

On Writing

On Writing Sociology

Zygmunt Bauman

The need in thinking is what makes us think.

(Theodor W. Adorno)

QUOTING THE Czech poet Jan Skacel on the plight of the poet (who, in Skacel's words, only discovers the verses which 'were always, deep down, there'), Milan Kundera comments (in *L'Art du roman*, 1986): 'to write, means for the poet to crush the wall behind which something that "was always there" hides. In this respect, the task of the poet is not different from the work of history, which also discovers rather than invents'. History, like poets, uncovers, in ever new situations, the human possibilities heretofore hidden. What history does matter of factly, is a mission for the poet. To rise to this mission, the poet must refuse service to the truths known beforehand, truths already 'obvious' because floating on the surface. It does not matter whether such 'assumed in advance' truths are classified as revolutionary or dissident, Christian or atheist – or how just they are or are proclaimed to be. Whatever their nature and denomination, those 'truths' are not this 'something hidden' which the poet is called to uncover; they are, rather, parts of the wall which the poet's mission is to crush. Spokesmen for the obvious, self-evident and 'what we all believe, don't we' are *false poets*, says Kundera.

These are bold and insightful words, no doubt; they say a lot about the poets' quandary and set them a hard task. But what has the poet's vocation to do with the sociologist's calling? We, the sociologists, do not write poems – and some of us who occasionally do, take for the time of writing a leave of absence from our professional pursuits. And yet, if we do not wish to share the fate of 'false poets' and resent being 'false sociologists', we ought to come as close as the true poets do to the yet-hidden human possibilities; and for that reason we must need to crush the walls of the obvious and self-evident, of that prevailing ideological fashion of the day whose

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- *Theory, Culture & Society* 2000 (SAGE, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi), Vol. 17(1): 79–90
[0263-2764(200002)17:1;79–90;011536]

commonality is taken for the proof of its sense. Demolishing such walls is as much the sociologist's as it is the poet's calling, and for the same reason: they lie about human potential while barring the disclosure of their own bluff.

Perhaps the verses which the poet seeks 'were always there'. One cannot be so sure, though, about the human potential discovered by history. Do indeed humans – the makers and the made, the heroes and the victims of history – carry forever the same volume of possibilities waiting for the right time to be disclosed? Or is it rather that – as human history goes – the opposition between discovery and creation is null and void and makes no sense? Since history is the endless process of human creation, is it not for the same reason (and by the same token) the unending process of human self-discovery? Is not the propensity to disclose/create ever new possibilities, to relentlessly expand the inventory of possibilities already discovered and made real, the sole human potential which always has been, and always is, 'already there'? The question whether the new possibility has been created or 'merely' uncovered by history is no doubt a welcome nourishment to many a scholastic mind; as for history itself, it does not wait for an answer and can do quite well without one.

Niklas Luhmann's most seminal and precious legacy to fellow sociologists has been the notion of *autopoiesis* – self-creation (from Greek ποιεῖν: do, create, give form, be effective) – meant to grasp and encapsulate the gist of the human condition. The choice of term was itself a creation/discovery of the link (inherited kinship rather than chosen affinity) between history and poetry. Poetry and history are two parallel currents ('parallel' in the sense of a non-Euclidean universe ruled by Boylai/Lobachevski's geometry) of that autopoiesis of human potentialities, in which creation is the sole form discovery can take while self-discovery is the principal act of creation. Sociology, one is tempted to say, is a third current, running in parallel with those two. Or at least this is what it should be if it is to stay inside that human condition which it tries to grasp and make intelligible – and what it has tried to become since its inception, though it has been repeatedly diverted from trying by mistaking the seemingly impenetrable and not-yet-decomposed walls for the ultimate limits of human potential and going out of its way to reassure the garrison commanders and the troops they commanded that the line they have drawn will be never crossed.

Alfred de Musset suggested almost two centuries ago that 'great artists have no country'. Two centuries ago, these were militant words, a war-cry of sorts. They were written down amid deafening fanfares of youthful and credulous, and for that reason boisterous and pugnacious, patriotism. Politicians were discovering their vocation in building the nation-states of one law, one language, one world-view, one history and one future. Many poets and painters were discovering their mission: nourishing the tender sprouts of national spirit, resurrecting long-dead national traditions or conceiving of brand new ones that had never lived before, giving to the

nation as yet not-fully-enough-aware-of-being-a-nation the stories, the tunes, the images and the names of heroic ancestors – something to share, love and cherish, and so to lift the mere living together to the rank of belonging together: opening the eyes of the living to the beauty and sweetness of belonging by enthusing them to remember and venerate their dead and rejoice in guarding their legacy. Against that background, Musset's blunt verdict bore all the marks of a rebellion and a call to arms: it summoned fellow writers to refuse cooperation with the enterprise of the politicians, the prophets and the preachers of closely guarded borders and gun-bristling trenches. I do not know whether Musset intuited the fratricidal capacities of the kind of fraternities which the nationalist politicians and ideologist-laureates were determined to build; or whether his words were but an expression of the intellectual's disgust and resentment of narrow horizons, backwaters and a parochial mentality. Whatever was the case then, when read now, with the benefit of hindsight, through the magnifying glass of experience stained with ethnic cleansings, genocides and mass graves, Musset's words seem to have lost nothing of their topicality, challenge and urgency; nor have they lost any of their original controversiality. Now as then, they aim at the heart of the writers' mission and challenge their consciences with the question decisive for any writer's *raison d'être*.

A century and a half later Juan Goytisolo, probably the greatest among living Spanish writers, takes up the issue once more. In a recent interview ('Les Batailles de Juan Goytisolo' in *Le Monde* of 12 February 1999), he points out that once Spain had accepted, in the name of Catholic piety and under the influence of the Inquisition, a highly restrictive notion of national identity, the country became, towards the end of the 16th century, a 'cultural desert'. Let us note that Goytisolo writes in Spanish, but for many years lived in Paris and in the USA, to settle in the end in Morocco. And let us note that no other Spanish writer has had so many of his works translated into Arabic. Why? Goytisolo has no doubt about the reason. He explains: 'Intimacy and distance create a privileged situation. Both are necessary.' Though each for different reasons, both these qualities make their presence felt in his relations to his native Spanish and to his acquired Arabic, French and English – the languages of countries which in succession became his chosen substitute homes. Since he spent a large part of his life away from Spain, the Spanish language ceased to be for him the all-too-familiar, always at hand and calling for no reflection, tool of daily, mundane and ordinary communication. His intimacy with his childhood's language was not – could not be – affected, but now it has been supplemented with distance. The Spanish language became the 'authentic homeland in his exile', a territory known and felt and lived through from the inside and yet – since it became also remote – full of surprises and exciting discoveries. That intimate/distant territory lent itself to the cool and detached scrutiny *sine ira et studio*, disclosing pitfalls and possibilities invisible in vernacular uses, showing previously unsuspected plasticity, admitting and inviting creative intervention. It is the combination of intimacy and distance which allowed

Goytisolo to realize that the unreflexive immersion in a language – just the kind of immersion which exile makes all but impossible – is fraught with dangers: ‘If one lives only in the present, one risks disappearing together with the present.’ It was the ‘outside’, detached look at the native language, which allowed Goytisolo to step beyond the constantly vanishing present and so enrich his Spanish in a way otherwise unlikely, perhaps altogether inconceivable. He brought back into his prose and poetry ancient terms, long fallen into disuse, and by doing so he has blown off the store-room dust which has covered them, wiped out the patina of time and offered the words new and heretofore unsuspected (or long forgotten) vitality.

In *Contre-allée*, a book published recently in cooperation with Catherine Malabou, Derrida invites his readers to think *in travel* – or, more exactly, to ‘think travel’. That means – to think that unique activity of departing, going away from *chez soi*, going far, towards the unknown, risking all the risks, pleasures and dangers that the ‘unknown’ has in store (even the risk of *not returning*). Derrida is obsessed with ‘being away’. As Christian Delacampagne (in *Le Monde*, 12 March 1999) points out, there is reason to surmise that the obsession was born when the 12-year-old Jacques was, in 1942, sent down from the school which by the decree of the Vichy administration of North Africa was ordered to ‘purify’ itself of Jewish pupils. This is how the ‘perpetual exile’ of Jacques Derrida started. Since then, Derrida has divided his life between France and the USA. In the USA he was a Frenchman; in France, however hard he tried, the Algerian accent of his childhood kept breaking time and again through his exquisite French *parole*, betraying a *piéd noir* hidden under the thin skin of the Sorbonne professor (this is, some people think, why Derrida came to extol the superiority of writing and composed the aetiological myth of priority to support the axiological assertion). Culturally, Derrida was to remain ‘stateless’. This did not mean, though, having no cultural homeland. Quite the contrary: being ‘culturally stateless’ meant having more than one homeland, building a home of one’s own on the crossroads between cultures. Derrida became and remained a *métèque*, a cultural hybrid. His ‘home on the crossroads’ was built of language. And building a home on a cultural crossroads proved to be the best conceivable occasion to put language to the tests it seldom passes elsewhere, to see through its otherwise unnoticed qualities, to find out what language is capable of and on what promises which it makes it can never deliver. From that home on crossroads came the exciting and eye-opening news about the inherent plurality and undecidability of sense (in *L’Écriture et la différence*), about endemic impurity of origins (in *De la grammatologie*), and the perpetual unfulfilment of communication (in *La Carte postale*).

Goytisolo’s and Derrida’s messages are different from that of Musset: it is not true, the novelist and the philosopher suggest in unison, that great art has no homeland – on the contrary, art, like the artists, may have many homelands, and most certainly has more than one. The trick is to be inside and outside at the same time, to combine intimacy with the critical look of an outsider, involvement with detachment; a trick which sedentary people

are unlikely to learn. Learning the trick is the chance of the exile: *technically* an exile – one that is *in*, but not *of* the place. Unconfinedness that results from this condition (that *is* this condition) reveals homely truths to be man-made and un-made, and the mother tongue to be an endless stream of communication between generations and a treasury of messages always richer than any of their readings and forever waiting to be unpacked anew.

George Steiner has named Samuel Beckett, Jorge Luís Borges and Vladimir Nabokov the greatest among contemporary writers. What united them, he said, and what made them all great, was that each of the three moved with equal ease – was equally ‘at home’ – in several linguistic universes, not one. (A reminder is in order: ‘linguistic universe’ is a pleonastic phrase: the universe in which each one of us lives is and cannot but be ‘linguistic’ – made of words. Words light the islands of visible forms in the dark sea of the invisible and mark the scattered spots of relevance in the formless mass of the insignificant. It is words that slice the world into the classes of nameable objects and bring out their kinship or enmity, closeness or distance, affinity or mutual estrangement – and as long as they stay alone in the field they raise all such artefacts to the rank of reality – the only reality there is.) One needs to live, to visit, to know intimately more than one such universe to spy out human invention behind any universe’s imposing and indomitable structure and to discover just how much of human cultural effort is needed to divine the idea of nature with its laws and necessities; all that in order to muster, in the end, the audacity and the determination to join in that cultural effort *knowingly*, aware of its risks and pitfalls, but also of the boundlessness of its horizons.

To create (and so also to discover) always means breaking a rule; following a rule is but routine, more of the same – not an act of creation. For the exile, breaking rules is not a matter of free choice, but an eventuality that cannot be avoided. The exiles do not know enough of the rules reigning in the country of arrival, nor do they treat them unctuously enough, for their efforts to observe them and conform to be approved as genuine. As to their country of origin, going into exile has been recorded there as their original sin, in the light of which all that the sinners later may do would be taken down and used against them as the evidence of rule-breaking. By commission or by omission, rule-breaking becomes a trademark of the exiles. This is unlikely to endear them to the natives of any of the countries between which their life itineraries are plotted. But, paradoxically, it also allows them to bring to all the countries involved gifts which they need badly even without knowing it, and which they could hardly expect to receive from any other source.

Let me make myself clear. The ‘exile’ under discussion here is not necessarily a case of physical, bodily mobility. It may involve leaving one country for another, but it need not. As Christine Brooke-Rose put it (in her essay ‘Exsul’), the distinguishing mark of all exile, and particularly the writer’s exile (that is, the exile articulated in words and thus made a

communicable experience) is the refusal to be integrated: the determination to stand out from the physical space, to conjure up a place of one's own, different from the place in which those around are settled, a place unlike the places left behind and unlike the place of arrival. Exile is defined not in relation to any particular physical space or to the oppositions between a number of physical spaces, but through the autonomous stand taken towards space as such. 'Ultimately', asks Brooke-Rose:

. . . is not every poet or 'poetic' (exploring, rigorous) novelist an exile of sorts, looking in from outside into a bright, desirable image in the mind's eye, of the little world created, for the space of the writing effort and the shorter space of the reading? This kind of writing, often at odds with publisher and public, is the last solitary, nonsocialized creative art.

A resolute determination to stay 'nonsocialized'; consent solely to integrate with the condition of non-integration; resistance – often painful and agonizing, yet ultimately victorious – against the overwhelming pressure of the place, old or new; rugged defence of the right to pass judgement and choose; an embracing of ambivalence or calling ambivalence into being – these are, we may say, the constitutive features of 'exile'. All of them – please note – refer to the attitude and life strategy, to spiritual rather than physical mobility.

Michel Maffesoli (in *Du nomadisme: vagabondages initiatiques*, 1997) writes of the world we *all* inhabit nowadays as of the 'floating territory' in which a 'fragile individual' meets 'porous reality'. In this territory only such things or persons may fit as are fluid, ambiguous, in a state of perpetual becoming, in a constant state of self-transgression. 'Rootedness', if there is any, can only be dynamic: it needs to be re-stated and re-constituted daily – precisely through the repeated act of 'self-distantiation', that foundational, initiating act of 'being in travel', on the road. Having compared all of us – the inhabitants of the present-day world – to nomads, Jacques Attali (in *Chemins de sagesse*, 1996) suggests that apart from travelling light and being kind, friendly and hospitable to strangers whom they meet on their way, nomads must constantly be on watch – remembering that their camps are vulnerable, having no walls nor trenches to stop the intruders. Above all, nomads, struggling to survive in a world of nomads, need to grow used to a state of continuous disorientation, to travelling along roads of unknown direction, for an unknown duration, seldom looking beyond the next turn or crossing; they need to concentrate all their attention on that small stretch of the road which they need to negotiate before dusk.

'Fragile individuals', doomed to conduct their lives in a 'porous reality', feel they are skating on thin ice; and 'in skating over thin ice', Ralph Waldo Emerson remarked in his essay on *Prudence*, 'our safety is in our speed'. Individuals, fragile or not, need safety, crave safety, seek safety. And so they try, to the best of their ability, to keep up a high speed whatever they do. When running among fast runners, to slow down means to be left

behind; when running on thin ice, slowing down also means the real threat of being drowned. Speed, therefore, climbs to the top of the list of survival values.

Speed, however, is not conducive to thinking; not to thinking far ahead, or to long-term thinking at any rate. Thought calls for pause and rest, for ‘taking one’s time’, recapitulating the steps already taken, looking closely at the place reached and the wisdom (or imprudence, as the case may be) of reaching it. Thinking takes one’s mind away from the task at hand, which is always running and keeping up speed, whatever else it may be. And in the absence of thought, the skating on thin ice which is the *fate* of fragile individuals in the porous world may well be mistaken for their *destiny*.

Taking one’s fate for destiny, as Max Scheler insisted in his *Ordo Amoris*, is a grave mistake: ‘the destiny of man is not his fate . . . [T]he assumption that fate and destiny are the same deserves to be called fatalism’. Fatalism is an error of judgement, since in fact fate has ‘a natural and basically comprehensible origin’. Moreover, though fate is not a matter of free choice, and particularly of individual free choice, it ‘*grows up* out of the life of a man or a people’. To see all that, to note the difference and the gap between fate and destiny, and to escape the trap of fatalism, one needs resources not easily attainable when running on thin ice: ‘time off’ to think, and distance allowing a long view. ‘The image of our destiny’, Scheler warns, ‘is thrown into relief only in the recurrent traces left when we turn away from it.’ Fatalism, though, is a self-corroborating attitude: it makes the ‘turning away’, that *conditio sine qua non* of thinking, look useless and not worth trying.

Taking distance, taking time – in order to separate destiny and fate, to emancipate destiny from fate, to make destiny free to confront fate and challenge it: this is the calling of sociology. And this is what sociologists may do, if they consciously, deliberately and earnestly strive to reforge their calling – their fate – into their destiny.

‘Sociology is the answer. But what was the question?’, states, and asks, Ulrich Beck in *Politik in der Risikogesellschaft*. A few pages earlier Beck seems to articulate the question he seeks: the chance of a democracy that goes beyond ‘expertocracy’; a kind of democracy which ‘begins where debate and decision-making are opened about whether we *want* a life under the conditions that are being presented to us . . .’. The chance is under question not because someone has deliberately and malevolently shut the door to such a debate and prohibited an informed decision-taking; hardly ever in the past has freedom to speak out and to come together to discuss matters of common interest been as complete and unconditional as it is now. The point is, though, that more than the formal freedom to talk and pass resolutions is needed for this kind of democracy, thought by Beck to be our imperative, to start in earnest. We also need to know what it is that we need to talk about and what the resolutions we pass ought to be concerned with. And this in our type of society, in which the authority to speak and

resolve issues is the preserve of experts, who own the exclusive right to pronounce on the difference between reality and fantasy and to divide the possible from the impossible (experts, we may say, are almost by definition people who 'get the facts straight' – who take them as they come and think of the least risky way of living in their company), is not easy to achieve.

Why is this not easy and why it is unlikely to become easier unless something is done, Beck explains in his *Risikogesellschaft: Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*. He writes: 'what food is for hunger, eliminating risks, or interpreting them away, is for the consciousness of risks'. In a society haunted primarily by material want, such a choice – between 'eliminating' misery and 'interpreting it away' – did not exist. Now it does exist – and is daily taken. Hunger cannot be assuaged by denial; in hunger, subjective suffering and its objective cause are indissolubly linked, and the link is self-evident and cannot be belied. But risks, unlike material want, are not subjectively experienced; at least are not 'lived' directly unless mediated by knowledge. They may never reach the realm of subjective experience – they may be trivialized or downright denied before they arrive there, and the chance that they will be indeed *stopped on their way grows*, together with the extent of the risks.

What follows is that *sociology is needed today more than ever before*. The job in which sociologists are the experts – the job of restoring to view the lost link between the objective affliction and subjective experience – has become more vital and indispensable than ever, while less than ever likely to be performed without the professional help of sociologists, since its performance by the spokesmen and practitioners of other fields of expertise has become utterly improbable. If all experts deal with practical problems and all expert knowledge is focused on their resolution, sociology is one branch of expert knowledge for which the practical problem it struggles to resolve is the *enlightenment aimed at human understanding*. Sociology is perhaps the sole field of expertise in which (as Pierre Bourdieu pointed out in *La Misère du monde*) Dilthey's famed distinction between *explanation* and *understanding* has been overcome and cancelled.

To understand one's fate means to be aware of its difference from one's destiny. And to understand one's fate is to know the complex network of causes that brought that fate about and its difference from destiny. To *work* in the world (as distinct from being 'worked out and about' by it) one needs to know how the world works.

The kind of enlightenment which sociology is capable of delivering is addressed to freely choosing individuals and aimed to enhance and reinforce their freedom of choice. Its immediate objective is to reopen the allegedly shut case of explanation and so to promote understanding. It is the self-formation and self-assertion of individual men and women, the preliminary condition of their ability to decide whether they want the kind of life that has been presented to them as their fate, that as a result of sociological enlightenment may gain in vigour, effectiveness and rationality. The cause

of the autonomous society may profit together with the cause of the autonomous individual; they can only win or lose together.

To quote from *Le Délablement de l'Occident* of Cornelius Castoriadis:

... an autonomous society, a truly democratic society, is a society which questions everything that is pre-given and by the same token *liberates the creation of new meanings*. In such a society, all individuals are free to create for their lives the meanings they will (and can).

Society is truly autonomous once it 'knows, must know, that there are no "assured" meanings, that it lives on the surface of chaos, that it itself is a chaos seeking a form, but a form that is never fixed once for all'. The absence of guaranteed meanings – of absolute truths, of preordained norms of conduct, of pre-drawn and no-longer-needing-attention borderlines between right and wrong, of guaranteed rules of successful action – is the *conditio sine qua non* of, simultaneously, a truly autonomous society and truly free individuals; an autonomous society and the freedom of its members condition each other. Whatever safety democracy and individuality may muster depends not on fighting the endemic contingency and uncertainty of human condition, but on recognizing it and facing its consequences point blank.

If orthodox sociology, born and developed under the aegis of 'solid' modernity, was preoccupied with the conditions of human obedience and conformity, the prime concern of a sociology made to the measure of 'liquid' modernity needs to be the promotion of autonomy and freedom; such a sociology must therefore put individual self-awareness, understanding and *responsibility* in its focus. For the denizens of modern society in its solid and 'managed' phase, the major opposition was one between conformity and deviance; in modern society in its present-day 'liquefied' and 'decentred' phase, the major opposition which needs to be faced up to in order to pave the way to a truly autonomous society, is one between taking up responsibility or seeking a shelter where responsibility for one's own actions need not be taken by the actors.

The other side of the opposition, seeking shelter, is a seductive option and a realistic prospect. Already Alexis de Tocqueville (in the second volume of his *De la démocratie en Amérique*) noted that if selfishness, that bane haunting human kind in all periods of its history, 'desiccated the seeds of all virtues', individualism, a novel and typically modern affliction, only dries up 'the source of public virtues'; the affected individuals are busy 'cutting out small companies for their own use' while leaving the 'great society' to its own fate. The temptation to do so has grown considerably since de Tocqueville jotted down his observation.

Living among a multitude of competing values, norms and lifestyles, without a firm and reliable guarantee of being in the right, is hazardous and commands a high psychological price. No wonder that the attraction of the second response, of hiding from the requisites of responsible choice gathers

in strength. As Julia Kristeva puts it (in *Nations without Nationalism*), 'it is a rare person who does not invoke a primal shelter to compensate for personal disarray'. And we all, to a greater or lesser extent, sometimes more and sometimes less, find ourselves in that state of 'personal disarray'. Time and again we dream therefore of a 'great simplification'; we engage on our own account, unprompted, in regressive fantasies of which the images of pre-natal womb and walled-up home are prime inspirations. The search for a primal shelter is the 'other' of responsibility, just as deviance and rebellion were the 'other' of conformity. The yearning for primal shelter has come these days to replace rebellion which has by now ceased to be a sensible option; as Pierre Rosanvallon points out (in a new preface to his classic *Le Capitalisme utopique*), there is no longer a 'commanding authority to depose and replace. There seems to be no room left for a revolt, as the social fatalism *vis-à-vis* the phenomenon of unemployment testifies.'

Signs of malaise are abundant and salient, yet, as Pierre Bourdieu repeatedly observes, they seek in vain a legitimate expression in the world of politics. Short of articulate expression, they need to be read out, obliquely, from the outbursts of xenophobic and racist frenzy – the most common manifestations of the 'primal shelter' nostalgia. The available and no less popular alternative to neotribal moods of scapegoating and militant intolerance – departure from politics and withdrawal behind the fortified walls of the private – is no more prepossessing and, above all, no more adequate to the genuine source of the ailment. And so it is at this point that sociology, with its potential of explanation that promotes understanding, comes into its own more than at any other time in its history.

According to the ancient but never bettered Hippocratic tradition, as Pierre Bourdieu reminds the readers of *La Misère du monde*, genuine medicine begins with the recognition of the invisible disease – 'facts of which the sick person does not speak or forgets to report'. What is needed in the case of sociology is the 'revelation of the structural causes which the apparent signs and talk disclose only through distorting them [*ne dévoilent qu'en les voilant*]'. One needs to see through – explain and understand – the sufferings characteristic of the social order which 'no doubt pushed back the great misery (though not so much as it is often said), while . . . at the same time multiplying the social spaces . . . offering favourable conditions to the unprecedented growth of all sorts of little miseries'.

To diagnose a disease does not mean to cure it – this general rule applies to sociological diagnoses as much as it does to medical verdicts. But let us note that the illness of society differs from bodily illnesses in one tremendously important respect: in the case of an ailing social order, the absence of an adequate diagnosis (elbowed out or silenced by the tendency to 'interpret away' the risks spotted by Ulrich Beck) is a crucial, perhaps the decisive, part of the disease. As Cornelius Castoriadis famously put it, society is ill if it stops questioning itself; and it cannot be otherwise, considering that – whether it knows it or not – society is autonomous (its institutions are nothing but human-made and so, potentially,

human-unmade), and that suspension of self-questioning bars the awareness of autonomy while promoting the illusion of heteronomy with its unavoidably fatalistic consequences. To re-start questioning means to take a long step towards a cure. If in the history of the human condition discovery equals creation, if in thinking about the human condition explanation and understanding are one – so, in the efforts to improve human condition, diagnosis and therapy merge.

Pierre Bourdieu expressed this perfectly in the conclusion of *La Misère du monde*: ‘to become aware of the mechanisms which make life painful, even unlivable, does not mean to neutralize them; to bring to light the contradictions does not mean to resolve them’. And yet, sceptical as one can be about the social effectiveness of the sociological message, the effects of allowing those who suffer to discover the possibility of relating their sufferings to social causes cannot be denied; nor can the effects of the effects of becoming aware of the social origin of unhappiness ‘in all its forms, including the most intimate and most secret of them’, be dismissed.

Nothing is less innocent, Bourdieu reminds us, than *laissez-faire*. Watching human misery with equanimity while placating the pangs of conscience with ritual incantation of the TINA (‘there is no alternative’) creed, means complicity. Whoever willingly or by default partakes of the cover-up or, worse still, denial of the human-made, non-inevitable, contingent and alterable nature of social order, notably of the kind of order responsible for unhappiness, is guilty of immorality – of refusing help to a person in danger.

Doing sociology and writing sociology are aimed at disclosing the possibility of living together differently, with less misery or no misery: the possibility daily withheld, overlooked or unbelieved. Not-seeing, not-seeking and thereby suppressing this possibility is itself part of human misery and a major factor in its perpetuation. Its disclosure does not by itself predetermine its use; also, when known, possibilities may not be trusted enough to be put to the test of reality. Disclosure is the beginning, not the end of the war against human misery. But that war cannot be waged in earnest, let alone with a chance of at least partial success, unless the scale of human freedom is revealed and recognized so that freedom can be deployed fully in the fight against the social sources of all, even the most individual and private, unhappinesses.

There is no choice between an ‘engaged’ and ‘neutral’ way of doing sociology. A non-committal sociology is an impossibility. Seeking a morally neutral stance among the many brands of sociology practised today, stretching all the way from the outspokenly libertarian to the staunchly communitarian, would be a vain effort. Sociologists may deny or forget the ‘world-view’ effects of their work, and the impact of that view on human singular or joint actions, only at the expense of forfeiting that responsibility of choice which every other human being faces daily. The job of sociology is to see to it that the choices are genuinely free, and that they remain so, increasingly so, for the duration of humanity.

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