

Professor C C Harris

**CIVILISATION, SOCIETY
AND TRADITION:
SOCIOLOGY AND THE UNIVERSITY
IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY**

SWANSEA UNIVERSITY



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ISBN 0 86076 124 X

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ISBN 0 86076 124 X

From the collection of the late
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July 2012

**CIVILISATION, SOCIETY AND TRADITION:
SOCIOLOGY AND THE UNIVERSITY IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY**

Inaugural Lecture

Delivered at the College on January 20 1987

by

**Chris Harris
Professor of Sociology**

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UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF SWANSEA

1987

CIVILISATION, SOCIETY AND TRADITION:
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It is customary for a newly appointed professor to commence his or her inaugural lecture by expressing thanks for the kindnesses extended since arriving in September. As in my own case the September concerned is September 1959, it would I feel be inappropriate to follow this pattern here. This is not to say that I do not wish to express my thanks for the many kindnesses which I received in my early years in the college. Indeed my gratitude for those personal kindnesses is increased by the fact that they were received chiefly and paradoxically from those who were profoundly opposed to the introduction to the university curriculum of the discipline which I professed, a circumstance which in my youth and ignorance I found somewhat bewildering. For my social anthropological colleague, Colin Rosser, and I found ourselves, on arrival, cast in the role of ambassadors of the social sciences in an institution to which they were largely alien.

Doubtless we should have been tolerated as a minor fringe activity, lacking any ability to generate academic passions, but for two circumstances. The first concerned the expansion of the College and indeed of the university sector itself. These were the days of the Black Papers on university education and full page spreads in the Observer containing articles arguing that



more students meant worse students and that the expansion of the university system would involve the destruction of the traditional university and quite possibly the end of civilisation as we had known it. The second circumstance was the mooted of the idea that some of the additional students in the expanded University College should be studying social disciplines in addition to those disciplines represented in the traditional faculties of Arts and Sciences. This notion added an entirely new gloss to the 'more means worse' thesis. Not only would entrance standards and the quality of academic work necessarily fall if more students were admitted: a proportion of students would not even be studying proper academic disciplines at all, but some newfangled thing called sociology, a circumstance constituting an even greater threat to civilisation than expansion alone.

The roots of the hostility to and distrust of sociology go far deeper however than the particular circumstances of its arrival in British universities some 120 years after its conception, fifty years after the foundation of the first British chair and forty or so years after its institutionalisation in continental European and American universities. One explanation of this aversion is that sociology, as the prototypical social discipline, confounds the two mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories upon which the contemporary organisation of British academic knowledge is based, those of arts and science. Sociology's true home is not in the Faculties of either Science

or Arts and they would be quite right to oppose our being based, as opposed to teaching in, those Faculties. But if we are not properly based in either, and those two Faculties, or classes of Faculty, exhaust the field of proper academic knowledge, it would seem to follow that either the study of social life is not an academic study or that there is something wrong with the dichotomy on which the organisation of academic life is currently based. Since no-one outside the field of social studies is going to assert to the latter proposition the first must be true, and social life not a proper academic study. Sociology is therefore a symbol of categorical and cognitive disorder, a snake in the academic grass, the snake symbolising chaos as does water (cf Eliade 1964). In the 1960s people were afraid of being 'engulfed' by a 'wave' of sociology students. The terminology is I think significant.

It could however be argued that the introduction of the social disciplines into the University creates political disorder in the sense that it brings to the surface conflicts and tensions which already exist within the academic polity and which are managed by exactly that Faculty segregation which, of its very nature, sociology challenges. For the existing social order of the university is based on a sort of Panmunjon agreement between the traditional pre-nineteenth century disciplines and the natural sciences not to press their claims to represent paradigmatic knowledge, without however renouncing them. Only recently I heard a group of senior members of this college let

pass without demur the statement that history was not, of course, a proper discipline, thus appealing to an unarticulated, taken for granted assumption that the 'we' concerned all knew what a discipline was. And doubtless similar sentiments are uttered on the other side of the great divide. But let any subject which lacks a natural arts or science constituency be introduced, then those criteria of disciplinarity must be articulated, if there is to be any rational discussion of whether or not to accept it. And once they are articulated, then not only is war likely to break out between arts and science, but between disciplines within the same category, since the sense in which, for example, botany, materials science and theoretical physics are academic disciplines is very different; philosophy, Welsh and history also exhibit distinct differences in kind.

Not only does the mere introduction of an enterprise such as sociology raise questions as to what the members of the *soi-disant* academic community have in common; it also raises the question of what it is that its members agree upon which makes possible the management by segregation of the lack of consensus over disciplinarity. The consensus which makes the management of dissensus possible is an implicit agreement as to the boundaries between arts and science. And the agreement on this division, which sociology by its very existence throws into question, reflects profound antinomies in, specifically, nineteenth century thought and, more generally, in western European culture.

The most fundamental of these is between subject and object. The natural sciences deal with things which are linked by a web of effects. Other disciplines deal with people in their capacities as purposive and intending actors or agents, and in this sense history, traditionally defined as being concerned with *res gestae*, the deeds of men, is the paradigmatic arts discipline (cf Collingwood, 1946). This simple dichotomy - subjects or objects, people or things - not only facilitates the marking of the arts-science boundary; it also provides an argument against social studies which is almost Thatcherian in its ideological simplicity and therefore power. It is quite simply that the very idea of a social science involves treating people as things which is quite self-evidently against both reason and morality and is therefore an intellectual enterprise which universities, as the guardians and transmitters of the European humanistic tradition of culture and civilisation have a duty to resist. Alternatively it may be argued that if the social disciplines are not humanities (and the humanities say they are not, and they should know) then they must be attempts at science (whatever their practitioners may think). It is not then difficult to select fairly commonsensical criteria of scientificity and show that by this or that criterion the social disciplines do not fulfil the necessary conditions of the application of the term science, at which point the process of exclusion of the social disciplines from academic life is complete. It is not surprising therefore that these disciplines have been divided into those practitioners who have sought to stake their very

existence on the attempt to satisfy the criteria of either the humanities or the sciences, and that sociology, as the premier social discipline, has, almost since its inception, been chronically prone to bifurcate into two branches: those who define sociology as a natural scientific and those who define it as a cultural discipline.

Both these tendencies in sociology have run into difficulties which are connected more with the confused state of the self consciousness of the university and the disciplines which constitute it than with the sociological enterprise itself. Since the dawn of the scientific age it has never been clear in what scientificity consists and the attempts by philosophers of science to elucidate the nature of empirical knowledge by squeezing the rich diversity of natural scientific enquiry into a single paradigm called the scientific method have been remarkably unsuccessful. Indeed Hesse has gone so far as to speak of 'the failure of philosophical analysis to present a normative model for science which is generally acceptable and clearly relevant to the history of science', (Hesse, 1980). There was however an historical moment thirty years ago when it looked as if it had succeeded and various versions of empiricist account reigned supreme. This account is now in ruins (see Suppe, 1974). Indeed one distinguished philosopher of science, Hilary Putnam, has gone so far as to claim that not only is the empiricist account an inadequate account of science in general but that no science has ever conformed to the paradigm it established. Only

sociologists of the scientific tendency have attempted to conform their investigative practice to its canons, and that says Putnam, is precisely why this sort of sociology is not science. Contemporary tendencies in the philosophy of science (see for example Harre 1985; Feyerabend 1975; Toulmin 1972; Hesse 1980) insist on the diversity of the logics of enquiry in different areas of science. The things-people dichotomy, by clearly marking the boundary of science, conveniently obviates the necessity of the public recognition of the heterogeneity of the intellectual practices thereby demarcated.

Conversely that which lies in the universe of intellectual practices indicated by the term people is similarly diverse. It is by no means evident that the study of the products of the human spirit must necessarily involve constituting them for the purposes of study as the congealed actions of their individual authors. They can equally well be regarded as objects: works of art can be isolated from their cultural and historical context which renders intelligible the intention of their authors, their surface meaning ignored and considered as texts having formal properties which it is then the task of criticism to disinter and display. Such an enterprise constitutes of course a literal dehumanising of the humanities (since it brackets off both author and public). This circumstance explains the violence of emotions engendered by members of the structuralist movement in the arts: they are the equivalent, in the cultural disciplines, of the sociologist: the attempt to treat cultural products as

objects rather than actions challenges the basic ideology of the humanities.

For academic rather than ideological purposes, however, it is the decontextualising of the subject matter of the humanities by structuralism which is its distinguishing characteristic for it is this which distinguishes structuralism from hermeneutics. For any hermeneutic approach is essentially structural, but the meaning of an individual product is determined less with reference to the meaning intended by the producer than the meaning given by the relation of the item to the ideal context in which not only the object of interpretation but both its producer and interpreter as subjects are situated, thus attempting to provide a solution to the problem of communication by making it dependent, not on a precariously achieved, but upon a prior communality. At this point, however, a new opposition occurs between those who, like Gadamer (1979) stress the historical dimension of understanding and its dependence on authority and tradition and those who, like Sir Karl Popper, rather belatedly following Emile Durkheim, have posited the existence of a Third World of objective mind (Popper, 1972), a world which lies between the two worlds of subject and object, the divide between which I have posited as the basis of the ideological divide between arts and science.

The positing of such a world is of course the classic first move in an attempt to make a space between the worlds of

subjective actions and material objects, where sociology might conceivably be done. Though the positing of a third world of objective mind goes some way to provide sociology with a class of phenomena which could be studied as objects (i.e. scientifically) without either attacking or ignoring the notion of voluntaristic action, it raises a new type of opposition. English social thought has been traditionally individualistic, ascribing ontological reality only to individuals and insisting that all language referring to social phenomena and all explanations thereof must, in the last analysis, refer to individual agents. Objective mind is clearly the group mind. Since it is obvious that only individuals have minds, the whole enterprise smacks of foreign metaphysics: it self evidently, to borrow a phrase from an eminent British Foreign Secretary, 'a supreme piece of mysticism and nonsense'.

The sociological enterprise would appear to involve therefore breaking out of two fundamental categorical cultural oppositions between subject and object, and between individual and collective phenomena. There is however a third: that between the ideal and the material. For those who identify society with the collective and the collective with the ideal (on the grounds that only the ideal is general and can be truly shared) would reject any notion that sociality resides in the material nature of mankind. Pluralities of persons may have collective ideal aspects which may be abstracted and constituted as objects for the purposes of study but human materiality is

essentially individual and particular. Material properties whether intrinsic to the individual organism or part of the natural world appropriated by it are essentially exclusive and hence individuating. And yet the objectivity of social life as it is experienced by its members, would appear to be connected with the constraining nature of the material world quite as much as being due to the objectification of ideas.

Only in the context of these oppositions can the attractiveness of Marxian thought to sociologists be understood. Not only does it treat of totalities rather than populations but is an attempt to resolve the oppositions which I have described by the resolution of a fourth opposition: that between history and structure. It does so of course by regarding social life as a process in which individual actions produce structures which constitute the context of subsequent actions, a process in which human agents are successively both subjects and objects and in which the material and ideal objects which they cooperate to produce constitute both means and fetters upon action and co-action.

The historicising of the polarities of the static classical opposition between action and object, individual and collective, ideal and material, constitutes one part of the Marxian move; the other crucial element is to regard the social totality as having, both historically and logically, priority over what appears to our consciousness as the individual, thus reversing

what Marxists would term 'the problematic of bourgeois sociology'. For Marx, the central question concerns the motive force of history and explanations of total phenomena are essentially historical explanations rather than merely structural explanations such as those attempted by conventional sociology.

Non-Marxist sociology, in contrast, centres on a reverse problematic: not what is the motive power of social change but what is the key to social order and stability; not what is the process that produces conflict between human beings and shatters the primordial unity of the group but what are the conditions under which non conflictual association, i.e. society, is possible. This problematic can only arise on the basis of the prior and essentially Hobbesian assumption that individual members of the species *homo sapiens* exist as competent social actors prior to the existence of association, and that in this primordial state it makes sense to claim that they have individual interests which necessarily conflict. Marxian sociologists hold that human kind is naturally cooperative and seek to explain the origin of social antagonisms; non-Marxian conventional sociology assumes that humankind is naturally competitive and antagonistic and seeks to explain the origin of peaceful association and the conditions under which communication is possible.

The pre-eminent social theorist within the tradition of conventional sociology is the American Talcott Parsons and his theoretical work is quite explicitly addressed to the problematic of order while also attempting what is unquestionably the central task of social theory as it appears when viewed from within the Anglo Saxon tradition of social thought characterised as it is by domain assumptions which are methodologically and ontologically individualist and epistemologically empiricist. Parsons defines the subject matter of the social disciplines as social action and then attempts to adumbrate what he terms a voluntaristic theory of action. In spite of the inevitability of vulgarising Parsons' argument in a brief summary, I propose to attempt it.

Very simply Parsons rejects the explanation of social order which arises out of the social theory of utilitarianism and classical economics, namely that regularity in human behaviour consists in social institutions which are the result of the pursuit by individuals of the satisfaction of basic human needs under specific conditions, so that, so to speak, environmental stimuli and behavioural response are mediated by rational thought. In Parsons' formulation the resultant order is an order in the choice of means only, and the theory assumes that the specific ends of particular individuals are random.

Parsons wishes to claim that social life is only possible if there is in addition order in the ends which individuals seek to achieve. Actions are governed, that is to say, not only by

reason and common circumstance, but by shared values. Parsonian man, like 'economic' man, cognises and cathects but in addition he evaluates, that is to say makes free but value governed choices. Though the origin of these values arises out of cathection on gratifying strategies of action, they become an independent element in action situations. By the classification of type of social value, Parsons is able to devise a scheme for the classification of actions, institutions and cultures according to the type of value which they embody.

By these means Parsons attempts adhere to the doctrine of the ontological primacy of the individual, preserve the rationality and freedom of the actor and conform to the canons of descriptive individualism. The regularities in action are not caused but result from value governed choice. The world of value generated by alter oriented social interaction corresponds to Karl Popper's third world or Durkheim's **conscience collective**. The value orientations embodied in social institutions constitute the set of components of which all institutions and cultures are made up and the general statements generated by social study are statements which specify the limitations on the combinations in which these fundamental bits can be assembled to constitute the elements of a functioning social order. Value systems constitute emergent features of systems of social action but are not reducible to them and consequently have an explanatory force. Parsons therefore advocates a modest explanatory holism. The type of explanation is however structural, not causal.

On this view society constitutes a complex of ideal forms which function to regulate social interaction and hence make social life possible, for in the absence of the normative regulation which they provide, social life would degenerate into the Hobbesian **bellum omnium contra omnes**. I wish to suggest that this view is profoundly mistaken and that the mistake is to confuse society and civilisation. It is a corollary of this proposition that conventional sociologists so far from being the barbarians at the gates are, if unwittingly, the defenders of civilisation against those who would subvert it, whether its subverters are the youthful cultural individualists of the cultural revolution of 1968 or the more elderly economic individualists of the political revolution of the 1980s. It is perhaps necessary to explain at this point that what the sociology students of 1968 were revolting against, children of the Enlightenment that they were, was of course mainstream sociology.

Parsons's mistake derives of course from his uncritical acceptance of the Hobbesian definition of the initial social situation. Here Marx and indeed continental thought in general has the better of him. Sociality is not a precariously won attribute dependent on any form of ideal communality but a species property of the animal **homo sapiens**. Man is a social animal which lives in groups. 'Society' is not a precarious cultural achievement but a pre-condition of the survival of human beings in relation to a hostile natural environment. When the

species came to consciousness it was already social, its members locked into interdependence through their membership of the group, just as when neonates come to consciousness they are already group members and constituted at both psychic and cultural levels as persons through the manifold of relations in which they are embedded.

We may accept Hobbes' dictum that at the dawn of consciousness life was nasty, brutish and short, but not for his reasons: not because each individual was at war with every other but because in the absence of symbolisation the results of learning and experience had not been transmitted from one generation to the other. Hence there was no means whereby the feature which gives man his decisive-advantage over other species, his intelligence, could be used to its maximum advantage. As a result, mankind was at the mercy of a niggardly nature or, in another formulation, his productive powers were relatively undeveloped. The development of the human capacity to exploit nature does not however ensure that life gets less nasty, less brutish and longer: it only makes these things possible. Indeed there is a long tradition of thought to which of course Marx belongs which supposes that as human control over the natural environment increases, so the quality of social relations declines, the struggle against nature or between human groups being replaced by struggles within human populations of sub groups and members against each other.

This conception of social development is central to the espousal by universities twenty years ago of sociology as a new modern discipline by whose incorporation they could demonstrate their willingness to come to terms with the modern world: the problems of modern society were thought no longer to be those concerned with wringing a living from a niggardly nature but were instead those of ordering social relations within it. It was upon the resolution of essentially social problems that the further advance of humanity in the material as well as the cultural sense was thought to depend.

We may interpret Parsons then as claiming not that society but that civilisation requires the normative regulation of action and the putting of social relationships into proper form. The advantage of this definition of civilisation is that, unlike nineteenth century social evolutionary attempts, it does not identify civilisation with any specific content and thus avoids the twin snares of ethnocentrism and tempero centrism. Civilisation is a formal matter: there is no specification of civilised values only the requirement that social life be value regulated. There is no identification of civilised conduct with specific forms, only the requirement that conduct have form.

Why however should it be claimed that these characteristics of social life are to be identified with civilisation? Two considerations immediately present themselves. If it is the case that the economic development of human societies is, as most

sociologists would claim, associated with the greater individuation of population members and the greater heterogeneity of ends, then there is a need for the regulation and prevention of individual conflict. This requires social mechanisms which make possible the interaction of persons who are not united by common circumstances and purposes; and the *locus classicus* of such encounters is the town in its capacity as a central place. For the town (*civis*) is essentially a public sphere in which natural propensities are given cultural form. The existence of such settlements depends on their providing a public arena in which unrelated persons may meet and the institutional means for governing and regulating that interaction: a civil mode of speech or conduct. Forms of civility do not however involve the suppression of nature by culture or individuality by collective regulation: rather they represent social masks through which, as in Greek drama, natural feelings and individual differences may be expressed. They are essentially distancing devices which permit association without allowing an intrusive intimacy^{1,2}.

Civilisation is not reducible merely to civility: the term in English refers to a larger consensus than that required by the acceptance of interactional forms: one which makes possible the resolution of conflicts without the resort to personal domination or the use of physical coercion. The production of knowledge is a form of social life. If a presuppositionless science is an impossibility so is a presuppositionless civilisation and civilisations, like different sciences or forms of the same

science, may be distinguished in terms of their fundamental presuppositions. In the absence of a profound consensus on values, social life, whether intellectual, political or economic, degenerates into a naked struggle to realise individual ends and the determination of issues not by reason or moral argument but by domination of the less by the more powerful, unrestrained by principle. Reason unsupported by any community of values is incapable of supporting a civilised way of life; conversely it is only within the limits set by a consensus of values that fully rational argumentation and action are possible.

But where, I hear the Durkheimians among you ask, in a society characterised by competitive individualism, is such a consensus to come from. My answer is clear and unequivocal: its origin must be found in tradition³; and that requires that we turn from our alternately hopeful and despairing contemplations of the future to a rediscovery of our common past. It is a mistake to suppose that to respond to the challenge of the future by turning to the past is necessarily obscurantist and reactionary. The return to the past is necessary because the utopian dream of a future in which the fundamental unity of mankind is realised through the abolition of group and cultural difference is an aspiration incapable of fulfillment. Societies are not mechanisms for the abolition of human difference but the means of its production, that is to say that they are mechanisms for the production of social identities. To be merely human but shorn of social or cultural difference would be **not** to be human,

since the possession of a socially given identity is an essential part of the human condition. To turn to the past is to recover the sources of our identity, that, knowing better who we are, we can discover who in the future we are called upon by new circumstances to become.

This century has, in my judgement, witnessed a collapse, not of civilised values, but of that degree of consensus on social values which makes a civilised social life possible. This collapse is paralleled within the university by the absence of any common sense of disciplinarity, by the absence, that is, of a consensus which makes possible the management of difference. It is paralleled also by a loss of any sense of what a university is and what is its function in society. The current stress on the university as a producer of new knowledge blinds us to its central social function as the repository of the accumulated cultural (i.e. symbolically encoded) wealth of the past which it holds in trust for the future. The prime function of a university is not to increase the gross domestic product or improve the balance of payments though it is its duty to furnish the means to those who will go on to do those things. Its prime function is that of transmission or as I would prefer to put it, the introduction of the rising generation to the treasures of their cultural inheritance and in so doing fostering a sense of identity which alone can provide that continuity between past and present which is a prerequisite of a civilised social life.

The true defenders of civilisation are no more to be found therefore among epistemic, ontological, economic or moral idealist individualists than they are among the ranks of the material collectivists whom western liberal ideologists from Herbert Spencer to Ronald Reagan have taught us to regard as the archetypes of barbarity. They are to be found rather in the ranks of those, whether sociologists or not, who seek to overthrow the sterile cultural oppositions upon which contemporary academic and political life is based. Once liberated from those oppositions it is possible to recognise that true freedom and responsibility and the highest pleasures afforded by human intercourse are only possible by virtue of the acceptance of common values and the submission of individual action to the discipline of cultural form. Such forms, having no individual author and being incapable of transformation by a single individual, are not intelligible in terms of the intentions of individuals, they constitute one class of objects of sociological study⁴ which having understood each in its own terms is concerned to explore the conditions which determine their combination and succession. It matters little whether this activity is called arts or science; what does matter is that it should involve the widening of the humane understanding and that discipline of thought which has traditionally been characteristic of a university education.

Notes

- 1 Civilisation has, of course, traditionally been associated with the regulation of interpersonal relations, the abrogation of the use of force and domination and some form of consensus (see, for example, Collingwood, 1942). Parsons' emphasis on values is interestingly pre figured in Clive Bell's work *Civilisation* (Bell, 1947). The process of civilisation has, interestingly, been the subject of an influential study by Norbert Elias (1978) which is however used as an example of a directional order in social life which is not the result of any of Parsons' candidates: conditions, rationality or values.
- 2 The whole question of the association of the public sphere with restraints on interpersonal conduct and of social forms with the expression of natural difference is illuminatingly discussed by Sennett (1974).
- 3 The recognition of the role of tradition and authority in social life in addition to reason is the result of an escape from yet another Enlightenment opposition: that between tradition and reason which has been brilliantly dealt with by H-G Gadamer: 'Does the fact one is set within various traditions mean really and primarily that one is subject to prejudices and limited in one's freedom? Is not rather all human existence, even the greatest, limited and qualified in

various ways? If this is true, then the idea of absolute reason is impossible for historical humanity. Reason exists for us only in concrete, historical terms, i.e. it is not its own master, but remains constantly dependent on the given circumstances in which it operates', (Gadamer 1979, p.245). For discussion see Bleicher, 1982, pp.72-77.

- 4 I do not restrict sociological study to objects of this kind. My views on the range of phenomena which are properly the subject of sociological enquiry are set forth in Harris, 1980.



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