

# Conclusion

## Biography Meets History

C. Wright Mills famously wrote that sociology lies at the intersection of biography and history. Marx suggested something similar when he wrote that individuals make history but not under conditions of their own choosing. Wrestling with the balance between voluntarism and determinism is difficult in all circumstances, but far more difficult when applied to oneself as one swerves between authoring one's own life and being a victim of forces one doesn't control. Still, I've tried to steer a course between this Scylla and that Charybdis, making sense of what I've been up to in the last fifty years by turning my trajectory through sociology into an object of analysis, and, at the same time, placing it in a wider context.

I began with a naïve view of policy sociology, with the view that sociology has only to propose reform and the world will miraculously follow its command, that knowledge is emancipatory. But I soon discovered that political and economic contexts not only limit what policy measures are possible but also shape the outcome of any particular intervention. Later, instead of expecting others to spontaneously do what was rational, I tried to win them over by making research findings public, encouraging public discussion, what I call *public sociology*. I then realized that promoting public debate, even if it's successful, can generate a barrage of opposition that may

co-opt, deflect, or suppress perspectives distasteful to established interests.

My next step was to understand the constellation of interests that conspire to limit social change. I plunged into critical sociology that attended to the seemingly unbridgeable divide between what is and what could be – the dialectic of utopian and anti-utopian thinking. Here I found that critique of the world was not enough; it was also necessary to criticize theories that were blind to alternatives, bad and good – theories that were complacent before the chasm separating reality and potentiality.

The next move, therefore, was to enter professional sociology to advance a theoretical tradition in which what exists is not immovable but brings about its own destruction, thereby opening possibilities for advancing toward the impossible. That alternative tradition was Marxism – for so long a pariah within the academic world, now carried by a new generation challenging consecrated sociology. We aimed to show that Marxism as a science was as well if not better equipped to explain the world than what we were served up in graduate school. But, as we joined the battle on professional terrains and even had our victories, we began to lose the war, as institutional pressures emerged to sideline critique.

Running into a cul-de-sac, I grasped the professional reins of power – serendipitously handed to me – and returned to the original quest for a better world. Once again embracing public sociology, but now armed with a more sophisticated understanding of its limitations, I examined the context to which it is a response, in which it is received, and within which it is produced. I was bringing sociology to bear on the possibilities of transcending the limitations of the academic world, celebrating those who had taken that path before me.

In returning to the driving force of my own interest in sociology, I also turned to the genesis of the discipline itself, developing a new appreciation of those founding figures whose powerful vision is endangered by sociology's

professional turn. Whereas before the point was to vanquish Durkheim and Weber and the traditions they founded, now the point was to elevate them by putting them into dialogue with Marxism. I now looked upon the canon as the source of the deepest truths of sociology: a moral science built on values; the basis for scientific research programs marked by paradigmatic studies; a sensitivity to the sociologist's presence in the world and a theory of history that casts light on the present and on alternative futures, sending the utopian tide of possibility crashing against the anti-utopian rocks of impossibility. For all their flaws, Marx, Weber, and Durkheim remain with us because their ideas transcend the historical moment and geographic site of their production. Even their flaws are an inspiration to push their ideas forward.

Those who worship science for its own sake, who rely on data – big or small, quantitative or qualitative – also make important contributions – but all too often they lose sight of why sociology came into the world. I turned Alfred North Whitehead's claim that "a science that hesitates to forget its founders is lost" on its head. Sociology is at risk of disappearing into a welter of positivism, a minor branch of economics or political science, if we lose sight of our founders. We will be left scattered among the fashions and the fads of the day.

Today sociology is being revitalized by the rediscovery of W. E. B. Du Bois, for so long denied a place in the pantheon. If he secures a permanent place it will not be as a founder of a provincial US sociology, driven by a meticulous empiricism. On the contrary, he abandoned the confines of professional sociology to develop critical, policy, and public sociologies, aimed at an expanding audience, within the academic field and part of the world beyond, across disciplines and across countries. His attention to racial oppression in the context of capitalism led him to a global sociology, and, at the same time, brought reflexivity to the center of sociology – not to question its science but to advance its science. Throughout

his extraordinary life Du Bois reflected on how social and political forces had created him and how his sociology never lost hope for a better world. It may turn out that sociology cannot handle his radicalism and will force him back into a corner of professional sociology, but perhaps the crises of today and the movements they generate will instead carry his expansive mantle into the core of the discipline.

If there was ever a sociologist for whom biography and history were entangled, it was Du Bois. But that precept applies to all of us: the trajectory of the sociologist within the sociological field cannot be separated from the transformation of society. In my case, not only the optimism of youth but also the optimism of the times propelled my expeditions to India to study the language problem in university education, to Africa to study Zambianization in the copper mines and student rebellion. This was the era of postcolonial possibilities. Even my exploration of the bases of consent in the American factory was rooted in the presumption that discovering how society reproduced itself would inform strategies for its transformation. It led me to ask: if hegemony is born in the factory in the US, what did that hegemony look like in other advanced capitalist countries? How stable was that hegemony?

By the 1980s, it turned out, deindustrialization was giving rise to the lean and mean regulation of production in advanced capitalism, and hegemony was becoming hegemonic despotism – a rebalancing of coercion and consent. But things were opening up in Eastern Europe. Poland had Solidarity, Hungary had economic reforms, together they offered vistas of democratic socialism. Once again, my optimism had got the better of my sociology, as state socialism was not followed by a new democratic socialism but a peripheral capitalism with its distinctive ailments. So I left Hungary for the Soviet Union where perestroika was fermenting excitement in a formerly grey country. Within a year of my arrival the Soviet Union, too, would crash – the Bolshevik transition to capitalism

extinguishing the flame of perestroika. I stayed in Northern Russia for the next decade, watching the economic demise as the market gobbled up production. This was not a great transformation but a great involution.

Traditional Marxism, with its focus on production, couldn't help me understand the logic behind the chaos because industry itself was disappearing. So I turned to Karl Polanyi. His focus on the historical conditions and consequences of a market society gave me the lens to comprehend why the Chinese transition to capitalism nurtured by the party-state was so successful and the Russian transition of wanton destruction was such a disaster. But Polanyi had his limitations. He considered the adoption of market fundamentalism in the nineteenth century to have been a mistake made by following the dangerous utopianism of liberal economics. He was wrong. Marketization was not a *mistake*; it was forced upon humanity by the inexorable logic of capitalism – not once, not twice, but three times. As capitalism is caught between mutually generated crises of overproduction and profitability, so ever-deeper marketization has been the inevitable solution. There is no limit to what can be commodified – from kidneys to carbon emissions, from tweets to everyday life – and these new markets provide outlets both for excess capital and for cheapening production. Counter-movements saved capitalism from the first and second waves of marketization, but the jury is still out as to whether it can be saved a third time, and if so at what cost.

For Polanyi, it was labor, money, and nature – all factors of production – that succumbed to commodification. Commodification – the turning of objects into things that are bought and sold – can be a destructive process. It begins through an often violent expropriation of entities from their integument – kidneys from the body, labor and land from community, money from economic production. For Polanyi the English enclosure movement was the prototype of expropriation – a process that now assumes a

global scale. Once commodified, the commodity itself is in danger of losing its use value. The process of commodification renders labor precarious or useless; it contaminates land, air, and water; it turns money into a source of profit rather than a medium of exchange. The market can even expel commodities from exchange; it can turn them into waste, a process we can call ex-commodification. In the Russian transition to capitalism, wage labor disappeared with industry and survival reverted to subsistence, exchange through money dissolved into barter, and land was abandoned – prefiguring the degradation that is spreading across the globe.

Contra Polanyi, protection against the ravages of the market, most prominently through a welfare state and economic planning, was not the future of the planet, but a blip straddling the middle of the twentieth century in advanced capitalism or state socialism. During my fifty years of ethnographic studies I have witnessed the incursion of the market, upending what safety nets there were in country after country – precarity for the vast majority and untold riches for the few. As I circled the globe the transition wrought by third-wave marketization piled wreckage upon wreckage behind me. The Zambian copper mines faced a precipitous decline based on the falling price of copper, finally bringing the Zambian economy to its knees in the 1990s as “structural adjustment” culminated in auctioning off the mines. Allis-Chalmers, and US manufacturing more generally, closed down under bankruptcy in the 1980s, leaving behind an industrial wasteland we know as the rustbelt. Only five years after I set foot in Csepel Auto, Hungary’s socialism began to disintegrate; and only five months after I stopped working in Northern Furniture, Russia took the same road. Meanwhile, back home, third-wave marketization was slowly dismantling the public university. The 1960s dream of free education had flown out of the window in a cycle of declining state support and increasing tuition, as universities began employing cost-reducing armies of

exploited lecturers; pursuing revenues with the hare-brained schemes of an ever-expanding administrative class; and exchanging short-term, often illusory gains for long-term losses.

As third-wave marketization imposes its grip on the world, it is forging a new set of crises, having destroyed all the levees and ramparts that might protect it from itself. Intersecting and intensifying crises: the ceaseless commodification of the environment leading to climate change and the destruction of water supplies; the unprotected commodification of labor leading to the migration of the destitute and proliferating floods of refugees; the commodification of healthcare that leaves so many defenseless against pandemics; the commodification of knowledge through digital technologies, dominated by Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Apple, and Amazon, speeding up the circulation of commodities and intensifying surveillance. Finance capital is the driver of all these processes: the spurious making of money from money overseeing destruction and waste, ensuring that the stock market floats high even as the productive economy declines. The social movements that emerge out of this maelstrom can be as irrational as the economy to which they react, as popular sentiments are easily whipped up by dictators and lunatics. But underlying it all is third-wave marketization, the monster that is eating away at the social fabric.

Now is the time for sociology to wake up and take a grip on itself, recover its original mission to defend society against an overweening state and out-of-control market, battle the forces of extinction by elaborating visions growing in the interstices of capitalism. It cannot forsake its utopian and anti-utopian commitments: exposing possibilities within limits and thereby expanding the limits of the possible.