

Sociology

MORRIS GINSBERG

M.A., D.LIT.



Geoffrey Cumberlege

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I

SCOPE AND METHOD OF SOCIOLOGY

In this chapter I propose to say something, firstly about the scope of sociology and its methods, secondly about its relation to other social sciences and to social philosophy.

In the broadest sense, sociology is the study of human interactions and interrelations, their conditions and consequences. Ideally, it has for its field the whole life of man in society, all the activities whereby men maintain themselves in the struggle for existence, the rules and regulations which define their relations to each other, the systems of knowledge and belief, art and morals, and any other capacities and habits acquired and developed in the course of their activities as members of society.

But this ideal is clearly too generously conceived. It is obvious that no science could make any headway if it attempted to deal with the whole tissue of human relationships in their infinite ramifications. How then is the delimitation of the field to be achieved?

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Two types of answer have been given by sociologists to this question, and they have given rise to two somewhat different conceptions of the scope of sociology. One group of writers, best exemplified by the German sociologist Simmel and his followers, is inspired by the desire to mark sociology off very clearly from other branches of social study, to free it from the charge of overweening ambition and to confine it to the inquiry into certain defined aspects of human relationships. The other group recognizes clearly that the field of social investigation is too wide for any one discipline, and that if any progress is to be made there must be specialization and division of labour; but insists that, in addition to the special social sciences, such as economics, anthropology, comparative religion, comparative jurisprudence, etc., there is need also of a general social science, sociology, whose function it would be to bring the results of the special disciplines into relation with each other, to deal with the general conditions of social life, which, because of their very generality, are often ignored by the specialists, in short, to view social life as a whole. The conception of sociology as a clearly defined specialism, and the view of it as a synthesis of all social studies, have both of them strong adherents, and it is important at the outset to indicate

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clearly the attitude which will be taken in this book.

The first point of view has been developed in a variety of ways, but only the more important can here be mentioned. Simmel's sociology is based on the distinction between the forms of social relationships and their content and matter. Such relationships, for example, as competition, subordination, hierarchical organization, division of labour, are exemplified in different spheres of social life, such as the economic, the political and even the religious, moral or artistic. The business of general sociology is to disentangle these forms of social relationships and to study them in abstraction from the varying matter or content within which they are manifested. On this view the relation between sociology and the special social sciences is that it deals with the same topics as they, but from a different angle—namely, the angle of the different modes of social relationships.

In a somewhat similar manner, Vierkanndt regards sociology as a specialism concerned with the ultimate forms of the psychical bonds which link men to one another in society. Actual historical societies, for example, the French society of the eighteenth century, or the Chinese family, are of interest only as illustrative of particular types of relationships, for instance, of power, or of

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degree of community. But sociology, if it is to be freed from the charge of vagueness and indefiniteness, must not attempt any detailed historical or inductive study of concrete societies. Its aim is, according to Vierkandt, to obtain by direct introspective analysis an account of the irreducible categories of social relationships, such as the attitude of respect, shame, love and hate, submission, the need we experience for the approval of others, the bond that ties individuals into a group. Similarly, in dealing with culture, sociology should not, according to him, compete with the historian by dealing with the actual contents of cultural evolution. It should not for example seek to formulate such laws as Comte's law of the three stages, but should confine itself to the discovery of the fundamental forces of change and persistence. Only by such methods could a definite field be marked out for sociological investigation.

A more concrete and historically-minded treatment of sociology is that of Max Weber, though he too is concerned to mark out a distinctive field for sociology. The aim of sociology is to interpret or 'understand' social behaviour. Social behaviour does not cover the whole field of human relations. It is defined as activity which, in the intention of the agent, has reference to, and is determined by, the behaviour of others. An act

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initiated by the anticipated behaviour of a material object is not social. Indeed, not all human interactions are social. For instance, a collision between two cyclists is in itself merely a natural phenomenon when there is no intentional reference by each to the behaviour of the other, but their efforts to avoid each other, or the language they use after the event, constitute true social behaviour. Sociology is concerned essentially with the probability or chance of the occurrence of types of social behaviour as thus defined. Sociological laws are empirically established probabilities or statistical generalizations of the course of social behaviour of which an interpretation can be given, that is, which can be understood. By "understanding" is meant a grasp of the intention or sense of the agent or agents sufficient to make it intelligible in terms of normal habits of thought and feeling and what is known of the deviations from such normal habits. Entities, such as the state or the church, are defined by Max Weber in harmony with this general method in terms of social relationships, that is, of the probability of certain types of social behaviour. There is a state, for example, when there is a reasonable probability that certain types of behaviour will be enforced by a defined authority in given circumstances. Max Weber attaches

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great importance to definitions of this type, on the ground that they avoid the personification of social groupings which is the besetting sin of sociologists.

These and other similar conceptions of sociology as a specialism clearly contain much of value. The analysis and classification of types of social relationship must, on any view, form part of sociological inquiry. It may, however, be questioned whether they solve, as is maintained by their upholders, the problem of the relation between sociology and the special social sciences. For a study of social relationships must remain barren, if it is conducted in the abstract without full knowledge of the terms which in concrete life they relate. For example, the study of competition will yield little of profit unless its manifestations can be followed in detail in economic life, or the world of art and knowledge ; it may even turn out that social relations depend upon very different factors in different spheres of life, that, for example, subordination has a different explanation in the family, the church and the state. Whether this is the case or not cannot be ascertained without a detailed knowledge of these institutions. We should thus be led to enlarge our view of sociology as a study of social relationships in general by adding various special sociologies concerned with

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these relationships as embodied in each of the great spheres of culture, for example, the sociology of religion, of art, of law, of knowledge. But then we have again on our hands the problem of the relation of these special sociologies to the more generalized systematic sociology. Are we then not brought back to the synoptic or encyclopædic view of sociology? .

Before answering this question, let us consider this latter view of sociology a little more in detail. If anything is well established, it is that all parts of social life are intimately related and interwoven. If society is not an organism, it certainly has something organic in its nature, in the sense that its parts function together and that changes at any one point have repercussions that affect the whole. It is, therefore, of the greatest importance that societies should be studied as wholes, and that the nature of the interactions between its various elements should be understood. The specialist very naturally comes to claim prominence for the factors of social life with which he is particularly concerned. The student of politics, for example, tends to identify the state with the whole of society, the economist to see the source of all social change in economic conditions, the historian of religion or of morals to assign a decisive part to the religious and moral beliefs of

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peoples, while the student of the natural sciences will look to intellectual and technical development. But the interrelation between these elements of social life can only be determined by elaborate inductive and comparative study, a study of a kind not usually undertaken by the specialisms concerned with each of these parts of culture. There is, therefore, clearly need for a general and systematic sociology which, utilizing the results arrived at by the specialists, is concerned more particularly with their interrelations and seeks to give an interpretation of social life as a whole.

This conception of sociology is in general conformity with that held by such great thinkers as Durkheim in France and Hobhouse in England. According to Durkheim, sociology consists of three principal divisions, which he designates social morphology, social physiology and general sociology. Social morphology is concerned with the geographical or territorial basis of the life of peoples and its relation to types of social organization, and the problems of population, such as volume and density, local distribution and the like. Social physiology is extremely complex and has to be divided into a number of disciplines, such as the sociology of religion, of morals, of law, of economic life, and recently also of language, which is beginning