

Sociology and Metaphysics

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The level which a science has reached, so Heidegger once wrote, may be determined by how far it is capable of a crisis in its basic concepts. The social sciences must have reached a very advanced level, judging by the manifold and profound conceptual disruption which three recently published books¹ variously register within the field, and with which they equally variously attempt to deal.

Writing as a social anthropologist who once worked in Polynesia and did research in Oxford under Evans-Pritchard, Professor Hanson explores some interesting philosophical problems that apparently bedevil “sociocultural investigations”. In the first place, it appears that social scientists are sometimes prone to collapse institutions into mere collocations of individuals. Incredible as it must seem to the outsider that sociologists should fail to understand the intrinsic nature of social institutions, evidence is provided by Hanson that it is the case. He offers bibliography in abundance and the name of the game does not seem like Aunt Sally. The set of problems at the core of his book, however, to define which Collingwood and Wittgenstein among others are adduced, centres round the intractable question of cultural relativism. A culture requires to be understood from within, and in its own terms, and not according to concepts and criteria imported and imposed from outside. Some Polynesians, regarding obesity as a mark of beauty, used to keep “ranking” girls (and on some islands also *boys*) in dark huts, idle and profusely fed, “to produce beauties with rolls of fat unhardened by exercise and skin untanned by the sun” (page 27). Judgements must always be considered in relation to particular sets of standards, and these standards clearly vary from one culture to another. For Hanson, a set of standards seems to float independently of the social and economic formation of the given culture. Without ever considering whether the obese and pallid beauties of Polynesia might

¹F. Allan Hanson, *Meaning in Culture*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1975; Bernard N. Meltzer, John W. Petras and Larry T. Renolds, *Symbolic Interactionism*, RKP, London, 1975; Barry Sandywell, David Silverman, Maurice Roche, Paul Filmer, and Michael Phillipson, *Problems of Reflexivity and Dialectics in Sociological Inquiry*, RKP, London, 1975.

not be symptomatic of a different social and economic matrix from that which governs the American preference (if it is so) for tanned and lissom ladies, Hanson struggles bravely on, wading through the Winch-Gellner controversy, but never reaching any very happy solution to the question of our right to judge another culture. But what else could be expected from a liberal-minded scientist when he has become uncertain of the superiority of western culture, and the validity of its criteria of truth and sense, on the strength of such phenomena as the popularity of the Hare Krishna cult and of Carlos Castaneda's books (page 40)?

The imperialism of western standards of meaning is in retreat, not before time perhaps, but it is giving way increasingly to a somewhat unconvinced— and certainly very unconvincing—abandonment to relativism. The no doubt often strained rationalism of western faith in *logos* is giving way—in the west—to a certain nostalgia for animal contentment. Consider, for instance, the beautiful cadence with which, more than twenty years ago, Levi-Strauss concluded his *Tristes Tropiques*: the privilege that remains, as long as we continue to exist and there is a world, lies “in the contemplation of a mineral more beautiful than all our creations; in the scent that can be smelt at the heart of a lily and is more imbued with learning than all our books; or in the brief glance, heavy with patience, serenity and mutual forgiveness, that, through some involuntary understanding, one can sometimes exchange with a cat”.

For the rest, following Wittgenstein again, though mainly à la Gilbert Ryle, Professor Hanson demonstrates how the path to understanding other cultures from within is often mined by Cartesian notions of understanding others as somehow entering into their hidden inner mental processes. Over against this, the ethnologist should rather seek knowledge of how to use beliefs, ideas, manners, customs, and so on, “like the natives use them” (page 67). As an exercise in showing how some of the conceptual and theoretical problems which apparently plague the practising social scientist may be identified and treated with the help of philosophical therapy of a Wittgensteinian kind, *Meaning in Culture* is exemplary.

In *Symbolic Interactionism* three professors of sociology at Central Michigan University describe the genesis, varieties and possible criticisms of an approach that derives mainly from the work of George Herbert Mead (1863-1931), who, though he published no books, posthumously became very influential. The historical significance of the stress on “interactionism” in American sociology was that it replaced the previously individual-orientated

perspective with one in which the primacy of the group was recognised. As in Hanson's book, then, for all the differences in terminology, the first conceptual decision to be taken is that "human nature is a group nature" (page 2), and the second is that meaning "does not lie in mental processes which are enclosed within individuals", but in the processes of social interaction and communication (pp 30-31). The principal varieties of the interactionist approach, at least those which are familiar to the non-sociologist in Britain, are the "dramaturgical" approach of Erving Goffman, and the "ethnomethodology" of H. Garfinkel.

Goffman's studies, easily available in paperback, of how people "manage" their behaviour in social encounters, are fascinating to read and gruesomely authentic. Rich with anecdote and abounding with attractively "placing" technical terms, these studies should nevertheless (or rather *therefore*) arouse deep suspicions on the part of the reader. The concept of "body gloss", for example, which refers to the process by which a person pointedly uses his whole body to comment on a situation in which his participation may otherwise be misunderstood (the lolling, or the sitting apart, by the man who wants to signal his relative detachment from the group in session, and suchlike), constantly involves Goffman in describing sequences of behaviour as "posturing" and as "display". The imagery of dramatic performance and presentation is illuminating up to a point. On the other hand, apart from the suspicions of the ubiquitously anecdotal method which a more "scientific" sociologist might imaginably harbour, the treatment of human conduct as "theatre", at least in Goffman's practice, coalesces with a view of life as little more than the management of impressions that maintain or enhance status, identity, prestige, and credibility. That the lives of so many people are so dominated, and so painfully reduced, and that many institutions force this upon them, surely requires a different analysis from, and a more critical analysis than, anything that Goffman provides. As Meltzer, Petras and Reynolds point out (page 73), the objection against Goffman's approach levelled by Alvin Gouldner, the leading non-Marxist "radical" sociologist (e.g. *The Coming Crisis in Western Sociology*, 1970), namely that Goffman's predilection for microscopic analysis of the "brief encounter", without reference to historical circumstances or wider setting, leads to a non-historical, congenitally a-political sociology which only deepens the alienations it describes, is surely difficult to refute.

In contrast with Goffman's readable books, the sociology of Garfinkel, replete as it is with diagrams and statistical tables, not to mention jargon taken over from Schutz, Husserl, and other

phenomenologists, easily defeats the amateur. His programme is to highlight the tacit conventions in the background that are taken for granted in ordinary conversations and incidents. His chief technique, again in contrast with Goffman's anecdotalism, is to report on "experimental" disruptions of the smooth flow of routine events. His most famous study, however, "Passing and the Managed Achievement of Sex Status in an Intersexed Person", is based upon interviews with a male transvestite. In an appendix to the paper Garfinkel engagingly discloses that the "socialization" of the man as a woman which the text describes was actually produced by chemicals which the man had been taking surreptitiously during the period in which the interviews were revealing his "techniques of adaptation". This perhaps suffices to indicate the profoundly idealist-metaphysical bias of Garfinkel's method. At any rate the same criticisms come to the fore, and again Alvin Gouldner is cited, to the effect that Garfinkel's sociology, like Goffman's, is deficient in its concern with social structure. That would seem damning enough, referring to a sociologist. In the closing pages of *Social Interactionism*, however, when the criticisms have piled up enough to discredit the whole enterprise, at least to this reader's innocent eye, the authors suddenly and astonishingly declare that "ours has been a predominantly sympathetic exposition of the symbolic interaction framework" (page 121). They simply chicken out of any attempt to deal with the objections they have listed, and merely record that "it is our conviction that symbolic interactionism is capable of providing an adequate treatment of ... social structure", conceding (however) that "it is overdue for interactionists to begin dealing more fully and on a large scale with problems of economic, political, and historical import" (page 120). On the evidence they have provided, it would seem as though interactionism would have to change out of all recognition to cope with such problems.

The interactionist universe of discourse overlaps to some extent with the sociological theory outlined in *Reflexivity and Dialectics*, as the bibliographies suffice to show. But the references in the latter to Heidegger and Marx, not to mention Derrida and Althusser, mark a difference in perspective that is far more important than any common ground between the two books. Here, in fact, with these British sociologists, most of whom teach in polytechnics, the reader is drawn deep into the territory of the "wild sociology" which, against the British academic grain, now flourishes like weeds, or perhaps knots. The allusion there is to the subtitle of John O'Neill's most recent book: *Making Sense Together: An Introduction to Wild Sociology* (1975). As translator of Merleau-

Ponty, O'Neill is surely one of the precursors of the *Reflexivity and Dialectics* team's interest in European philosophy. The convoluted, neologistic jargon alone would suggest that John O'Malley's *Sociology of Meaning* (1972), by far the most important theoretical intervention in sociological inquiry that has so far appeared in Britain, and worth the struggle with the hermeticism of the text, counts as another determinating threshold of discourse.

More specifically, however, this book results from a set of papers on the notion of "social stratification" which the authors prepared for the British Sociological Association's annual conference in 1973. The shortest paper is by David Silverman. He has recently published an introduction to the epistemological problems of the social sciences entitled *Reading Castaneda* (1975), in which he uses these accounts of meetings with a Yaqui Indian magician without having to decide whether they are social science or science fiction. His essay in this collection, ostensibly a defence of Davis and Moore's much-criticized "structural-functionalist" theory of social stratification, becomes an exposure of the mercantile metaphors that define their discourse as well as that of their critics. Language as a medium of exchange becomes a commodity, a convention used as a tool. For language to be an efficient instrument terms must be clearly defined. As the terminology itself indicates, the demands of positivist science are in collusion with market capitalism. By electing to bring out the commodity metaphors in our conception of language Silverman points towards his commitments to a different kind of community—one in which speech would no longer be used merely for instrumental purposes. This leads him to make the point that we are often left literally speechless. Confronted with extremes of grief, for instance, "we recoil at expressing ourselves through a commodity (language), for in doing so we turn ourselves and our relationships into commodities". We resort then to touch and gesture. The irony is thus that, when we most need and want to speak from our common humanity to another person's grief, we find ourselves bereft of speech, since we are trapped in "a market form of life in which words can do everything, except to engage that which makes them possible" (page 102). The very humanity of which speech is the expression is finally robbed of a word.

Paul Filmer, in his paper, argues that sociologies of social stratification are simply sociologists' ways of seeing social stratification: "as such, they are, simultaneously, ways of doing the stratification that organises the particular collectivity that is professional sociology" (page 149). Maurice Roche, questioning "conventional sociology", replaces the notion of social stratification with that of *class*: "in our times, which are those of the degeneration of soci-

etal self-understanding into the rhetoric of public administration, of theory into calculation, community into market, and commitment into political pragmatism” (page 136), Marxist class-analysis, since it is “thinking which is forgetful of the limits of itself”, requires to be supplemented and corrected by the Heideggerian concept of “difference”. Referring to Lenin and Althusser, Maurice Roche flatly denies that the idealist/materialist problematic is of any relevance. He goes so far as to say that it is “deeply illusory” (page 135) to think that there is a difference between idealism and materialism. To think in such terms is “to mystify thought if they allow differences to be formulated as radical separateness, rather than as that which issues from that which differentiates” (ibid.). If language, or Being, is understood a la Heidegger as that which differentiates, then things may still be reduced to reification and action regarded as the will to power, and so on, but this is not to understand what they are. The differentiations of concrete particulars—things, actions, discourses—have always to be understood as belonging together with the movement of their differentiation. Beings, as Heidegger would say, belong together with Being.

Michael Phillipson, in an even more Heideggerian paper than the preceding three mentioned, asks for the destruction of the hegemony of the technological-calculative community and the supersession of its modes of producing knowledge by “theoretical practices which show themselves as grounded in and responsive to the foundationally metaphoric and dialectical life of language” (page 192). The first two essays in the collection are by Barry Sandywell, and they are by far the most intelligible and accessible, at any rate to a non-sociologist (I suspect that *all* these essays would be totally unintelligible to most sociologists). In the opening paper he expounds the notion of language which will be familiar to anybody who has read such collections of Heidegger’s work as *On the Way to Language* or *Poetry, Language, Thought*. His conclusion is that “the final and most grotesque irony is that we are all positivists now” (page 55). It is not only positivist (i.e. conventional) sociology which requires to be dismantled and reconstructed. “Wild”, phenomenological, ethnomethodological, and other, alternative and radical sociologies, on Sandywell’s account, remain just as firmly entrenched in positivism. “When one realises he is on the wrong train it is no use running backwards down the corridor in the opposite direction” he concludes, quoting Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In other words, as Sandywell says (page 57), his method is self-refuting, like that of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. His work disintegrates as a text by its very success: in asking that the reader begin to engage in the work of doing social theory socially himself”.

The dissemination of Marxist-Heideggerian social theory in polytechnics and northern universities will occasion no flutter among the dreaming spires. Where neither Marx nor Heidegger counts for much an amalgamation of historical materialism and *Seinsdenken*, of class difference and ontological difference, must seem a phantom. Surely, however, it is a portent. Does it not mean that, where knowledge is regarded as empiricist and positivist in its orientation, a critical theory must be sought in sources other than any currently provided by mainstream British philosophy? When the problems are recognized to raise far more fundamental questions than *Meaning in Culture* deals with in its somewhat half-heartedly Ryleian way, and when the flashy procedures of “social interactionism” fizzle out in conceptual sterility, it is not surprising—it is encouraging—to find a group of young British sociologists reaching out to the wider intellectual world in search of clues and bearings. A blend of Marxism and Heideggerian ontology has been attempted several times already—most notably by Herbert Marcuse and (in France) by Kostas Axelos. Heidegger, like Hegel in this as in so many other respects, has successors on the Left as well as (more commonly) on the Right. The question is whether the former have really turned him upside down. As Engels wrote of Hegel so one might say of Heidegger—that so powerful a work cannot be disposed of by simply being ignored: it has to be ‘sublated’ in its own sense, that is, in the sense that while its form has to be annihilated through criticism, the new content which has been won through it has to be saved. It has fallen to Jacques Derrida to bring this about (*New Blackfriars*, October 1974).

David Silverman cites Heidegger (page 95)—I complete the quotation (*What is a thing*, page 67): “The greatness and superiority of natural science during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is because all the scientists were philosophers. They understood that there are no mere facts, but that a fact is only what it is in the light of the fundamental conception (*Begriff*) and always depends on how far that conception reaches. The characteristic of positivism, wherein we have stood for decades and today more than ever, is contrary to this in that it thinks it can sufficiently manage with facts or other and new facts, while concepts are merely expedients which one somehow needs but should not get too involved with, since that would be philosophy”. Heidegger goes on here to say that “where genuine and discovering research is done, the situation is no different from that of three hundred years ago”; it is “only where average and subsequent work is done” that positivism prevails. Confronted with fact-gathering, anecdotal or statistics-minded methods in the social sciences, it may well be that the discontented

would turn with pleasure and relief to the writings of Heidegger. For him, however, positivism is only a symptom of the whole system of ideas which—not unlike Marx and Engels in this—he classifies as “metaphysics”, *die Metaphysik*. By this he means the mainstream texts of western thought from Plato onwards. He sees this tradition challenged constantly from within by thinkers who have in the end always been pushed to the periphery. It is only now, as western power begins to recede in the world, that questions become unavoidable as regards the limits and the nature of western thought.

In intention, at least, Heidegger is a profoundly anti-idealist thinker. As may be seen in *Identity and Difference*, he defines his position clearly over against that of Hegel. For Hegel, the continuity with earlier thought is achieved by the practice of *Aufhebung*—that is, of absorbing all previous thought into an ever more grandiose synthesis, with the ambition of attaining truth in the sense of the completely unfolded certainty of self-possessed knowledge (page 49). Secondly, it is always what has been thought that preoccupies Hegel. Because thirdly, it is thought as such that he regards as the subject matter of philosophy. This is not an implausible account. It is only saying that Hegel’s philosophy, as a synthesis of the history of ideas, constitutes absolute idealism. In contrast with all that, Heidegger attempts to take a “step back”—thus to break out of certain sophisticated habits of mind, and to do so by reading the classics of western philosophy in quest of what remains *un-thought* in what they have thought—in search, then, of what they take so much for granted that it has fallen into oblivion.

The “step back” does not mean some isolated shift of viewpoint, made once for all, or a mere change of stance or acceptance of some new position (page 50). On the contrary, it involves our whole way of reading the documents of our past. There is no question of breaking off communication with the tradition which has made us think as we do now (page 55). To interrupt our continuity with the tradition that has destined us to think as we do—metaphysically then—would only surrender us more helplessly to the power of “metaphysics” and close off all prospect of our ever learning to think differently.

As Heidegger writes (*Identity and Difference*, page 50): “To the extent that the step back determines the character of our reading of the history of western thought, our thinking is led in a certain fashion away from what has been thought so far in philosophy”. In other words, reading the texts to find what remains unthought in them leads one outside the precincts of what has hitherto been regarded as philosophy. Heidegger, by 1930 at the latest, ceased to

be a philosopher, in exactly the same way as Marx and Engels stopped being philosophers when they completed *The German Ideology*. In Heidegger's case, as he tells us here, his thought receded before what forced itself upon him and he was thus brought into a confrontation with the whole history of western thought—"with respect to what constitutes the source of this entire thinking, inasmuch as it provides it with the 'space' that it occupies" (page 50). In contrast with Hegel again, this is not a traditional problem, often handled before. On the contrary, it is something that remains unquestioned throughout the history of western thought. "We have to speak of it, tentatively and unavoidably, in the language of the tradition"—we have no other language in which to begin this quest. Heidegger identifies what the tradition has left unquestioned as the difference between Being and beings. What Heidegger is preoccupied by, that is to say, is not *ideas*, or even *Being*, but rather the difference that appears between Being and beings, the hiatus that opens up our world. Thus he seeks to go beyond, or to cut beneath, the option between idealism and materialism. He centres neither on ideas and subjectivity nor on being and nature but rather upon the movement of differentiation which opens the very possibility of the interplay of difference and identity that constitutes our perception and our language.

It is entirely misleading to regard Heidegger as obsessed with "Being". His *Seinsdenken* is unmistakably the question of the *difference*. If we try to picture it, or represent it, we must at once be misled into perceiving the difference merely as a relation which our minds attribute to Being and beings (page 62). That would be to reduce the difference to a distinction within the power of our minds to make. We make distinctions all right, seeing differences is what perception is about; but, as Heidegger thinks, the movement of differentiation that discloses our universe of discourse is not itself at our disposal. We do not make the difference the appearance of which makes us see differences. Desperate this may all seem, it is Heidegger's attempt to avoid the dilemma of idealism or materialism. The movement of differentiation that of its own accord separates and unites our world and things within it, the particulars and their context, is beyond our power to represent, a fortiori beyond our power to invent or project—which thus subverts all modern philosophies which privilege subjectivity and ideas. On the other hand, the difference between the world and things within it cannot be reduced simply to Nature or to matter—or need not be so. In fact, Heidegger often comes very close to a strange kind of materialism.

Being forced to confront the primacy of the movement of

differentiation in this way, Heidegger is able to identify what the metaphysical tradition has always left in oblivion. What constitutes metaphysics is that it ignores the difference that makes all thought –itself included–even possible. It ignores the difference and rests on the unity of beings as such in the universal and that which is highest (page 61). That means, as Marx and Engels thought too, that metaphysics has always been riddled with religion. *Die Metaphysik ist Onto-Theo-Logik*. The element of *theos* has never been absent from the western philosophical tradition. The production of knowledge has always been crypto-theological. The entire western search for meaning, in all its multiplicity, whether it is science or metaphysics of Christian theology, owes its dynamic to that nostalgia for a fixed point—a centre of reference—which Heidegger identifies as Aristotle's god: the unmoved Mover.

Heidegger's concept (if concept is the word) of the Difference which remains absolutely unrepresentable, and in a sense then even unthinkable, and certainly never of our making, is a stratagem for expunging the last residue of theology from western thought. This is not because he is an atheist (page 55)—far from it; the “godless” thinking he practises may be more open to God than many theologians would like to admit (page 72). The search for a language to speak non-metaphysically of God may be allied with present discontent among some sociologists. The strategy of resorting to the Difference is certainly disruptive, and may in time prove creative: *rupture instauratrice*.

But there are serious reasons for thinking that Heidegger expels the god from the metaphysical tradition only to reinstate the mother goddess. It is one thing to question the current view of language as merely the expression of something already formulated in the mind, or always the representation of something (of *Poetry, Language, Thought*, (page 192 ff.)). It is valuable to break free of the instrumentalist conception (cf. *On the Way to Language*, page 98 ff.) and remember that language is our mother tongue, *Mundart*, “mouth-skill”, “the flower of the mouth”. But when we are invited to think of the source of language as “the bourne, the well, from which the twilit Norn, the ancient goddess of Fate, draws up the names” (ibid, page 145), “the well in whose depths she searches for the names she would bring forth from it” (page 67), one begins to suspect that the expulsion of the unmoved Mover with his imperial “logic” only opens the door to the return of the great earth-mother, Dame Kind, with her mysticism and myth. The destruction of the idealist tradition seems to inaugurate a certain chthonic materialism. Discontented theorists in our polytechnics are surely not going to find much illumination *there*.