Introduction
The Promise of Sociology

It was 1967. I was sitting in Christ's College Library, very depressed. I was a grammar school boy who didn't belong in such a citadel of learning. I resented Cambridge – its spires and its gardens, its rituals and its gowns, its dons and its curfews, all things passed down from time immemorial. I resented the mathematics I was there to study, so removed from the world beyond. The place, the subject, the atmosphere all seemed so irrelevant, so meaningless.

And there on the desk, next to me, appeared a book called *Suicide*. That must be for me, I thought – a recipe for a way out of my misery. I picked it up and started reading. It was a strange tome written by some Frenchman called Émile Durkheim. As far as I could tell this turgid text made an astonishing claim: suicide – that most individual of acts, committed in a state of desperation – was a product of something beyond the individual, namely, the social relations one inhabits.

Rates of suicide, the propensity to commit suicide, Durkheim (1897) showed, varied with the group or society to which one belonged. Social relations that encourage excessive individualism lead to *egoistic* suicide. So Protestants, he claimed, are more likely to commit suicide than Catholics, men more than women. Group relations that demand exacting conformity, as in military

units or in societies with strict moral codes, can cause *altruistic* suicide, the opposite of egoistic suicide. States of moral confusion – when life loses its meaning, when people experience rapid social mobility, or when society is in crisis – lead to *anomic* suicide. So, there it was, I was suffering from anomie. Ironically, *Suicide* healed my depression far better than any pill or even psychotherapy. Far from offering a road to ending my life, *Suicide* would inspire a lifelong commitment to sociology. This was sociotherapy based on socioanalysis.

To know that what we do is limited by forces outside our immediate control can be paralyzing but it can also be strangely liberating, as the pressures on the self are redirected to the world beyond, a world we share with others. As Karl Marx, another sociologist, once wrote: we make history, but not under conditions of our own choosing. This is the defining question of sociology: How do human beings make their worlds under external constraints? Sociology discovers what those constraints are, but not only that. In addition, sociology studies how those constraints may be changed to expand the realm of possibilities.

Sociology excavates the often-repressed desire for a different world, a better world, and explores the conditions of and obstacles to its realization. Sociology is caught between the possible and the impossible: between the *utopian imagination* reaching beyond the constraints on human action and the *anti-utopian science* that reveals their existence and power. By "anti-utopian" I don't mean "dystopian," which refers to an undesirable or "bad" society, but the limits on the realization of a "good" society.

There are three moments to utopian thinking. First, there is the simple desire for a better world, the originating impulse that impels us to become sociologists. We become sociologists not to become rich but to make a better world, whatever *better* might mean – more equal, more free, more cooperative. Second, those values form the basis of

a systematic critique of society, the way the realization of values are systematically obstructed – how inequality, domination, egoism are reproduced by the social institutions we inhabit. This is the anti-utopian moment. Third, those same values can be molded into a vision of an alternative world. These alternatives are not blueprints; they are provisional, experimental, and tentative. In principle, they have nothing to do with totalitarianism and everything to do with emancipation. In this final moment the utopian imagination is not an abstract design but an elaboration, a one-sided elaboration of actually existing institutions, organizations, what Erik Wright called "real utopias," what Max Weber called "ideal-types." Suspended between their utopian aspirations and anti-utopian constraints, sociologists become archeologists excavating the world for emancipatory possibilities, now and in the past, here and there.[1] The sociologist is impelled to discover the embryos of alternative worlds by an incessant lament directed at the existing world.

Given Cambridge's insulation from the world beyond, it is not surprising that sociology never took root on such infertile soil. Other disciplines have thrived within such insulation: anthropology as the study of the colonial other as though it were a permanent fixture; economics as the fabrication of abstract models, removed from human experience; moral philosophy as the study of universal injunctions. They had long traditions in Cambridge. But sociology – this Johnny-come-lately discipline, flourishing in the red-brick universities at the time – was taboo. Sociology's crass descent into abject lives threatened the sacred distance of scholarly endeavor. Sociology invites everyone – scholars, students, and lay-people – to reflect on the social world in which *they* dwell as a condition of comprehending the world in which others dwell. It compels the recognition, and takes as its principle assumption and challenge, that we are part of the world we study – participants in the world we observe or observers in the world in which we participate. We are

not above the world; we are in the world. There's no knowledge from nowhere.

Still, this poses a problem – how can we study the world as we participate in it? We need some stabilizing rudder that will guide us through the swamps of society. This brings us back to the discipline's founding values. Sociology is a science that is built on moral commitment, on values that we hold deeply with others – freedom, reason, equality, solidarity. Different sociologists hold different values, but some value or set of values is necessary to stabilize our exploration of the world of which we are a part. This guided exploration, this science, seeks out the forces that obstruct the realization of what we value – forces that are hidden but, all the more certainly, govern our world. If everything were transparent to the actor, then there would be no science. We are in search of the invisible so as to make it visible – and thus more mutable – to ourselves and to others.

It is not enough to defend values in the abstract. A sociological approach to values is to discover them as embedded in institutions – institutions that incubate values as utopian imaginations that prefigure an alternative world. They might be the workplace free of alienation, the family free of domination, education free of inequality. The external forces we explore are the anti-utopian limits on the realization of those utopias. But these limits are not immoveable. As Max Weber writes in the epigraph to this book – the realization of the possible is through the pursuit of the impossible. Or to put it slightly differently, the pursuit of the impossible shifts the limits of the possible. To expand them we have to identify them and understand them. If we are not careful, however, the pursuit of the impossible can restrict as well expand those limits. Here lies the tragic moment of sociology – the way it maps the unintended consequences of utopian strivings. Without attention to the anti-utopian science, utopian strivings can, indeed, turn into dystopian nightmares.

It took me a few decades to come to these conclusions: to recognize the meaning of sociology as a value-based science, rooted in lived experience and focused on the tension between utopian and anti-utopian thinking. This book relates that process of discovery. It is not a novel, however. So it begins with my point of arrival. Part One begins by describing the utopian and anti-utopian tensions that lie at the heart of sociology as read through the conventional classics of sociology – Marx, Weber, and Durkheim – but captured most clearly in the life and writings of W. E. B. Du Bois. Feminists have made their own distinctive contributions.

The classics are also the founders of sociology because they had to carve out the distinctiveness of sociology as against other disciplines – psychology, economics, philosophy, history, and even theology – while at the same time drawing on them. Over the last century (and this is the subject of the second chapter), sociology has advanced as an academic discipline with its own division of labor, often trying to shed those founders either because they are obstacles to the progress of "value-free" science or because they are mired in the prejudices of their time. The classics are classics, however, because they transcend their time: they speak to the crises we face and are rooted in values we embrace. Their time is still our time.

Part Two turns to the point of departure, starting where so many of us begin – with policy sociology's naïve view that social problems have technical solutions. I went to India in the earnest belief that the question as to which language should be the medium of instruction in Indian universities could be solved by what today would be called a *field experiment*. I came away understanding that wider political and economic context interests were the major contributors to any solution. I thought that integrating Black and white pay scales in the copper industry of postcolonial Zambia was a mathematical problem, but I quickly learned that the supposedly neutral job evaluation scheme I constructed already contained within it

a solution defined by the preexisting racial order. I had entered the realm of policy sociology driven by utopian desire but without anti-utopian science.

Part Three, therefore, recognizes the limits to social change, leading me to public sociology and the hope that stimulating public debate and the exercise of collective rationality could shift those limits. Thus, television and print media disseminated the results of our study of the persistence of the color bar in the Zambian copper mines. Yet dissemination was not enough. Even though the study engendered public debate, the multinational corporation was able to deploy the results in its own interests. Casting one's findings into the public sphere that is populated by powerful actors can have unexpected and unintended consequences – often unfavorable consequences. Thus, I turned from this traditional, mediated public sociology, to what I call an organic public sociology – an intimate, organic connection between sociologists and their constituency. I worked with students at the University of Zambia to collectively contest government policies. But this, too, was diverted into a losing political battle. In another continent – Latin America – these interventions might be called *participant action research*, which had its own fateful consequences, including the disappearance of sociology.

Despairing, I realized I simply understood too little of the forces shaping the outcomes of these public interventions – the unintended consequences of intentional action. Part Four follows my path as a graduate student to the University of Chicago, one of the historic heartlands of sociology. I was very disappointed by what was on offer – a parochial and self-referential vision of sociology. I took up arms against this professional sociology in critiques of extant theories of race, of development, and then of work – theories that served racial domination, neocolonialism, and capitalist profit. I turned against those reigning theories and their comforting illusions: that racism would simply evaporate through assimilation; that Third World

countries released from colonialism would take off into modernity; that pretending to treat workers as human beings would get them to work harder. When the illusions proved to be just that, illusions, the temptation was to blame the victims – pathologized people of color, tradition-oriented colonized, lazy workers. Instead I drew on an anti-utopian Marxist research program to interrogate the class character of racial orders, the reproduction of cheap labor power through migration, and what I called "the politics of production." I remain committed to participant observation, studying the factory I worked in, challenging the objectivity of the removed scholar, and gaining insight into the subjectivity of industrial labor. At the end of this part I bring together the ideas of the preceding chapters to assess one important sociological framework for studying race as it applied to South Africa. Together these four chapters in Part Four comprise *critical sociology* – a critique of the world but also of professional sociology as it was then.

Part Five describes my own trajectory into professional sociology. It opens with a series of flukes that landed me a position at Berkeley. This was as radical a department of sociology as you could find in the US, but it was still driven by the imperatives of the discipline. To survive I had to develop a research program – both a methodology and a theory – that could advance Marxism within professional sociology. What was at stake was not only the advance of a Marxist science, not only my own survival, but also securing jobs for my students. To establish some sort of legitimacy for Marxism I had to respond to mainstream critics of my research. Among other things, they were skeptical of the generality of my claims based on the study of a single factory. They doubted that my experiences in my Chicago factory were a function of capitalism rather than modern industrialism. I responded by developing the "extended case method" but also turning, once again, to working in factories, this time in socialist Hungary. There I identified their specifically socialist organization

of labor, their specifically socialist production politics, and how they harbored a real utopia of democratic socialism. There were similarities between socialist and capitalist production, but there were also fundamental differences.

History took an unexpected turn. In 1989, while I was working away in the Lenin Steel Works (LKM), then the biggest and oldest steel mill in Hungary, state socialism crumbled. The democratic socialism I had envisioned from within the furnaces of LKM was never a serious contender; instead state socialism gave way to a destructive capitalism. That transition was not what I had come to Hungary to study. So I migrated to the still-standing high command of state socialism, to become a worker in the Soviet Union. But not for long. It was 1991 and the Soviet Union was itself in flux, about to sink into an extortionate merchant capitalism. From their lofty perch the Western economists were debating whether the transition to capitalism should be a *revolutionary* break with communism (shock therapy) or an *evolutionary* movement built through the creation of new supportive institutions. From where I was, in the factory, all I could see was the post-Soviet economy's self-destructive *involution*. The realm of exchange was flourishing but it came at the cost of production – out of the planned economy arose barter, mafia, and banks eating away at industry and agriculture. A few were making enormous gains, while the vast majority sank into precarity. Utopian thinking – mine as well as theirs – was dashed, once again, on unseen rocks.

With no factories to work in, I followed the fate of my fellow workers as they wrestled with what I called "primitive disaccumulation," the wanton destruction of the Soviet economy. This widespread faith in market fundamentalism – as though capitalism would spring spontaneously from the ruins of communism, as though there was a market road to a market economy – required a shift of critical perspective from Karl Marx to Karl Polanyi, taking Marxism in new directions. Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* (1944), a classic treatise on the

dangers of overextending the market, reconstructed *The Communist Manifesto* for the twentieth century, shifting the focus of attention from production to exchange, from exploitation to commodification, from the state to society, from class struggle to the counter-movement. In its account of market ideology as well as market reality, Polanyi's theory fitted the transition from socialism to capitalism far better than Marx. But it was a depressing scene, with people struggling for survival and with no better future in sight.

My sociology seemed irrelevant, impotent, but it was given new energy from the place I least expected. Part Six opens with the strange circumstances that led to my ascent up the professional ladder, into the leadership of national and international sociological associations. From that perch I returned to the quest for public sociology, inspired by the work of my colleagues and students at Berkeley, but also drawn to the committed sociology of South Africa driven by the fight against apartheid. I now understood that the advance of public sociology required an understanding of the world it sought to engage as well as the conditions of knowledge production.

The post-Soviet transition – not a "great transformation" but a "great involution" – accelerated "neoliberalism," deepening what I call *third-wave marketization* that has left no part of the world untouched. What I experienced in Russia during the 1990s was an exaggerated, pathological form of anarchic capitalism, dominated by finance, that has spread across the world. State socialism as the actually existing alternative to capitalism had dissolved, and with it the utopian variants it harbored. It now became necessary to search for socialist alternatives within the interstices of capitalism.

With a Polanyian lens I could see how third-wave marketization threatened human existence, and, at the same time, paralyzed liberal democracy, giving rise to right-wing and left-wing populisms as well as to authoritarian regimes. The counter-movements to first- and second-wave

marketization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries developed their own utopias, but the counter-movement to third-wave marketization seemed bereft of a utopian dimension, in large part because of the discrediting of the idea of socialism. One task for sociology today is to advance such utopian visions.

But is sociology capable of such visions? To answer that question, I turn to the conditions for the production of knowledge, not least the university, which is itself not exempt from the invading forces of capitalism. Third-wave marketization enters the university through the commodification of the production and dissemination of knowledge, which sets in motion a succession of crises: fiscal crisis, governance crisis, identity crisis, and legitimation crisis. If there was any doubt, this transformation of the university is the living demonstration that we are part of the world we study. It is no longer possible, if it ever was, to hold on to notions of sociology assembled from outside the world it studies. The university can no longer be conceived of as an ivory tower. It has become a battleground between still unrealized utopias and dystopias. Its public moment has to be recovered by expanded access but also accountability. Within the crevices of the capitalist university, there are still spaces of emancipation, teaching being one of the most important. In constituting students as a public, sociology turns itself into its own real utopia.