
Reason's Revenge on Sociology

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The Decomposition of Sociology, by Irving Louis Horowitz. *Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. 282 pp. \$35.*

[Sociology] is the dismal science par excellence of our time, an intrinsically debunking discipline that should be congenial to nihilists, cynics, and other fit subjects for police surveillance.

—Peter L. Berger, sociologist (1969)

Irving Louis Horowitz has been an internal critic of sociology since the sixties. Thirty years ago in the introductory chapter of *The New Sociology: Essays in Social Science and Social Theory in Honor of C. Wright Mills*, which he edited, he complained of “the trivialization [of sociology] that has taken place over the past twenty-five years.” The chief culprit in this trivialization was empiricist sociology, which represented the abandonment of sociology’s classical tradition of “big-range” thinking in fundamentals, its comparative-historical theory and method, its openness to inspection and criticism, and its eagerness for improvement.

He accused sociologists of being

philosophically illiterate, unfamiliar with historical sources, and of being “scientific delinquents” who would continue to be so until they gave up their faith in claims about the separation of fact and value, and the separation of the man of action from the man of thought. “We have lived for so long with the dualism of fact and value that we have lost sight of the need to study values, not to celebrate their vagaries,” he observed.

That Horowitz felt compelled to write *The Decomposition of Sociology* shows that he and other critics of thirty years ago were not able to reverse the steady decline of sociology. As he points out, although *The New Sociology* was favorably reviewed, its impact on the profession was limited. “People interested in perfect methodological exercises [the unconcerned quantitativists] hardly paused to worry about, much less take seriously, the need to look at the big picture, whereas the growing legion of sociological discontents [the overly

concerned qualitativists] to whom the book was also aimed were taken up with movement politics . . . and had little time for or interest in sociological work." Three decades of polarization between these factions has placed the health of the discipline in grave danger—professionally, institutionally, and intellectually. Thus, there is good reason for Horowitz to render yet another assessment of the impact of politicization, planning, and partisanship on the inner history of sociology and other social sciences, and to make a plea for their reconstruction.

One of the first signs of the decomposition of sociology that Horowitz points to is that the discipline "has largely become a repository of discontent, a gathering of individuals who have special agendas, from gay and lesbian rights to liberation theology. . . . Any notion of a common democratic culture . . . has become suspect. Ideologists masked as sociologists attack [the notion of a universal scientific base] as a dangerous form of bourgeois objectivism or, worse, as an imperialist pretension. In this climate, sociology has lost meaning apart from its ideological roots and pseudoscientific posturing."

Decomposition is also evident in the attempt to ideologically define the tasks as well as the operations of research. This jeopardizes not only the general theory but also the specific practice of sociology. The field has separated into a multitude of problem-oriented specialities that draw practitioners from diverse fields such as economics, urban studies, criminal justice, nutrition, communications, and information systems.

The policy planning in these new disciplines is animated not by the traditional models of social science but by ideologies that assume capitalism's inability to solve the problems of urban development and that justify new social-welfare schemes as the answer.

Horowitz shows how sociological theory has degenerated into pure critique, strongly influenced by the strong anti-American and anti-Western bias of Marxist dogmatism in which all questions have one answer—the evil of capitalism—and all problems have one solution: the good of socialism. In one area after another, he shows how this same formulaic thinking dominates the field, resulting in a crude, reductionist view of contemporary social life.

Having developed into an ideology instead of a study of ideology, sociology amounts to a series of demands for correct politics rather than a set of studies of social culture. Intimidation has displaced intellectual inquiry; evidence is rejected if it contradicts the value system of the revolutionary vanguard. And everywhere ethnicity, treated as an irreducible primary, and elitist claims to privileges based on victim status shape the parameters of sociological discourse and membership.

In a 1970 essay entitled "Subjective, Si! Objective, No!" Robert Nisbet expressed his astonishment over the repudiation of objectivity as manifested in the preposterous notion of the "necessary ethnic roots of science." Now, a quarter century since Nisbet's article, the subjectivism he condemned remains the common denominator of all the social sciences. Protesting the subjectivist claim that the subjective obliter-

ates knowable reality, Horowitz observes that, "What starts as a perfectly reasonable expression of social-science interest in taking into account subjective elements of behavior . . . ends with a denial that reality is anything other than subjective." By denying the world of common experience, by making structure nothing more than perceived idiosyncratic actions, the new moral relativists are able to inform their readers in journals of sociological scholarship that "in the wonderful world without norms there can be no deviance—only alternative lifestyles, contextually situated."

Horowitz's critique of sociology is made with an eye toward its revitalization. He urges a large vision of the social sciences in which universities, research institutes, granting agencies, and publishers provide an environment in which research may be untainted by partisan agendas—where policy changes will not be hindered by the prevailing cultural climate. He calls on sociologists to move away from blind advocacy, to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century by utilizing the knowledge of other times and other places, and to develop and maintain a new set of universal standards in the era of a world culture.

Horowitz ends his analysis with the suggestion that, as the "third culture," social science has the potential to act as a source of reconciliation and transformation in the face of the gap between the "two cultures" of science and the humanities. Neither scientific nor humanistic studies has a monopoly on the truth; each is valuable in scrutinizing validity in the world of learning. Yet, as

Horowitz notes, this reality is widely overlooked. "For while the claims of science are viewed as universal and subject to rule of evidence and experience, the claims of the social sciences are seen as particular and subject to partisanship." He believes a third culture composed of the rich variety of the social sciences could offer a common language of discourse, logic, and method. But, he admits, "the conversion of a specialized series of disciplines into a shared culture, a third culture, is a tough, trying task. To achieve a positive outcome will require a double-edged struggle: against the political barbarians at the gate and against the professional savages who have already gotten inside."

I think we need not concern ourselves with establishing a third culture, but concentrate instead on demonstrating the unity of humanistic and scientific studies as forms of the same desire for understanding reality. Natural science has its own special methodology, which can be misapplied to man as a social being, but the study of the latter is also a form of science in that it is based on facts that can be reliably ascertained, although in a humanistic manner. The promotion of a third culture does nothing to eliminate the false dichotomy that is maintained between the two. To leave it unchallenged is to reinforce the very epistemological error of severing the connection between consciousness and reality that is at the root of the false antinomies that Horowitz wants to see finally discarded. For, as he concludes, if such dualisms are permitted to claim our attention in the production and use of knowledge, "then the war is lost, and only skirmishes remain

to be fought.”

Sociology's project should be to show the linkage of the two modes of knowledge as ways of understanding reality. Sociology should pursue this task by restructuring itself to comprehend social life as it actually exists. In doing so, it would recommit itself to that which Horowitz argues it once did best of all: “support[ing] humanistic disciplines in accurately studying conditions of the present to make the future a trifle better.” Humanistic sociology takes the position that we cannot achieve the meaningful understanding of human behavior and everyday interaction (the interest of humanism) apart from arriving at a causal interpretation of them (the interest of science).

As the great humanistic scientist Jacob Bronowski (1971) puts it, to think otherwise is to evade the very identity of man.

Sociologist Peter L. Berger (1963) argues that the fact that sociology's subject matter is the human condition makes it, among other qualities, a humanistic discipline. Its concern with the social dimension of human life brings it repeatedly to the fundamental question of what it means to be human, and what it means to be human in a particular situation.

Because it recognizes the nature of its data base, says Berger, humanistic sociology resists the kind of positivistic sociology that interprets social reality exclusively in sociological terms, “recognizing no other causal factors within its preserve.” It is able to accomplish this by its “ongoing communication with other disciplines that are vitally concerned with exploring the human

condition,” the most important of which are history and philosophy. “The foolishness of some sociological work,” he says, “could be easily avoided by a measure of literacy in these two areas.”

As a sociologist whose career has been irreparably damaged by the politicization of the field, I welcome Horowitz's challenging examination of the intellectual and political diseases that are corrupting sociology. But there are some points of contention I must raise regarding his analysis.

Conservatism. The fallacy of reducing ideas, beliefs, and value-judgments to “interests” is pervasive in sociological literature. Just as pervasive is the equation of conservatism with individualism. Although he must certainly know better, Horowitz does just this in his examination of James Coleman's rational-choice perspective in *The Foundations of Social Theory*. Although he applauds Coleman's effort, he calls the book “a simplistic account of social life.” As Horowitz sees it, “ultimately, the problem with the rational-choice model is that philosophically it is predicated on conservative premises that the individual is sovereign and that decisions made by the person are inevitably superior and carry greater beneficial effects than those made by collectivities or states.”

Rational-choice theory is premised on the principles of utilitarianism and draws many of its insights from the utilitarian analyses of the public-choice school of economics. Although utilitarianism shares with individualism the understanding of economic activity as resulting from the myriad choices and decisions of individuals, it differs from

individualism in two important respects: (1) it judges behavior as moral in terms of its “utility” for numbers of individuals; (2) its emphasis on the primacy of the general good leads it to base its justification of private property and capitalism not on the idea of rights but on the preservation of social cooperation and the social order. Utilitarian classical liberals want to preserve the institution of private property “not because the abolition of that institution would violate property rights but because it is in the interest of all strata of society” (Mises). This is a far cry from either individualism or conservatism.

Although these last both oppose government economic intervention, they differ significantly in their justifications of a free market. Conservatism justifies capitalism on the grounds of religion and tradition, while individualism does so on the grounds that capitalism is consonant with the self-sustaining and self-generating activities that human beings must perform if they are to survive, and that justice (individual rights) is its ruling principle.

Individualism. Elsewhere in his review of Coleman’s work, Horowitz also mischaracterizes individualism. A serious flaw in the exposition, he says, is that Coleman fails to understand “that both family values and corporate structures are subsumed under a new variety of individualism—one in which the corporate life does not replace family life but rather both are displaced in the rush to be defined as ‘a person.’ The demands of various movements for racial and sexual equality are not just attempts at collective representations of general interests. More pointedly, they

are demands that one should count as an individual—no more and certainly no less. Neither the corporation nor the family is in a position to deny this new surge of individualism, sometimes criticized, by Christopher Lasch, as a heightened egotism but just as readily viewed as an extension of constitutional demands that equity requires fair results no less than fair starting points.”

Horowitz’s reading of the demands for group-based equality (group rights) as expressions of individualism is baffling. To be sure, we are now living in an age of corporate liberalism when self-identity means “I am my ascriptive categories,” when personal autonomy is equated with collective “self-determination” of one’s membership groups. But to say that these premodern attitudes are expressions of individualism is to say that there is no distinction between the individual and the collective, and that individual rights and the non-existent group rights are synonymous. The rush to be defined as “a person” on the basis of race, ethnicity, or gender is the rush to be defined as a tribal entity.

It also is disappointing that Horowitz chooses to perpetuate Christopher Lasch’s equation of the rational self-interest of individualism with the self-centeredness of narcissism. For more than two centuries critics of individualism have successfully promoted the view that it means self-absorption, unscrupulous competition, atomism, deviance, rebelliousness, unconventionality, rationalism, nominalism, subjectivism, relativism, nihilism, self-centeredness, self-importance, self-indulgence, instant gratification, and greed. The meaning of individualism has been so distorted that

it is uncritically viewed by people around the world as a vice rather than a virtue.

The authentic individualist is self-consciously and consistently committed to rationality, *rational* self-interest, intellectual independence, moral autonomy, self-responsibility, self-reliance, personal integrity, self-respect, human dignity, individual rights, equality before the law, individual liberty, and capitalism (Waterman). While the authentic individualist is concerned with the choice between independence and dependence, the pseudo-individualist is concerned with the choice between self-fulfillment by any means, including the domination of others, and selflessness.

Authentic individualists would justifiably find it repugnant to be lumped with self-centered “dog-eat-dog” professional climbers, therapeutic welfare statisticians, interventionist “new industrialists,” particularistic multiculturalists and communitarian collectivists who are variously included among the representatives of the “new individualism” (Leinberger and Tucker). And no individualist understands the Constitution to contain a view of equity (or justice) that requires “fair [read: equal] results.” Indeed, individualists understand the Constitution to be an instrument for guaranteeing justice, not equality.

Toward Reason. Horowitz’s illuminating critique of the disintegrating effects of professionalization, planning, and partisanship on the intellectual and professional enterprise of sociology is primarily an analysis of symptoms. The root of the problem is epistemological, specifically the failure of sociology to assert the connection of human con-

sciousness and reality and thereby to validate its claim to reason. This failure has left sociology, as well as the other social and humanistic disciplines, hostage to a plethora of unnecessary corollary dichotomies: between value-judgments and the facts of reality; between morality and technical progress; between artistic imagination and sociological inquiry; between humanism and science; between specialization and holistic approaches to the learning experience; between pure and applied research. Such dualisms emerged because reason, the source of their unity, was abandoned, first by philosophy, its chief steward, then by the other humanities and the social sciences.

The abandonment of reason was possible because from their inception the disciplines misunderstood the claim to reason to mean the expression of either positivism or rationalism. The empiricists claimed that man obtains knowledge from experience—from direct perception of immediate facts with no recourse to concepts. The rationalists claimed that man obtains his knowledge of the world by deducing it exclusively from concepts which come from inside his head with no reliance on the perception of external reality. Instead of reinforcing the idea of reason as the faculty which integrates the sensory evidence of man’s perceptions into conceptual knowledge, philosophy’s division of the ascertainment of truth into two competing orientations of rational speculation and empirical observation delegitimized reason as man’s ultimate arbiter and guide in matters of knowledge, values, and action. The result was to fuel what Jeffrey C. Alexander calls

a "discourse of suspicion" of conceptual knowledge that has continued unabated since the nineteenth century. It has ended in "the discourse of subjectivity, relativity, and deconstruction" that Horowitz documents. Now, as Peter Berger (1969) has so aptly put it, "the relativizers are relativized, the debunkers are debunked."

The barbarians at sociology's gate and the savages who have taken up residence inside social science exist because social science abandoned reason. As philosopher Brand Blanshard (1962) has pointed out, "Just as there is nothing more practical than reasonableness, so there is no sphere of practice that will not have to pay a heavy ransom for the abandonment of reason as its authority and guide." (1962) Despite its flaws, *The Decomposition of Sociology* is a valuable contribution because Horowitz presents an unembarrassed documentation of the price paid by sociology for its role in that abandonment. There is reason to hope that the book will motivate social scientists to pursue the intellectual liberation that rational scholarship promises.

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