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HUMANISM

Humanism in its broadest sense can be traced to the philosophical movement that originated in Italy in the second half of the fourteenth century and that affirmed the dignity of the human being. Although over the centuries there have been numerous varieties of humanism, both religious and nonreligious, all have been in agreement on the basic tenet that every human being has dignity and worth and therefore should be the measure of all things.

Humanism, as practiced in sociology, starts from two fundamental assumptions. The first of these is that sociology should be a moral enterprise, one whose fundamental purpose is to challenge the views and conditions that restrain human potential in a given society. The second is that sociology should not be defined as a scientific discipline that embraces "positivism"—the position that facts exist independently of the observer and that the observer should be a value-neutral compiler of facts.

Sociologists operating in the humanist tradition hold that the study of society begins with the premise that human beings are free to create their social world and that whatever impinges on that freedom is ultimately negative and destructive. They argue that the use of one of the traditional methodological tools of science—dispassionate observation—has not only taken sociology away from its Enlightenment origins in moral philosophy but is based on a faulty epistemology.

Although diverse theoretical frameworks, such as Marxism, conflict theory, phenomenology, symbolic interaction, and feminist sociology, can all be said to have some form of a humanistic orientation as a part of their overall framework's, humanism in sociology is most readily identified with those sociologists who in their teaching, research, and activism gravitate around the Association for Humanist Sociology (AHS), which was founded in 1976 by Alfred McClung Lee, Elizabeth McClung Lee, and Charles Flynn.

The fundamental underpinnings of sociological humanism can be traced back to two traditions that came out of the Enlightenment: moral philosophy and empiricism. Although Modern sociologists see these traditions as separate, to the Enlightenment French and Scottish philosophers (collectively known as the philosophes) they were intertwined and interdependent. The philosophes called for a fusion of morals and science, for a social science that sought to liberate the human spirit and ensure the fullest development of the person. It is this emphasis on moral philosophy and empiricism, as modified by German idealism and more recently by the American philosophical tradition of pragmatism, that constitutes the foundations of humanism in sociology, today.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE LEGACY OF SOCIOLOGICAL HUMANISM

Although the Enlightenment philosophes initiated the enterprise of modern sociology through their call for the application of scientific principles to the study of human behavior (Rossides 1998), humanist sociologists stress that the philosophes were first and foremost moral philosophers. Science and morality were to be fused,

not separated; the "is" and the "ought" were to be merged into a moral science, a science for the betterment of humankind. It was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, with his arguments against inequality and for the dignity of the person, who best represents this tradition of moral science. Rousseau (1755-1855) started with the fundamental assumption that all people are created equal and from this formulated a radical system of politics. Rousseau and the philosophes were wedded to the idea that individual liberty and freedom prospered only under conditions of minimal external constraint that had to be consensually based. In the eighteenth century, the philosophes articulated their doctrine of individual liberty and freedom chiefly in the idiom of natural rights (Seidman 1983).

The philosophes held that the most important value was the freedom of the individual in a humane society that ensured this freedom. Not having any developed psychology of the individual, of the subjective side of human behavior, or of how institutions are formed, they could not go beyond this modest beginning. They could not fashion a full-blown vision of the free individual within a society based on the principle of human freedom.

This tradition of a moral science is overlooked by contemporary sociologists, who instead focus on the empiricism of the philosophes; but although empiricism without doubt played the greatest role in the rise of social science, it is only one part of what the philosophes advocated. In their dismissal of the moral science tradition and in their virtually unquestioning embrace of the positivism of Comte, Spenser, Durkheim, and the other early founders of sociology as a discipline, contemporary sociologists overlook the philosophes' concern that there was an epistemological dilemma inherent in the new empirical science they envisioned. If a social science was to arise out of the Enlightenment, it had to have a new conception of knowledge, one that rejected Greek and medieval Christian epistemology. The Aristotelian view held that a definite entity resided within the human body, an entity that passively observed what was going on in the world, just as a spectator does. The observer sees a picture of the world, and it is this passive observation that constitutes experience. Science, in the Aristotelian model, was the process of observing objects as they were thought to be conceived in the human mind. Following Newton, the world was to be understood in terms of mathematical equations by means of axioms that were put in the minds of humans by God and that enabled the mind to picture reality. John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* ([1690] 1894) represented an early attempt to show that the extreme rationalist notion that the world precisely followed mathematical axioms was in error. Locke argued that first principles did not exist a priori but came from the facts of experience. Locke, however, became caught up in the epistemological dilemma that experience was mental, and not physical, and therefore still had to be located in the "unscientific" concept of mind. This led Locke, like David Hume (1711-1776), to conclude that an exact science of human behavior was unattainable (Randall 1976). Only probabilistic knowledge could be arrived at, and this could only modestly be used to guide humankind.

Although the epistemological dilemma posed by Locke and other Enlightenment thinkers was real to them, the development of sociology in France, England, and later in the United States discarded these concerns and embraced positivism as the cornerstones of the discipline. Sociology, however, developed differently in Germany, and it is through German social science that the tradition of humanism in sociology was kept alive.

GERMAN IDEALISM

German social science, unlike its English, French, and later American counterparts, was much more influenced by idealism than by empiricism. This influence is due to two giants of philosophy: Immanuel Kant and Georg William Freidrich Hegel.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant ([1781] 1965) was interested in answering the basic question of how autonomy and free will were possible in a deterministic Newtonian universe. His answer led him back to Locke's epistemological dilemma. According to Kant, there is a phenomenal and a noumenological self. Kant called the world as experienced by the individual phenomena and the thing in itself noumena. Since science is

concerned with experience, Kant relegated it to the study of phenomena. The noumenon is beyond the scientist's realm of inquiry, because Kant wanted to claim the noumenon for the moral philosopher. For Kant, the basis of moral philosophy was to be found in the human mind; moral law located a priori in the mind and can be deduced rationally. Kant, like Locke before him, was faced with the dilemma of how the mind works.

Kant's explanation was that objects of scientific investigation are not simply discovered in the world but are constituted and synthesized a priori in the human mind. The external world that human beings experience is not a copy of reality, but something that can only be experienced and understood in light of a priori forms and categories. According to Kant, these forms and categories determine the form but not the content of external reality. Causation is a product of the mind and is a necessary precondition for the conception of an orderly universe.

Kant believed that he had solved the problem of knowledge through the forms and that he could do the same for ethics. Morally right action, too, is located in the mind. Going back to Rousseau and before him to the fourteenth-century humanists, Kant ([1788] 1949) focused on the dignity of the human being. His notion of the categorical imperative, that each person be treated as an end and never as a means, solidifies the importance of the person as the cornerstone of philosophical inquiry and of humanism. Natural rights are part of the noumenal world, part of the moral self. Kant thus began to look to the mind, to the self, as the primary origin of society. Moral values come from human consciousness: but, lacking a viable theory of consciousness, Kant could go only so far. It was Hegel who took up the challenge and subsequently made further progress toward the development of a humanistic orientation in sociology.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831).

Hegel was well versed in the social and moral philosophy of his day, and was particularly steeped in the work of Kant, who was the dominant figure in Germany philosophy at the time. Although Hegel ([1821] 1967) held that Kant's epistemology was successful in explaining how scientific knowledge was possible, he differed with Kant by rejecting Kant's belief that the categories were innate and there for a historical. For Hegel, the human mind has to be understood in the context of human history. Human reason is the product of collective action and as such is constantly evolving toward an ultimate understanding of its own consciousness. There are adumbrations of the sociology of knowledge in Hegel's view, specifically in his arguments that the Kantian categories, which are used to make sense of the world, change as the political and social climate changes. Hegel is very close to modern sociology in other aspects of his thought, and it is extremely unfortunate that he is so often dismissed because of his ultimate reliance on the metaphysical assumption that total understanding would only come with the realization of the absolute spirit in human history. When Hegel's contributions are mentioned, it is usually only as having had an influence on Marx, and even then it is inevitably pointed out that Marx turned Hegel "upside down." These interpretations overlook the fact that Hegel was the first modern theorist to develop an anti-positivistic critical approach to society. Hegel rejected positivism because of its overreliance on empiricism, which forces the individual to find sense impressions meaningful. As was Kant's philosophy, Hegel's philosophy was humanist at its core.

Also overlooked is the fact that Hegel not only offered an active epistemology but a social one as well. This socially based epistemology (the categories are conditioned by social and political factors) also led him to conceive of a socially based moral philosophy. Whereas Kant held that the concept of freedom was based in the mind of the individual, Hegel, like Rousseau, believed that freedom could only be expressed in terms of a supportive community.

Perhaps Hegel's most important contribution to modern social science is that he was among the first theorists to look at the social development of self, something that makes him a forerunner of humanist sociology. For Hegel ([1807] 1967), the self must be understood as a process, not as a static reality. The self develops as the mind negotiates intersubjectivity. We experience ourselves as both an intending subject and

as an object of experience. The mind develops and strives for ultimate truth in this context, which, to Hegel, is freedom. The essence of being is, therefore, a self-reflexive struggle for freedom. Hegel's idealism led him to conclude that objective analysis is always mediated by subjective factors and points toward freedom. In Hegel, there is the outline of a critical, humanistic sociology. He offered an active, anti positivistic, socially conditioned epistemology, with an emphasis upon freedom through the seeking of self knowledge, along with a critique of any non-moral-ly based society.

PRAGMATISM AND HUMANISM

The importance of pragmatism for a humanistic orientation in sociology lies in its assumption of an active epistemology that undergirds an active theory of the mind, thereby challenging the positivistic behaviorism of the time made popular by the likes of John B. Watson. For the pragmatists, how the mind comes to know cannot be separated from how the mind actually develops.

George Herbert Mead ([1934] 1974) exemplifies the pragmatists' view concerning the development of mind. Consciousness and will arise from problems. Individuals ascertain the intentions of others and then respond on the basis of their interpretations. If there were no interactions with others, there would be no development of the mind. Individuals possess the ability to modify their own behavior; they are subjects who construct their acts rather than simply responding in predetermined ways. Human beings are capable of reflexive behavior: that is, they can turn back and think about their experiences. The individual is not a passive agent who merely reacts to external constraints, but someone who actively chooses among alternative courses of action. Individuals interpret data furnished to them in social situation. Choices of potential solutions are only limited by the given facts of the individual's presence in the larger network of society. This ability to choose among alternatives makes individuals both determined and determiners (Meltzer et al. 1977).

What Mead and the pragmatists stressed was the important notion that the determination of ideas—in particular, the impact of social structure on the mind of an individual—is a social-psychological process. Thinking follows the pattern of language. Language is the mechanism through which humans develop a self and mind, and language is social because words assume meaning only when they are interpreted by social behavior. Social patterns establish meanings. Language sets the basis for reason, logic, and by extension all scientific and moral endeavors. One is logical when one is in agreement with one's universe of discourse; one is moral when one is in agreement with one's community. Language is a mediator of social behavior in that with a language come values and norms. Value judgments and collective patterns exist behind words; meaning is socially bestowed.

Although Mead was the most important pragmatist for understanding the development of self, the epistemology of pragmatism was most precisely formulated by John Dewey (1929, 1931). Dewey's epistemology represented a final break with the notion that the mind knows because it is a spectator to reality. For Dewey, thought is spatiotemporal. Eternal truths, universals, a priori systems are all suspect. Experience is the experience of the environment—an environment that is physical, biological, and cultural. Ideas are not Platonic essences but rather are functional to the experience of the individual (Dewey 1931). This position is anti positivistic in that the mind deals only with ideas and, therefore, does not ponder reality, but only ideas about reality. Truth is not absolute but is simply what is consistent with experience.

The individual is engaged in an active confrontation with the world; mind and self develop in a social process. The pragmatists provided an epistemological justification for freedom (the basic tenet of humanism). The mind develops in a social context and comes to know as it comes into being. Any restriction on the freedom of the mind to inquire and know implies a restriction on the mind to fully develop. The pragmatists rounded out Hegel's ([1807] 1967) view that ultimate truth is freedom by showing that the mind needs freedom to develop in a social context. Epistemology and freedom are inseparable.

Pragmatism, by joining epistemology and freedom via the social development of mind, also provides a solution for the seeming incompatibility between an instrumental and an intrinsic approach to values. The value of freedom is instrumental in that it is created in action (the action of the developing mind); but it is also intrinsic in that the mind cannot fully develop without the creation of an environment that ensures freedom. This integrated epistemological framework provides the basis for a humanistic methodology for sociology.

PRAGMATISM, METHODOLOGY, AND HUMANISM

Dewey and Mead developed a methodology that gave social scientists a different frame of reference from that of the "traditional scientific methodology." Flexibility was the main characteristic of their pragmatic methodology—it did not offer specific forms or languages to which social problems had to be adapted. Instead, the form and language of the method grew out of the problem itself. The social scientist, thus, fashions his or her own methodology depending upon the problem studied. New concepts and methodologies arise from efforts to overcome obstacles to successful research. Techniques are developed that enable the researcher to be both a participant in and observer of social structures. There is an instrumentalist linkage between theory and practice as it is incorporated into the humanist sociologist's life. This is what Alfred McClung Lee (1978), a leading humanist sociologist, meant when he wrote: "Sociologists cannot be persons apart from the human condition they presumably seek to understand" (p. 35). This is what C. Wright Mills (1959) meant when he wrote: "The most admirable thinkers within the scholarly community . . . do not split their work from their lives." (p. 195).

For the humanist sociologist, the main purpose in amassing a body of knowledge is to serve human needs; knowledge must be useful. By accepting this dictum, humanist sociologists extend the analysis of what is to the analysis of what ought to be. Knowledge should provide answers for bringing about a desired future state of affairs, a plan that can be achieved through the methodological insights of pragmatism whereby the researcher is both participant and observer.

The dilemma of which values to choose is answered by opting for the pragmatist's emphasis upon responsibility as a moral standard which assumes that a fundamental quality of human beings is their potentiality for ethical autonomy. People not only are but ought to be in charge of their own destiny within the limits permitted by their environment. Individual character development takes place to the extent that persons can and do decide on alternative courses of action (Dewey 1939).

Pragmatism is grounded upon an assumption of freedom of choice. However, choice among alternatives is always limited. It is in pointing out these limitations in the form of power relations and vested interests behind social structures that humanist sociology builds upon pragmatism and thereby confronts the basic sociological criticism of pragmatism—that it lacks a viable notion of social structure. Humanist sociology seeks to fashion a full-blown vision of the free individual within a society based on the principle of human freedom.

HUMANIST SOCIOLOGY TODAY

Humanist sociology has moved beyond pragmatism via its attempt to spell out the social structural conditions for the maximization of freedom. Humanist sociology is based on moral precepts, the foremost of which is that of freedom—"the maximization of alternatives" (Scimecca 1995, p.1). This is assumed to be the most desirable state for human beings—and the goal of sociology is to work toward the realization of conditions that insure this freedom. Given its Meadian theory of self (an active theory of self that chooses between alternatives), humanist sociology is concerned with how this is best realized within a community. Humanist sociology begins with the fundamental assumption that all varieties of humanism hold—that individuals are the measure of all things. Using a nonpositivistic epistemological foundation, humanist sociologists employ their methods of research to answer the most important question that can be asked by a

humanist sociologist about human behavior, the one originally raised by the Enlightenment philosophes: How can social science help to fashion a humane society in which freedom can best be realized?

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