

way—the only way out of the crisis, and the only way also to win over those in the Labour Party who genuinely want such a way out.

Having settled accounts with the Labour Party, we must then set to work. For beyond the Labour Party there is that social force which it once

represented after a fashion and in whose name it still claims on occasion to speak—the working class. And more, much more than the future of the Labour Party now depends on whether that class will at last speak for itself and in its own voice.

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THE SCOPE OF UNDERSTANDING IN SOCIOLOGY. Towards a more radical Reorientation in the Social and Humanistic Sciences, by Werner Pelz, *Routledge and Kegan Paul*, London, 1974. 283 pp. £5.50 hardback, £3.75 paper.

When a writer promises a radically different approach to the problem of knowledge in sociology and chastises us yet again for not taking it seriously, my first reaction is to ring the editor and pretend I've reviewed the book for someone else.

Ever since Alvin Gouldner conned his fellow-academics into believing that the day of reckoning was at hand with *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, sociologists have become cynical about fundamental reorientations and reappraisals. Gouldner's mistake, having apocalyptically proclaimed the new order, was to spell it out in clear, readable prose. Good millenarians, however, know better than to expose themselves to argument; far wiser to wrap the message in mystery and make a virtue of incomprehensibility.

I can find no other virtue in Pelz's book. It is badly written, with irritating errors in punctuation and a dull, heavy style that leaves the reader thumbing desperately for light relief . . . a humorous remark . . . ? . . . a humorous quotation . . . ? . . . a few pictures. . . ? The book moves relentlessly, packed from chapter to chapter with allusions masquerading as explanations and silly, rhetorical questions pretending to be flashes of inspired thinking.

At the outset, the author poses the problem by begging the epistemological question he intends to address: 'Is it possible', he asks, 'to reach an understanding not *totally* conditioned by the situation it tries to comprehend?' (p. 2, my italics). Of course it is, and not even Gouldner—who was never soft on classical methodology—would deny it. Scientistic sociology, which may be defined as that procedure which makes the observation and interpretation independent of the observer and implicitly lays claim to total objectivity, is no longer a live issue, even if it still survives in some American colleges. It was not killed by total relativism such as

Pelz assumes, however, but by 'relative' relativism: the position that makes scientific criteria of validity applicable to sociological theory both as a test of its objectivity and as a demonstration of its cultural conditioning. It would require a book to elaborate on this for the unconverted; it is enough to note here that social relativism taken to extremes must be resisted in the same way and for the same reasons as philosophical solipsism. Pelz's brand of relativism, moreover, is nowhere substantiated in his discussion of the classics. Indeed, he deplores sociologists' needs to read the classics—a regressive tendency which sociology shares with psychology and philosophy:

(Sociology) has not yet begun to explore possibilities of mutuality and dialogue through which, analogous to the scientific method but not in imitation of it, the conversation, not argument, between the living and the dead, is kept alive, so that the originality of a thinker may retain some of its pristine originating power and impact (p. 103).

Pelz is turned off by argument. And in common with others who are similarly into 'dialectics'—not the Marxian method, but the disease of the mind that appeals to reason when attacking others but decries it as an artefact of Western culture when it threatens oneself—he has built in his own defence against nasty reviewers 'who are not interested in interesting work' and will not allow the sociologist to give 'free play to his debilitated contemplative faculty' (p. 234). If man is to understand man, he tells us in one of his elliptical statements, he can only do so by conversation. 'In arguments he merely comes to understand logic' (p. 104) and logic is the weapon of that devil which must be exorcised from the social sciences: scientism. But it is not scientism as I have defined it above. Pelz identifies scientism with positivism,

attributes it to Comte, Spencer, Marx, Durkheim and Weber, and from his general preference for conversation rather than reason one must assume that scientism is simply scientific method applied in the social sciences. So Pelz is for mutuality and dialogue and against science.

Like some other sociologists, his high expectations of the discipline have never been realised, so he turns for deeper understanding to hitherto unexplored sources and methods of inquiry—in his case, to poets, artists and mystics, who offer a ‘humane understanding’. Nothing wrong with that, if only he would *explore* them and show us precisely how such methods offer, or might yield, an understanding superior to that bequeathed by Marx, Weber, etc., and in what sense it is superior. Pelz has no time for such questions. Turning to music for illumination, he asks: ‘Why do slaves sing?’ ‘Why congregations and the crowds at the cup final?’ ‘Is man

fundamentally as good as his music?’ (He never answers these questions; I am still pondering them.) Composers ‘express something of our common humanity’ we are told, though to no purpose as far as I could see. What follows is a string of shattering revelations about them:

The Mass in B minor is indubitably Bach, Don Giovanni and The Magic Flute inimitably Mozart. The last quartets are idiosyncratically Beethoven. No one but Schubert could possibly have written his late string quintet (p. 66).

Perhaps this line of research could be extended to show that no one but England could possibly have won the 1966 World Cup. But even if such a proposition were proven it scarcely justifies the conclusion that ‘because of this each work speaks immediately of and to our condition, to what was said and is and could be’. Or maybe it does. . . .

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