

## SOCIOLOGY AND FREEDOM

PETER L. BERGER

*Rutgers University*

*The American Sociologist* 1971, Vol. 6 (February): 1-5

Sociology, greatly to the surprise of most of its older practitioners, has acquired the reputation of a liberating discipline. Sociology courses are crowded with students in search of the intellectual tools with which to demolish the hypocritical world of their elders and fashion for themselves, if not for society at large, a new authenticity and a new freedom. Even more astonishing expectations are directed toward sociology by students who adhere to the radical left. For them, sociology is nothing less than the theoretical arm of revolutionary praxis, that is, a liberating discipline in the literal sense of a radical transformation of the social order. It is sociology in this latter understanding that has been associated with the remarkable proportion of students of the field who are among leading activists of the New Left, both in America and in western Europe—to the point where there now are firms in Germany and in France screening job applicants in order to bar those who have taken sociology courses. Even in this country, where sociology is established more firmly in academia, there are places where the field has taken on a slightly disreputable flavor.

All this is very recent indeed. Only a few years ago most outsiders, if they thought of a sociologist at all, thought of him as a dry character, with an insatiable lust for statistics who at best might dig up some data of use to policy makers and at worst (in the words of one malevolent commentator) might spend ten thousand dollars to discover the local house of ill repute. It would have required a wild imagination to conceive of this unexciting type as an object of interest either for young seekers after salvation or for the FBI. It has happened all the same. Especially among younger members of the profession there are now serious aspirants to drastically different images of the sociologist. There is the image of the sociologist as one of several guru types within the youth culture, in close proximity to the evangelists of psychedelia, T-group mysticism, and other fashionable gospels. There is also the image of the sociologist as a carrier of revolutionary doctrine and, potentially at least, as a character throwing Molotov cocktails through the windows of the faculty club (in either direction, depending on circumstances). Both images have provoked dismay as well as enthusiasm. The former image is especially galling for psychologists, who suddenly find themselves challenged in what so recently was a monopoly

in the treatment of the metaphysical afflictions of intellectuals. The latter image is a source of alarm not only to university administrators and law enforcement officers, but to orthodox Marxists, who describe the new radical sociologists in terms that could have been borrowed from Spiro Agnew.

The greatest dismay, naturally, comes from sociologists. Placid purveyors of Parsonian theory are suddenly confronted with demands to be "relevant" to the turbulent and constantly shifting commitments of the young. Graduates of the Bureau of Applied Social Research, collectors and producers of multiple correlations with impeccable margins of error, suddenly hear themselves denounced as academic hirelings of the military-industrial complex. This confrontation between the old and the new sociology, a yawning generation gap if there ever was one, could be fully observed at the 1969 meetings of the American Sociological Association in San Francisco. There were the various caucuses of radical leftists, black militants, and (perhaps most frightening of all) liberated or wanting-to-be liberated women sociologists, each group doing its thing in the antiseptic corridors of the San Francisco Hilton. Amid this novel furor, the majority, almost furtively, went about its usual business of interviewing job candidates, drinking publishers' liquor, and reading papers in atrocious English.

Sociology should be an instrument for the existential liberation of the individual; it should be a weapon in the revolutionary struggle to liberate society. To anyone familiar with the history of the discipline, these notions are startling, if not ironic. In the origins of sociology, there was indeed a quasi-religious conception of it—the conception of Auguste Comte and his followers. Comte, however, envisaged sociology as an *antirevolutionary* doctrine, as the new church that was to restore order and progress in the wake of the havoc caused by the French Revolution. With few exceptions, however, the Comtian view of sociology as *Heilswissen* (to use Max Scheler's term) did not survive into the classic age of the discipline, the period roughly between 1890 and 1930. None of the classic sociologists would have been able to make much sense of the current notion of sociology as a vehicle of personal liberation.

As to understanding sociology to be a doctrine of revolutionary praxis, it is noteworthy that some of the greatest classic figures (such as Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and Vilfredo Pareto) invested a good deal of effort in what they considered to be refutations of Marxism. Most classic sociology in Europe was a counterrevolutionary and (at least implicitly) conservative doctrine. Early

Paper delivered January 8, 1970, at the symposium "Freedom and the Human Sciences," Loyola University, Chicago. The full proceedings of the symposium will be published by Loyola University. Permission granted by Loyola University for separate publication of this paper is gratefully acknowledged.