Culture, Ethics and the Ends of Sociology

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With the publication of *The Enchantment of Sociology*, Kieran Flanagan becomes one of the contemporary sociologists whose work is shaped by the devastating indifference which dominates so many social and cultural relationships. This is an indifference of apathy and unconcern in the face of the sense of the emptiness of so much of what passes as the good life in our commodified and media-saturated culture. It means that all the things and qualities which could once be taken to make a difference to what it means to be a human being in the world have been thrown into the flux of the quest for perpetual newness. Indifference has emerged to the extent that there has been a collapse of the chance that some quality, some ideal, or some value, might possess the abilities to make a difference.

In itself there is little new about this sociological care about the absence and lack of care. It bears some comparison with Hannah Arendt's portrayal of dark times as those in which outrages can be perpetrated without a murmur of outrage (Arendt 1973). Meanwhile, and perhaps more pertinently for the purposes of this discussion, C. Wright Mills noted the prevalence of indifference in the late 1950s in *The Sociological Imagination* (Mills 1959). Mills looked at the situation which had emerged out of the settlement of the Second World War and saw people who had been left lost and alone by the erosion of their ability to accept readily the time-honoured ways of making sense of the world. He identified the outlines of what amounted to an existential and hermeneutic vacuum. Values and ideals tended to become irrelevant where they had not already been eroded by the onslaught of fashion or challenged by overwhelming events. Mills saw people who were "neither aware of any cherished values nor experience any threat." He saw in this "the experience of *indifference*, which if it seems to involve all their values becomes apathy." Yet precisely in this apathy Mills saw the seeds of a sense of danger. Mills went on to say of the indifferents he saw around him: "Suppose...they are unaware of any cherished values but still are very much aware of a threat? That is the experience of *uneasiness*, of anxiety which if it is total enough becomes a deadly unspecified malaise." (Mills 1959: 18) "And it is this condition of uneasiness and indifference that is the signal feature of our period." (Mills 1959: 19) Flanagan's book is also shaped in important ways by a concern to explore the dimensions and implications of this fatal and paralysing combination of uneasiness and indifference. Consequently he reveals himself to be possessed of a most keen and reflexive sociological imagination.

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But there is, of course, a great distance between Mills and Flanagan. For Mills, the sociological imagination was brought to bear on uneasiness and indifference in terms of a commitment to the power of reason and of the necessity of politics. His sociological politics was one of the emancipation of human freedom and creativity from the dead hands and even deader minds of all of those who were concerned to elevate the system above all else. This is a sociological politics which continues to be necessary. The problem which besets the moment in which Flanagan is writing is quite different. This is a moment in which sociologists have ridden on the coat tails of fashion and have turned to the problem and the problematic of culture to produce an abundance of work which is enthusiastic, popular and utterly banal.

There can be little doubt that much of what has been dubbed by David Chaney the "cultural turn" in recent sociology can be attributed to the allure of the discipline of Cultural Studies. Cultural Studies has been one of the great success stories of recent academic life; careers have been made on its back, publisher's lists have expanded enormously and recruitment to undergraduate courses is buoyant to say the least. Simply put, Cultural Studies is a lot more fun than Sociology. Yet the chances for fun are gained at the expense of seriousness. Cultural Studies implies that this world is sufficient unto itself and that appearances and fashion are the proper and perhaps only pressing sites of intellectual inquiry. As such Cultural Studies is fun because it avoids the challenges and uncertainties of what Herbert Marcuse called the Great Refusal: "the protest against that which is. The mode in which man and things are made to appear to sing and sound and speak...modes of refuting breaking and recreating their factual existence." (Marcuse 1968: 63) Cultural Studies and, in its wake ,the dominant forms of the sociology of culture offer an agenda of politics which refers only to the impermanent surfaces of the world. And so these styles of inquiry are fraudulent; they promise critique and deliver accommodation.

The consequence of Cultural Studies is more or less identical to that which Marcuse identified in the case of the fate of literature: "The efforts to recapture the Great Refusal in the language of literature suffer the fate of being absorbed by what they refute." Marcuse goes on: "As modern classics the avant-garde and the beatniks share in the function of entertaining without endangering the good conscience of the men of good will." (Marcuse 1968: 68) This is one of the central planks of Marcuse's thesis of one-dimensionality. He argues that contemporary society is one-dimensional precisely because the Great Refusal (the second dimension) has been co-opted within the existing relationships and arrangements. Flanagan is aware that sociologists can too easily fall into the abyss of one-dimensionality if they forget what he calls the "Faustian property" of sociology: "they are weary and want to come home. But they know too much to go back and not enough to go forward."(Flanagan 1996: 3) Indeed: "Placing sociology within the nexus of culture in the marketplace can lead it to endorse everything, all commodities, idols and artifacts,

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indiscriminately, with a credulity." (Flanagan 1996: 15) In Marcuse's terms this is a sociology of a happy consciousness: "loss of conscience due to the satisfactory liberties granted by an unfree society makes for a *happy consciousness* which facilitates acceptance of the misdeeds of this society." (Marcuse 1968: 72) A little later Marcuse writes: "Just as this society tends to reducer and even absorb opposition (the qualitative difference!) in the realm of politics and higher cultures so it does in the intellectual sphere." (Marcuse 1968: 74) Marcuse explains that the result of this absorption is: "the atrophy of the mental organs for grasping the contradictions and the alternatives and, in the remaining dimension of technological rationality the *Happy Consciousness* comes to prevail." (Marcuse 1968: 74)

Flanagan is able to avoid the trap of the inane identification of the happy consciousness. He deploys a perspective on culture which is quite different to the obsession with surfaces which bedevils Cultural Studies and the sociology which seeks to emulate it. Flanagan's perspective seeks to stress eternal verities and qualities rather than fashion. As such he ties the interpretation of culture to a set of explicitly ethical concerns. It might even be said that what Flanagan is trying to do is reconnect the two sides of modernity which were so famously identified by Baudelaire, the two sides which the exclusive emphasis on fashion ignores. For Baudelaire, modernity can be defined as the "transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable." (Baudelaire 1992: 403)

Flanagan draws his perspective on culture from two sources. First, he recalls the tradition represented by writers like Matthew Arnold and T.S. Eliot. This is a tradition which has rather tended to have been thrown away by the enthusiasts of Cultural Studies. It is clear that Flanagan is attracted by this tradition because with its interpretation of culture as the pursuit of human perfection it is possible to find "distinctive theological overtones" (Flanagan 1996: 154). Moreover, Arnold in particular was concerned to understand the condition of culture in circumstances in which the "potential threat to culture came less from revolution than from the combined effects of utilitarianism and an unimaginative middle class who confined their vision of life to technology and industrialisation." (Flanagan 1996: 154) This is not too far removed from the present circumstances in which the vision of life has been reduced to mediated images and consumer practices. Second, Flanagan harnesses his interpretation and understanding of culture to a specifically theological agenda. Here, Flanagan seems to understand culture to be not just a pursuit of human perfection but importantly an expression of human dignity and of the dignity of being human. As such, and despite his reservations about the document, from a strictly sociological point of view it is possible to identify connections between Flanagan's perspective on culture and the position outlined in *Gaudium et spes*. There culture is lent both an anthropological and a spiritual aspect. On the one hand, culture refers to how "man" "strives by his knowledge and his labours to bring

the world itself under his control. He renders social life more human both in the family and the civic community through improvement of customs and institutions." On the other hand, "man": "Throughout the course of time he expresses communicates and conserves in his works, great spiritual experiences and desires, that they might be of advantage to the progress of many, even of the whole human family." (*Gaudium et spes*, chapter II, paragraph 53).

These grounding assumptions about the meaning and significance of culture are rendered sociological by Flanagan through his use of Bourdieu. Through Bourdieu, Flanagan is able to retain sight of the point that whatever culture might mean in anthropological or spiritual terms, nevertheless it is vitally important that attention is paid to the specific sociological conditions of cultural reproduction. For example, *Gaudium et spes* makes it clear that cultural production and activity has a temporal dimension, but the sociologist seeks to inquire about, and for that matter enables the theologian to understand, how the conditions of that temporality might be variable and various. This is why Flanagan stresses the importance of postmodernity.

To this extent the category of culture can be made to operate reflexively. The interpretation of culture through Arnold and Eliot and a Catholic tradition means that it becomes a way of considering what human being might be and where it might be going. The interpretation of culture as the field of reproduction means that existent cultural forms can be attended to without however falling prey to the allure of fashion. In other words a dialectical tension is established in which, firstly, a sociological imagination can operate and, secondly, a Great Refusal might be practised on principled grounds. A sociology which is indebted to this kind of dialectic is thus able to condemn the present and point to something else. It is in this context that Flanagan is able to express concern about the ability of "the cultural condition of postmodernity to commodify in a limitless manner that disguises the growth of a culture of moral indifference. Dehumanisation and the evaporation of the spirit facilitate this commodification of evil.'' He goes on: "But if sociology *does* judge in this descent into evil, it has to consider ascent into good. It has to think in terms of an opposite, of good, of innocence and the practice of virtue, images that supply correction to evil." (Flanagan 1996: 188) For sociology not to judge is to accept the inevitability of indifference and of uneasiness.

It is with this contention that sociology has to think in terms of an image of the good that I wish to disagree. I wish to disagree with Flanagan's tacit qualification of what can be called after Marcuse the Great Refusal. The point is that Flanagan might refuse a great deal but, in the end, there is much he accepts on faith. Specifically, I wish to base my disagreement with Flanagan on a claim that although sociology is, or at least can be, a profoundly *moral and morally concerned* discipline, it is not thereby necessarily possessed of any competence to address questions of *ethics*. More strongly yet, and contrary to Flanagan, I wish to propose

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that *sociology has no necessary ethical dimension whatsoever.* Indeed, I want to stress a distinction between the moral and the ethical, and I want to refuse to collapse them into each other. For my purposes, the moral can be taken to refer to the practises and relationships of being good, of being just and so forth. Meanwhile, and for my purposes, the ethical can be taken to refer to the criteria of the good and the just. Ethics can be rooted in theology (as they are for Flanagan), but they cannot be known or established through the deployment of a sociological imagination. This is because the sociological imagination consists in a reflexive interrogation of the temporal world and the temporal world alone, since that is where the reflexive individual is experientially and existentially situated. To this extent, the judgement of the present which sociology offers can be nothing other than entirely negative; all the sociologist as sociologist can say is: "I do not know what the good life is, but I do know that it is not this." Whether this represents a liberation or a restriction of the sociological imagination will, and by definition must remain, a moot point.

As the analysis of the temporal and the phenomenal world sociology cannot address ethics. This is because ethics are founded in purportedly eternal qualities and capacities of human beings. The exercise of a sociological imagination can certainly explain some of the social and cultural conditions of the production and reproduction of these ethical positions but whether they are true or false is not a judgement the sociologist is competent to make. Or, put another way, sociology can address morality in so far as that involves relationships and practices of the temporal world, but it cannot address questions of ethics in so far as they involve purportedly atemporal criteria and organisations of what morality comprises. And Flanagan's concern to talk about virtue and innocence is, precisely, ethical. The point I am trying to make has been explained quite admirably by Kurt H. Wolff. He has identified something by way of a paradox. He says that: "there is no sociology of religion but only of superstition, no sociology of knowledge but only of ignorance or error, no sociology of art but only of kitsch." Yet Wolff explains that "there is the sociology of the church, the academy or bohemia, styles of poetry, schools of philosophy.... In short. there are sociologies of these intellectual-spiritual-emotional activities considered as *social institutions.*" There is, and can be, no sociology of them as meanings of ends (Wolff 1986: 347). After all: "Social and sociological discourse takes place in the area of means and is as necessary as all coming to terms with our material setting but does not concern our ends and is not among them, is not and does not concern what we are 'meant to be'."(Wolff 1986: 351)

In the specific case of the interpretation of culture, Wolff's position (which is of course heavily indebted to Max Weber) means that a sociological approach can only involve a study of the fleeting temporal forms of fashion; a resolutely sociological approach can say nothing about what eternal qualities or virtues might lay behind or beneath them. Yet this does not at all mean that sociology must therefore necessarily lapse

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into the moral idiocy of Cultural Studies. Sociology avoids such a fate all the time the sociologist feels her or him self to be not-at-home in the world; all the time there is some of that anxiety about which Mills talks and all the time that the anxiety is seen as a social issue and not just a personal worry. The sociological imagination offers the chance of being not-at-home precisely because it is such a limited and yet grand thing, precisely because it can reveal so much and yet say so little: "Then the world with the persons, things, events which were like the air we breathe yields to an assemblage of alien givens and, what is more, we change into beings strange to ourselves." (Morawski 1994: 181)

And it is not unreasonable to speculate that when the sociologist has become a being strange to her or him self, she or he begins to hear the bell of Faust, the bell which reminds her or him of what has been forgotten or simply thrown to one side in the name of fashion. But whether or not the bell is taken to be the call to the atemporal or, instead, the call for last orders at the bar (as Flanagan realises many sociologists will probably take it to be), is beyond the ability of the sociologist to say. The relationship between the sociologist and God is one which the sociologist cannot talk about all the time that she or he remains a sociologist alone. As such, the final act of the sociologist as sociologist is not faith or certainty; it is not happiness or the possession of truth. Neither is it the struggle for perfection, since the criteria of perfection are unknown except when they are the occasion of another twist to the feeling of being not-at-home. The final act of the sociologist as sociologist is to say "No". That is the entirely negative substance of the sociologist's attempt to refuse indifference.

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