to shape it from time to time (from Halsey, through Bernstein and Young to Bowles & Gintis and Bourdieu) to be really about the impact of class inequalities on educational opportunities and performance. Industrial sociology continued to be concerned at bottom, under rubrics as diverse as those of Fox and Braverman, with the single issue of the domination of disadvantaged masses by overprivileged oligarchs.

In precisely the same way, and to an even greater extent, the sociology of health bangs on in single-minded, unthinking unison about the intolerable inequity of inequalities in health status between the social classes. Neither occasional changes in its brand-image, nor minor variations in marketing styles and strategies between the several branches of the enterprise as a whole make any difference at all to this basic feature of the sociology of health.

A systematic critique of this whole line of analysis has been published recently by the Social Affairs Unit (Le Fanu, 1993). I limit myself here, therefore, to some informal observations designed to encourage critical debate about what has become an unchallengeable axiom at the core of the sociological analysis of health.

1. The most striking feature of the health condition of the British population since the War is not the persistence of inequalities but consistent and substantial improvement across the board — in mortality rates, in life expectancy, in infant mortality rates, in morbidity rates, and in almost every other specific sphere of health status. Even where this is clearly reported in the literature of the sociology of health, it is commonly discounted heavily by means of artfully selected comparisons with other countries which have supposedly done even better, or in the last resort by reference to entirely *a priori* norms, drawn from the sociologist's imagination, such as would tax angels.

2. The extent of the inequalities in health status identified in the *Black Report*, and repeated and elaborated in most subsequent accounts of the sociology of health, is systematically and substantially exaggerated. On most of the measures reported, the difference between the best and worst cases are very modest when account is realistically taken of the much larger differences between any of the contemporary figures and data from most other societies or our own recent history.

3. Accounts of the class patterning of differences in health are systematically oversimplified. Careful examination of the figures suggests the following challenges to the usual interpretation. In some sectors there is no simple class gradient, however modest. There are certainly no cases evident of the "dose-response relationship" — point for point parallels between two variables — which is usually required by epidemiologists before they are prepared to infer any causal connection.

In several, the key distinction is between the mass of the population on the one hand and the small minority of the poorest on the other — rather than between classes as such. In some spheres there are even reversals, with higher status groups worse off in health outcomes than supposedly disadvantaged groups. There is also, in every sector of health statistics, enormous variability *within class categories*, usually much more substantial than vari-

ation between classes. In other spheres, such as intelligence, sociologists typically interpret this sort of pattern as indicating an *absence* of structured inequality!

4. Whatever the extent and patterning of differences in health status may be, the inference of the authors of the *Black Report* and most sociologists of health that they are causally attributable to class and poverty is at best conjectural. Le Fanu argues, persuasively it seems to me, that it is demonstrably false. Thus:

- Given improved and improving standards of living, the only kind of poverty which could conceivably cause the bulk of ill health — except possibly among the tiny minority of the most disadvantaged — is *relative* poverty. It is difficult to see how this sort of mechanism could produce such results, except through the intervention of complex psychological processes which take us a long way beyond the simple force of poverty (Berger et al, 1992).
 - The artifactual nature of health statistics, which the authors of the *Black Report* dismiss with cavalier abandon, may in fact have real significance. The lowest class has been reduced in size *vis-à-vis* others over recent decades enormously. To such an extent, indeed, that most of the Class 5 morbidity statistics are based on such small-scale data that any inference about causes is dubious. Most illness conditions are much commoner in absolute terms among higher rather than lower classes. Moreover, the composition of the lowest social groups has been continually altered, with substantial and complex effects so far little investigated, by the incorporation in large numbers of the downwardly-mobile and immigrants (McCormick and Anderson, 1992).
 - When the specific diseases and illnesses which affect lower classes disproportionately are examined carefully in medical and epidemiological terms, it is apparent that, with a few exceptions, poverty is not the operative cause. More relevant are life-style decisions and habits arising not from poverty or even class — but from moral and cultural inclinations. On this crucial point, Le Fanu's analysis (op. cit.) is compelling.
 - The filtering effect of social mobility, propelling the healthier upward and the less healthy systematically downwards in the social structure, may have much more relevance than sociologists — with their unquestioned prejudices against biological explanations — typically allow for. The role of genetic susceptibilities in most types of morbidity has been increasingly acknowledged and become better understood in the decade since the *Black Report* was published.
 - Some of the persisting health differences are trace effects of the social inequalities and genuine poverty of previous times. Inadequate maternal diet affects susceptibilities across at least two generations. These effects will wash out gradually regardless of health care or broader social policies, provided that standards of living continue to improve. Policies designed to reduce them in other terms than these would be redundant and quite possibly counter-productive.
5. In any case, sociologists of health are probably guilty of unrealistic expectations about what either the NHS, or health care policy more broadly, or even a multi-sectoral social policy approach to health could conceivably achieve. They allow grossly insufficiently for the complexity of all things social, the persistent rigidities of institutions under whatever political regime, the irredeemable recalcitrance of individual human beings as such, and the risks and costs inevitably entailed in the development of any fully comprehensive health policy — verging at the extreme into what is beginning now to be referred to regularly as "health fascism" (Davies, 1991; Bliss, 1993).
6. Moreover, in as far as the least advantaged sector of the population in income and educational terms does suffer health penalties, this may be precisely due to rather than despite established health care policies. A targeted system focussing scarce public resources sharply on the most disadvantaged might reasonably be expected

to be more effective in reducing differences than the universalist approach of the post-war years.

A plausible argument can be made for suspecting that the augmented state welfarism urged by Peter Townsend and most sociologists of health as a means to reducing health inequalities will actually worsen them — since the better off and better educated will always do better out of such systems than the people who really need and deserve special help. Inasmuch as there is health disadvantage (i.e. intolerable exclusion from health gain, rather than mere inequality), and inasmuch as the state has a responsibility for reducing it, sociologists should be arguing for less universalistic, more sharply targeted health care policies.

Over and above these specific arguments against the obsession among sociologists of health with inequalities, there are also general and philosophical issues about inequality and its analysis which few sociologists seem to have taken on board adequately (Marsland, 1988, chapter 10; Flew, 1981 and 1992). For example, when is a difference an inequality? What level of difference should count as an inequality? Are there not some unavoidable inequalities? Perhaps even some beneficial inequalities? How can we make rational judgements about the social costs of reducing inequalities in one sector which have to be paid in others? And so on (Berger, 1987; Klein, 1988; Green, 1990; Saunders, 1990).

MISCONSTRUING THE WORLD OF WORK

The hijack of sociology by socialists extends beyond youth and health to most other spheres — not least the world of work. Corruption of the analysis of work is exemplified paradigmatically by a recent book edited by Ray Pahl.

Our competitors in Asia, in the USA and even elsewhere in Western Europe take a quite different view of work, and reap the rewards of it in seizing British jobs away from us. What we need are sociologists who can provide teachers with more objective and more positive analyses of work, and teachers who can transmit an enthusiastic understanding of work — properly analysed — to our young people. Instead we get distractions, misconstruals, and plain errors.

Pahl's book was published in 1988 by Blackwell. Available as a very cheap paperback at £9.95 for 752 pages, it is obviously expected to have large sales. No doubt they will be secured, since already it is appearing widely on reading lists for degree and sub-degree work, and, more dangerously, for professional training of all sorts. The gatekeepers of sociological doctrine like it.

As the cover accurately claims, "*On Work* will be essential reading for students of sociology, history, and politics". Indeed, for the next five years, and with a new edition for the next ten, I would expect this book to become the main access to understanding of the nature of work for thousands of students. It is destined to become the nineties equivalent of Bendix' classic *Work and Authority in Industry* (1956).

However, it differs from that book not only by reason of its broader scope and the changes in fashion which thirty years inevitably bring. It seems to me an odd, one-sided book which, in the light of its likely influence, we should be seriously concerned about, supposing we believe that modes of understanding the nature of work matter somewhat more than trivially for the health of the culture and the economy in liberal democratic societies.

EXAGGERATING GENDER

The single most remarkable feature of this likely influential book is the space given over to the gender issue. Yet Pahl himself is dissatisfied even with this. "The casual reader", he says at page 749:

... might imagine that I have overemphasised the role of women's work, simply because nearly half of all the essays I have included are specifically about that topic. If anything I should perhaps have devoted *more* space to women's work and employment ...

Quite apart from the overpowering emphasis on women throughout the book, and the fact that the cover illustration is of a painting by Bonvin of a woman ironing, one whole section is given over entirely to the women issue. Called "Most of the World's Work", it occupies one hundred and twenty pages, more than 15% of the whole book.

Even if this represents a proper attempt at correction of earlier chauvinism in the analysis of work — and this is presumed rather than demonstrated — it is surely an excessive over-correction. It seems to have been determined less by objective analysis of the concepts, theories, and literature of work provided by social scientists, than by the large proportion of students constituted by women, and by the all-pervasive influence of radical feminism.

I cannot think that objective understanding of work is likely to be much assisted by a book in which the editor's introduction to Part 3 begins with the following sentence:

In retrospect it is astonishing that until the early 1970s most sociologists neglected any serious consideration of those who did most of the world's work.

This proposition is simply not true, and the doctrinaire spirit in which it is presented is indicated pretty clearly by Pahl's footnoting it as follows:

It is significant that it was not until 1980 that a United Nations report provided the following quotation now widely available printed as a postcard:

Women
constitute *half* the world's
population,
perform nearly *two-thirds*
of its work hours,
receive *one-tenth* of the world's income,
and own less than *one-hundredth*
of the world's property.

This statement has shifted from being dramatically challenging to being conventionally acceptable in a very short time.

That phrase "conventionally acceptable" seems to me a good deal more accurate than Pahl perhaps realises. It may be irrelevant, untrue, misleading, and a serious distraction from the important task of examining the relations between women and work, but it has become regarded as self-evident gospel truth, and any challenge to it is treated as evidence of reactionary chauvinism if not of incipient fascism. This is surely no way to advance the analysis of work.

STRETCHING THE CONCEPT OF WORK

Orthodox British analysis of work has hitherto certainly narrowed the concept excessively — particularly by focussing on employment to the extent of neglecting self-employment almost entirely, by giving exaggerated attention to operational work roles at the cost of ignoring management, and by insisting on emphasising manual work — real work, as it were — while playing down the expanding non-manual, white-collar sector.

However, these errors are less influential in earlier British work, in American sociology, and in economic by contrast with sociological analysis. The situation is not in any case much helped, I think, by the general line adopted in *On Work*, which stretches the concept to the point of vacuity, while simultaneously maintaining the errors and omissions to which I have just referred.

This is apparent throughout the book, in the continuing thread of emphasis on women's work, and in particular in Part 4 of the book "Forms of Work and Sources of Labour". This focuses on what Pahl claims are "the various forms of communal and informal work that are not conventionally considered in the contemporary analysis of work" (page 469).

Pahl's argument in the introduction to Part 4 and the selected readings which comprise it are an elaboration of the argument about "self-provisioning" promulgated in his earlier book *Divi-*

sions of Labour. This, it seems to me, trades on spurious criticisms of the family, on an absurdly exaggerated notion of the potential competence of the Welfare State, and on a serious and dangerous downplaying of the current and likely significance of straightforward paid work.

“Sociologists”, he says at page 475, “have left the offices and factories of the formal economy to explore the changing pattern of all forms of work”. Alas, it seems to me this heavy emphasis on “forms of work outside employment” is nothing more than a red herring, and a dangerous influence on young people subjected to it — to whom employment (and self-employment) are presented as if, rather than being central, and crucial to society and to the individual, they were entirely socially constructed, a mere product of passing capitalism, and due to be incorporated by some broader and truer concept of work in some better organised society of the near-future.

Mother to teenage son, lying in bed at 10.00 in the morning: “Aren’t you going to work, son?” Son replies: “I’m already working, Mum, honest. Ask a sociologist.”

INACCURATE HISTORY OF WORK

Part 1 of the book is called “Ways of Working in Former Times”. The six essays it includes are for the most part interesting and valuable. Their overall effect, however, which is picked up and underlined by Pahl in his introduction to them and at other points in the book, is to construct a simple, single line of development in the transformation of work, and to de-emphasise to the point of denial other aspects of the development of work which are at least as important.

The story Pahl tells, in his own words and through the selection of papers he has made, is purely and simply what he calls “the rise of the male breadwinner”. Before capitalism and industrialism we are supposed to believe that the main features of work were that it had no significant role for employment, and that men and women joined in the broad domain of work without significant differentiation between them. As a result of social transformation, what has happened that matters, according to Pahl, is the development of employment as the normative model of work, and the exclusion of women from this narrowed domain.

This seems to me both inaccurate and misleading. Employment work and specialisation between the sexes in work as in other spheres are much older than capitalism or industrialism. Consider, for example, the accounts of work provided by Homer, Chaucer, and Shakespeare. They are indeed probably historically normal except in the very simplest types of society. Far from excluding women, the history of capitalism reveals a continuing gradual incorporation of women at increasingly high levels of the occupational system. Moreover, to suggest that this is the main line of development in the history of work is hugely misleading.

It encourages student readers to ignore other enormously important changes — above all increasing efficiency, productivity, prosperity, and standards of living. There is also radical improvement in the conditions and rewards of work; continuous upgrading of the skills and discretion required at all levels; transformation of the organisational structures and managerial systems of work; and, quite crucially, the development of freedom of choice in location and type of work.

All these positive developments disappear in Pahl’s account, submerged almost entirely in a one-sided, misleading story about the inexorable rise of the male breadwinner, thrusting women back into the home as he appears, clutching his spanner in one hand and his employment contract in the other, above the historical horizon.

EXAGGERATION AND MIS-CONSTRUAL OF CURRENT CHANGES IN THE WORLD OF WORK

I would not want to suggest that the nature and organisation of work are not currently undergoing radical change, or that the pace of such change may not escalate over the next decade. However,

the account provided by Pahl, particularly in Part 5 of the book (“Disaggregated Capitalism, World Factories, New Technologies, New Strategies, and New Contradictions”) seems to me to exaggerate and mis-construct likely changes. Pahl refers inter alia to “the current confusions about work”, “diverse and challenging developments” in the world of work, work as “the key personal, social, and political issue of the remaining years of the twentieth century”, “confusion and ambiguities about its meaning”, “a restructured world of work”, and “new ways and styles of getting the world’s work done”. Of course this is in part sales spiel for the book — why would people buy it if it hadn’t got a new story to tell? But in significant part he also means it, and it is an exaggeration.

For all the changes, there are also constancies — at least wherever liberal democracy is sustained or extended. All these are underplayed by Pahl’s single-minded focus on change. For example: managerial authority; meritocracy; economic incentives; specialisation; effortfulness; individual rewards and satisfactions; societal outputs, economic and other; delayed gratification; the necessity for commitment; etcetera, etcetera.

Moreover, the book’s diagnosis of the character of changes in work is inaccurate, or at least one-sided. This largely follows from the book’s one-sided history. If modern work history consists essentially of the rise of the male breadwinner, predicted change naturally and inevitably consists primarily in his decline. The main changes the book deals with are transformations in the relations between men, women, and work, and reduction in the salience of employment compared with other forms of work.

On the latter he seems to me simply wrong. The whole population of the Third World is currently being recruited into employment. On the former, he exaggerates enormously — after all there are limits both in biology and in psychology to the extent to which women can replace men as breadwinners. Moreover, if the other major change he emphasises — “the disaggregation of capitalism” — is, as it seems to me, a latter-day, wish-fulfilling alternative version of the old Marxist dream, it is neither explicitly argued anywhere in the book, nor plausible, nor even, except to socialists, desirable.

Pahl is quite rightly, in my view, sceptical about the concept of the “leisure society”. But his own vision of the future of work seems to me at least as unlikely and even more unattractive morally, politically, or in economic terms. The major constancies of work remain central in the agenda of free societies for the foreseeable future. It is dangerous to persuade student readers otherwise.

THE BOOK’S REAL STORY

Part 6 of the book, the last before a brief epilogue by Pahl himself, is called “Why Work?”. It consists of two papers. The first is Ronco and Peattie’s “Making Work”. This is a relatively harmless (if not enormously useful) phenomenological, even softly ethno-methodological, exploration of how work is socially constructed, justified, and evaluated.

The second essay, by Sean Sayers and called “The Need to Work”, is a different kind of thing altogether — although, placed to follow Ronco and Peattie, it trades rhetorically on their glib social constructionism. First published in *Radical Philosophy*, the trade journal of British socialist wisdom, it is a downright Marxist critique of all the assumptions and principles which are essential to make work actually work in a free society. His revealing section headings are: Alienation; Women and work; Work and liberation; A false need?; Industry and human nature; The need for leisure; The politics of work; and finally Socialism and work! He concludes — and Pahl’s book concludes its collected contents — as follows:

According to Lenin:

“The feudal organisation of social labour rested on the discipline of the bludgeon, while the working people, robbed and tyrannised by a handful of landowners, were utterly ignorant and downtrodden. The capitalist organisation of social labour

rested on the discipline of hunger. ... The communist organisation of social labour rests ... on the free and conscious discipline of the working people themselves who have thrown off the yoke both of the landowners and the capitalists. This new discipline does not drop from the skies, nor is it born from pious wishes, it grows out of the material conditions of large-scale capitalist production, and out of them alone.”

Lenin was writing in 1920, when Russia was still predominantly a peasant-based agricultural society. His words must have seemed as utopian and as distant from reality as Marx's.

If today, in our society, they still seem so it is for different reasons. We live in a capitalist society, based upon large-scale industry. For most people in our society, work is in many respects an alienating and oppressive experience. The spur that drives them to it may no longer be the threat of hunger as such, but certainly the threat of serious material deprivation plays its part. There is no question but that there are material incentives to work. And yet the evidence, I have been arguing, shows that work (at least of any but the most repulsive and degrading sort) is also now felt subjectively as a need. It may not yet be ‘life's *prime* want’, but it is a vital want, a need, nevertheless. So far from being a utopian dream, Marx's vision is increasingly becoming a fact of modern psychology. That is to say, the *subjective* conditions for a more satisfactory and rational organization of the work of society are developing here and now. What is lacking is the *objective* framework of economic and social relations, and the objective organization of work, which would allow this need to be satisfied.

For all the to-ing and fro-ing of Pahl's own arguments, for all his equivocation on socialism, *this* is the unequivocal concluding message he chooses to leave with his student readers. The same old negative nonsense, the same old critical sabotage of work as I reported in *Seeds of Bankruptcy*.

PSEUDO-PLURALISM

On the other hand, it is enormously difficult to pin down Pahl himself in the editorial material in the book. In the modest sixty pages he allows himself, scattered between the several sections of the book, he offers almost no clear, definite propositions. All are hedged with apparently judicious ifs and buts and may-bes. There are scarcely any clear, tight definitions even — criticisms of established definitions in abundance, but of coherent alternatives precious little sign.

The rhetorical effect of this is to leave the untutored reader imagining that the editorial line is open and pluralist. This cloaks the reality given by the selection and ordering of the readings, which is quite the opposite — an unambiguous, totally one-sided critique of normal, natural, and useful conceptions of work and its crucially positive role in the lives of men and women in free societies.

WASTED REFUTATION OF BRAVERMAN

The one clear and, as it seems to me, valuable move in the whole book occurs in Part 2 on “Employers’ Strategies and Workers’ Strategies”. Between them, his introduction and the readings provide a definite rejection and a coherent refutation of Braverman's sociologically fashionable thesis of “skill degradation”.

Braverman's Marxist theorising about the continuing, inevitable de-skilling of labour under advanced capitalism has dominated British industrial sociology for years — to the point of what I have called elsewhere “Bravermania”. Skill degradation always was an implausible and remarkably silly notion, controverted by all the available empirical evidence, and maintained purely to shore up collapsing Marxist theories of work. It was brought in primarily to serve as a cloak for Marxism's nakedness, once the immiseration thesis had been once and for all refuted by continuously improving general standards of living.

We should be grateful to Pahl and his authors at least for clearing Braverman out of the way definitively. Unfortunately, Pahl's alternatives are scarcely improvements. He concludes his analysis as follows (page 174):

New divisions of labour are emerging that help to break down traditional lines of conflict and replace them with new ones. The arguments and issues that dominated the era of mass production and the collective workers are being replaced by new arguments and issues concerned with flexibility, fragmentation, deregulation and the distinctive strategies of management and workers.

This leaves him and those for whom he speaks with ample scope to continue sociologists' established presumption of the primacy in industry of conflict, the malevolence of management, the necessity for collective resistance by workers, and the happy coincidence of workers' “victories” — in the ongoing struggle against exploitative oppression — with social progress. We are thus back, by another route, to the usual unmitigated negativism about the whole world of work as it is organised in free societies.

TOWARDS A POSITIVE WORK CULTURE

Samuel Smiles' demand for hard work and self-help, and Max Weber's identification of the work ethic and the values which underlie it as essential foundations of liberal democracy remain entirely valid. Yet in Britain at least sociologists are sabotaging the work ethic systematically and routinely. The influence of their destructively negative attitudes towards work on hundreds and thousands of our young people (and through the media on millions) cannot be other than corrosive of the work culture as a whole in the long run, and therefore of freedom itself.

A more accurate and more positive sociological account of work is essential (Marsland, 1994). On that basis the positive work culture which free societies need can be renewed and securely re-established.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS AN IMPROVEMENT IN SOCIOLOGY

If my analysis is correct, there is much to be done to bring sociology as a discipline back into the normal and proper condition of any field of enquiry in a free society. It is improper and intolerable for *any* discipline to be taken over wholesale from *any* direction by a sectarian ideology. Ideally we should strengthen our capacity for genuine objectivity (Marsland, “Methodological Inadequacies”, 1992). Short of that we should ensure that at least a better balance is achieved in teaching and teaching materials.

Of course, my analysis may be incorrect, and certainly it is strenuously resisted by many of my colleagues. They insist variously: that things have changed out of all recognition and improved enormously since the 1970s; that if there is a bias to the left in sociology, this is acceptable because it is balanced by a contrary bias in economics, in political science, and in the media; that other than in the natural sciences objectivity is impossible and irrelevant; or alternatively that this is how the social world really is, and only a theoretical focus on inequality, power, and subordination — i.e. what would usually be called a socialist perspective — can discover and reveal the true nature of life in societies such as ours.

All of these seem to me to be at best implausible, inadequate excuses for unpardonable offenses against the normal criteria of scholarship and science, as I have sought to show elsewhere (Marsland, *Fact and Fancy*, 1992). A particularly interesting version of rhetorical apologetics is provided by Ian Carter in *Ancient Cultures of Conceit* (1990).

In a chapter on critics of bias in sociology, he makes what seems to me a wholly self-contradictory case in defence of the discipline. On the one hand, he suggests that the critics of sociology comprise in and of themselves a refutation of their own arguments. Since David Martin, Julius Gould, Bryan Wilson, Caroline Cox, and David Marsland are a) sociologists and b) anti-socialist and

ipso facto conservative, then sociology is more open and balanced than they claim, and not purely a collectivist, socialist and anti-capitalist enterprise.

Not content with this plainly specious claim — since after all neither one swallow nor even five make a summer of balance, let alone an August Bank Holiday of objectivity, he argues, despite the contradiction, that sociology is bound (on account of its origins, its history, and the context of its development) to be critical, anti-capitalist, and in some sense progressivist and reformist, if not indeed probably radical.

To this second argument, he calls in aid the distinguished conservative sociologist Robert Nisbet (*The Sociological Tradition*, 1967). In my view he is here in part misinterpreting Nisbet, and in part relying on inappropriate evidence — since Nisbet is as much a collectivist in his paternalist conservatism as the socialists of the sociological mainstream. The conservative is almost as incapable as the socialist of comprehending or of tolerating liberal individualism, or of evaluating capitalism other than negatively.

Neither Carter's response to my criticisms of the appropriation of sociology by socialism, nor any others I have so far seen, are telling. I rest my case, and await a serious reply.

In the meantime, a new book by Irving Louis Horowitz demonstrates that these errors and weaknesses are not unique to British sociology. In *The Decomposition of Sociology* (1993), he suggests that sociology has changed "from a central discipline of the social sciences to an ideological outpost of political extremism". He argues that much contemporary social theory "has degenerated into pure critique, strongly influenced by Marxist dogmatism". This thinking, he shows:

has a strong element of anti-American and anti-western bias, in which all questions have one answer — the evil of capitalism — and all problems one solution — the good of socialism.

We should not, I suggest in concluding, despair of sociology because of temporary faults, however grave. A liberal and liberating sociology to balance and eventually, through free and fair competition, to displace the oppressive socialist orthodoxy is urgently needed. It is also, in my view, feasible. We must turn back to different strands of our discipline's roots — beyond the half-way house of Weber to Spencer, and beyond the prevarications of Goffman to Sumner — if we are to discover and construct a sociology which can tell the truth about social life and assist us in defending and improving free societies.

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