Comment on Presidential Address

Postmodernism and Protest: Recovering the Sociological Imagination

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Joel Handler's presidential address to the 1992 Annual Meeting of the Law and Society Association examines the intellectual debates that animate recent studies of social change. This talk is his attempt to understand and question these studies of transformative politics which, Handler claims, are deeply influenced by a turn toward postmodernism. After ruminating over the postmodernist argument and its broader intellectual currents as well as its impact on studies of what he calls "protest from below" (e.g., Ewick & Silbey 1992; White 1990), he compares this work to earlier, more structurally informed approaches (e.g., Genovese 1974; Stack 1974; Piven & Cloward 1977). Handler believes that this earlier work remains more persuasive. Because the work of the 1970s is firmly rooted in an analysis of politics and economy that forms the basis for a theory of progressive social change, he concludes that it is more compelling, provocative, and socially meaningful. Handler is skeptical about the current research that is influenced by strains of postmodernism, although he does not seem to advocate a wholesale return to the earlier, social-structural approach. Thus, he does not take the difficult step of outlining a more useful and progressive analytical and political strategy.

We are sympathetic to many of Handler's arguments, particularly the concern to draw out lessons for social action from research and the limitations of postmodernism in this regard. On the other hand, we believe that the proddings of some who write from a postmodernist perspective do at least remind us that ultimately social movements are forged by real people with self-identities and sometimes unique stories to tell. And this in-

tellectual shift alerts us to the neglect of this essential insight in much of the social-structural work of the past. The challenge now is to bridge the divide between structure-based and people-based analyses of social processes by taking seriously the notions of human agency and subjective identity. In this comment, we will first discuss why we are not convinced by the postmodernist approach and then briefly outline the possibilities of linking structure and individual action or interpretation within the framework of the sociological tradition.

While postmodernism defies easy classification and is almost by definition resistant to definitional boundaries, at base the postmodernist approach seems to entail a critique of *social* research, questioning Enlightenment values including notions of causality, commonality, and progress. One strain of postmodernism announces the "death of the subject," warning that the subject is a construct of "logocentric" humanism, that a subject inevitably implies a subject-object hierarchy, and/or that the notion of an integrated subject conceals the contradictory and fragmented nature of subjectivity (e.g., Ashley 1988; Ashley & Walker 1990; Bauman 1989). Postmodernist legal scholars, however, tend to take the opposite position, *privileging* the individual subject as the appropriate category of analysis through their epistemological and methodological focus on narratives and stories. These postmodernists further imply that all experiences—all individuals—are unique, different, atypical from one to another.

This assumption is antithetical to both social science and transformative politics, for the prerequisite of successful theory and action is the binding power of common experiences. In sociological research, for example, we try to sort out the ways in which the common experiences of race, gender, social class, status, or occupation, structure a shared insight; similarly in political struggles, there is an attempt to build cohesion by linking commonalities and emphasizing shared experience. At this most basic level, postmodernist analysis is politically regressive because it *deconstructs* common experiences and, in its most extreme form, claims that social categories do not exist. The logical extension of this claim not only by definition makes sociology impossible; it flies in the face of the one sociological truth to which all previous theory, research, and praxis points: We are social beings, and as such, we are oriented toward, and to some (still disputed) extent shaped by, our social environments and interactions. While we each reflect a *distinct* pattern of social interactions and interpret those interactions through our own peculiar lenses (an insight provided close to a century ago by George Herbert Mead and his Pragmatist colleagues), this is not to deny the significant commonalities that lie at the

core of social interaction itself, and which indeed are its prerequisite.

More important, "privileging the individual narrative" is irrelevant to the strategy that historically has marked every successful political movement for social change—organizing around common interests. The strategic importance of highlighting common rather than disparate interests, of drawing together despite idiosyncratic personal biographies and subjectivities, is attested to historically by the numerous elite victories forged around the powerful counterstrategy of "divide and conquer."

The very existence of commonalities and shared experiences implies that social reality is more than the sum of individual parts, as those common experiences are embedded within, and are the products of, institutional arrangements that pattern people's lives. Durkheim was right at least in this: *Social life has a reality of its own, and must be central to any account of human history and biography.* Yet, there are essential ways in which a structural approach neglects the equally compelling claim that in the final analysis *individual people* remain agents of events—social movements, political elections, or professional undertakings. Each of these agents not only has unique stories to tell about how they see the world and act on the event; they in fact construct the event—but in a sociohistorical context. Thus, there is a fundamental contradiction between the social and the individual, between the common experience and the individual story, between the category and the person. The theoretical, methodological, and political challenge before us is to take *both* seriously, to respect equally the integrity of common and individual experience, and to explore the possibility that a singular experience can make a qualitative difference. On this latter point, Randall Collins (1989:130) has noted that we must leave ample room for "theoretical indeterminacy" because "situations can sometimes change very rapidly: that there are negotiations, conflicts, sudden insights, decisions, and on the macrolevel, movements, revolts, revolutions. All this is true. But do we take this as an end of analysis, or as a beginning point, a challenge to develop theories to explain when such sudden shifts will occur?"

Focusing on the tension between the micro and the macro is by no means a new challenge, nor does it derive from a novel insight. It has always been the proper and most arduous task of sociology, and constitutes what C. Wright Mills (1959) called "the promise" of the "sociological imagination." As Mills pointed out, our personal biographies are necessarily subjectively experienced; nonetheless, they are historically shaped:

> What ordinary men [and women] are directly aware of and
> what they try to do are bounded by the private orbits in which
> they live. . . . Men [and women] do not usually define the
> troubles they endure in terms of historical change and institu-
> tional contradiction. . . . They do not possess the quality of
> mind essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of
> biography and history, of self and world. . . . The sociological
> imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and
> the relations between the two within society. (Mills 1959:3–6)

Taking seriously the individual narrative or the personal bi-
ography does not mean that we must search for radically new
paradigms or discard the social science tradition altogether.
Within sociology there is a long tradition of inductively devel-
oped, contextualized approaches to the analysis of social life.
These approaches may borrow an anthropological emphasis on
systematic observation, sometimes in a semiparticipatory
mode. Alternatively, they may use systematic but open-ended
and semistructured interviews with a view toward having the
respondents construct for the researcher the relevant catego-
ries of experience. Some recent work looks at micro processes
of conversation and body language, with a focus on social con-
text and culturally embedded meanings. These approaches
share the assumption that the process of research is much more
than falsifying a hypothesis, that social life is more textured and
nuanced than any crudely stated notion of empiricist positivism
allows for. But lest the wrong impression be left, these
"grounded" students of social life are equally committed to ex-
plaining to the reader how their strategy of data collection and
analysis makes it possible to move from the specific to the more
general. For example, Eliot Freidson (1980:263) is careful to
show that his qualitative study of a group of doctors in one of
the first HMOs in the United States is not "anecdotal"—"that is,
a form that can be discounted as being arbitrary in the selection
of information to report." Rather, Freidson explains, his analy-
sis represents a systematic examination of "the assumptions,
behavior, and attitudes of a very special set of physicians [who
are] interesting *because* they are special" (1980:273; emphasis in
original). Integral to Freidson's analysis of these HMO physi-
cians is a discussion of the structural and experiential qualities
that set them apart, thereby shedding light not only on the idio-
syncratic but indirectly on the nature of the pattern from which
they deviate.

The social study of institutional relations and their lived ex-
perience is exemplified in Liebow's classic study, *Tally's Corner*
(1967). This work remains timely and provocative because the
author shows the ways in which African-American male culture
is "situational," that is, the ways it responds to and simultane-
ously transforms the macro-structural dynamics that keep these

men outside the social and economic mainstream. Liebow's account of this culture is powerful precisely because it grounds the subjective experience to the larger context of U.S. race relations. Similarly, Abraham Blumberg's study of plea bargaining is a classic of sociolegal studies because he makes sense of the " 'cop-out' ceremony" of criminal plea bargaining as the outcome of the bureaucratic, political, and fiscal constraints on the system of justice (p. 105). Finally, in two studies of the interplay of institutional/structural factors and subjective experience, Lillian Rubin, in *Worlds of Pain* (1976) and *Intimate Strangers* (1983), uses extensive, in-depth interviews to explore the dynamics of class and gender in the daily lives and psyches of her respondents.

   The risk in paying close attention to the personal and close-up is that, as in much postmodernist work, we may lose sight of the polity and economy, macro forces that inexorably both shape the parameters within which our lives are lived and trigger or limit social change. To state the point most simply: There is late liberal capitalism; there is a welfare state; there is widespread and rising economic inequality in the United States and around the world. Such macro conditions and the institutional contradictions and conflicts they engender structure the patterns of our lives and in so doing ultimately shape the course of human history as well. To borrow from Mills (1959:3) once more, "When a society is industrialized, a peasant becomes a worker; a feudal lord is liquidated or becomes a businessman. When classes rise or fall, [individuals are] employed or unemployed; when the rate of investment goes up or down, [an individual] takes new heart or goes broke." These broad objective forces matter. They matter not just because they shape our life chances and constrain our choices but because *the cumulative impact of this social reality is to unite people in shared circumstances*—the peasant, the worker, the feudal lord, or the unemployed.

   The admittedly daunting task before us is to bridge the methodological and analytical divides that have limited our theoretical vision, and incorporate in our analyses both social structure and the very real human actors who are situated within those structures, and who ultimately are the agents of change. Interpretive sociologists underscore the complexity of social behavior, the analysis of which must be based on systematic and close-up observation of "hard" realities, that is, the world as it is. But we miss the benefit of their insights if we work in "separate but equal" enclaves, extracting individual experience from its social and historical context on one hand, and reifying social structure on the other. The challenge is to craft methods of analysis that are inclusive rather than exclusive; that go beyond the particular and idiosyncratic but are wary of

universalities; that locate and define the interplay between institutional power and the daily, lived experience of that power.

There is moreover a fundamental and inherent tension between structure and agency that can never be fully resolved at a methodological or theoretical level (but see Silbey 1992). Further, to speak of strategies of study in the abstract is problematic. Indeed, there is a way in which discussion of method without a substantive focus contradicts the very points we make here. Nevertheless, the challenge is to acknowledge the contradiction, proceed with research, and expect to be surprised. As students of law and society, we cannot let our investigations be drawn too broadly, too locally, or assume that community-based analyses necessarily inform us about all the nuances of the state as itself a "site of power" (Simon 1992:52). As Jonathan Simon notes (p. 53), Foucault also recognized this point:

> His major imperatives emphasized not the what or the who but the where and the how of power. We should take Foucault's methodological advice that we study power at its points of application, not as a rule that one avoid the institutional spaces of the state (although he surely says that at times) but that one ask, even of the state, how it exercises power.

Handler reminds us in the conclusion of his address, "The struggle is about power and politics" (p. 38). But *people* control power; politics is about people making things happen, shifting the course of events and rewriting history as it happens. We need a research approach that reflects the full complexity of this contradiction between the individual and the social, between objective structural constraints and subjective agents of change. While its details will depend on the nature of the questions we ask, we should strive for a synthetic approach, closely grounded to the empirical data, and careful to avoid the twin pitfalls of "abstracted empiricism" and an equally abstract structuralism devoid of human agency or individual experience.

This is a critical juncture for sociolegal studies and the related social sciences. It is a time of self-reflection and reevaluation of our methodological and theoretical legacies, a time of self-criticism and skepticism not only about the validity of our traditional approaches but also, it seems, about the validity of the endeavor itself. In a period of overwhelming economic distress and political demoralization, the turn toward postmodernism that is marked by a repudiation of the notions of causality and progress reflects almost perfectly the larger societal malaise. Handler has done us an important service by confronting the issues that postmodernist work raises and the relevance of such work for progressive social change. What we

need now is a way to harness the postmodernists' insights without succumbing to the potential for nihilism that underlies their approach and impedes the recognition of *collective* interests that lie at the heart of effective movements toward social change.

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