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# SOCIOLOGY

## THE PROPER STUDY

*Inaugural Lecture of the  
Professor of Sociology and Anthropology  
delivered at the College  
on 3 March 1964*

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by  
PROFESSOR W. M. WILLIAMS  
M.A. (Wales)



UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF SWANSEA



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## SOCIOLOGY: THE PROPER STUDY

WE are all familiar with the lines which begin the second Epistle of Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*:

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;  
The proper study of Mankind is Man

—words which echo Pascal's dictum: 'The study of man is the proper employment and exercise of mankind.' These lines provide a title for this lecture and they also serve as a reminder of my great debt to the University of Wales because it was as a student in Aberystwyth that I read the works of Pope and Pascal for the first time and, under the guidance of Alwyn D. Rees, began my 'proper employment'. As a home-grown product I am, therefore, particularly conscious of the honour conferred on me by the University in my appointment to its first Chair of Sociology and Anthropology and of the great responsibilities of this office.

When I began thinking about the content of this lecture, my first step was to read as many inaugural lectures given at this College as I could find. It is not an exercise to be undertaken lightly, but it seemed an appropriate piece of preliminary research. When I had finished, I had learned a great deal about what my colleagues are up to, something about my colleagues as individuals, and a little about the scope and purpose of inaugural lectures. There is fair consensus of opinion on the latter, which can be summarized by quoting from the Inaugural Lecture of our present Principal, who remarked that

. . . within reasonable limits, convention decides for them what the inaugural lecture should be about. An inaugural lecture is, or should be, a pleasant occasion when a newly appointed professor



can choose either to reflect in a general way upon the nature of his chosen discipline, or, if he prefers, explain to his new colleagues the nature of a specific piece of work upon which he has recently been engaged. He is called upon to give a performance in a well-tried classical form.<sup>1</sup>

A slightly different view was taken by Professor Zienkiewicz who held that

one of the functions achieved by an Inaugural address is to clarify and maybe to justify the existence of a particular field of study and if possible to map in broad terms the direction of its progress.<sup>2</sup>

Others, while agreeing on the scope and content of an inaugural lecture, have characterized it variously as an honour, an arduous task, a predicament, a matter of some difficulty, and an occasion for considerable misgivings. It is certainly all of these things, but it is also something else. An inaugural lecture is an occasion when people meet and enter into social relations of a partly formal and partly informal nature, the formal relations being relatively simple in kind and conforming to a well-established pattern. From this point of view, the lecture is part of the raw material of the sociologist and in looking at it a little more closely, it may be possible to indicate something of the distinctive procedures of the discipline. Unfortunately, the sociology of inaugural lectures—which may be regarded as a minor aspect of the sociology of occupations—appears to have been totally neglected and therefore the analysis which follows must be regarded as preliminary and tentative.

An inaugural lecture is a public, secular event characterized by traditional, but simple, ceremonial practices. It has no ritual content, such as an opening prayer, and very little symbolism. The content of the lecture, while

<sup>1</sup> *University, State and Society*, Inaugural Lecture delivered in March 1961, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *The Next Decade of Civil Engineering*, Inaugural Lecture delivered in February 1962, p. 3.

formally directed at the speaker's academic colleagues and members of the general public, need not in fact be intelligible or meaningful to either: generally, however, the lecture is published and is read by persons within the same discipline as the lecturer, the majority of whom are not likely to have been present when the lecture was given. At this point, there are a number of sociological questions that might be asked. Why are inaugural lectures generally confined to university teachers? Are there equivalent practices in other professions? Why is the lecture public rather than a private or semi-private meeting of colleagues?

Questions of this kind at once relate the lecture as a social event to the status of the lecturer within the college as an institution and within the wider society. They lead further to other questions concerning the relations of the institution to the social structure of which it is part, and in a slightly different way to matters of considerable generality relating to men, work, and its ideology. Thus the inaugural lecture may be regarded as a public affirmation of the achievement of a given occupational status in a society which believes that a man may aspire to do any work provided that he can demonstrate the appropriate skills and competence. In this sense, university professors, like saggar-makers, barristers, or 'pop' singers, are made not born, and we have indeed seen in recent years the rapid extension of this ideal to the view that any individual has the right to the formal education necessary to achieve his occupational goals. This lies at the core of the 'Newsom' and 'Robbins' reports. There is, of course, a considerable gap between the ideals and what happens in practice, and the gap is itself a matter of considerable sociological importance; but this falls outside the scope of this lecture.

The status *within* the occupation cannot be directly

related to a general social status because in our society the prestige of different occupations varies very greatly. Indeed, the kind of work a man does is often taken as a primary indicator of his wider social status, without reference to his abilities in the performance of his work. To say that a man is very good at his job is not as meaningful in terms of general social status as saying that he is an excellent carpenter or an incompetent barrister.

This raises a different but relevant consideration. Practising barristers are, in virtue of being members of a profession, protected from the charge of incompetence by persons outside their ranks. As Everett Hughes has shown,<sup>1</sup> professional men make their living by giving a specialized service, the essence of which is that the persons receiving the service are not in a position to judge its quality for themselves. Many of them are disappointed since all professions fail in greater or lesser degree to satisfy their clients. In the courts half the litigants are on the losing side: in medicine, 'all patients are lost in the long run';<sup>2</sup> in teaching, many students fail to pass their examinations. Such failures are not, as a rule, ascribed to deficiencies in the conduct or skill of the professional, who is protected by the fiction that all qualified members of a profession are honest, competent, and highly skilled. Generally, the more esoteric the skills employed, the greater the protection, but some degree of secrecy is found in all professions. Doctors may refuse to tell patients the nature of their illness, teachers often refuse to inform their students of the results of examinations, and so forth.

Seen in this light, the inaugural lecture may seem somewhat paradoxical. If university teaching is a profession, and if a prime characteristic of a profession is that

<sup>1</sup> In *Men and Their Work*, Free Press, Glencoe, Ill., 1958, pp. 140-4.

<sup>2</sup> Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

its members must be protected from their own mistakes, then a public statement concerning the essential nature of the work they do appears inappropriate and inconsistent. However, this is only one difference between university teaching and other professions, including other kinds of teaching. Whereas doctors, solicitors, accountants, actuaries, &c., are required to pass certain examinations in order to qualify as full members of their profession, are normally bound by specific codes or regulations, and are licensed to practice in one form or another, university teaching has no such specific requirements. Even a university degree is not essential, although it is rare nowadays to find a university teacher without one. Other differences exist which can be explained only in terms of the nature of the university as an institution and its development in our society. Since this takes us far beyond our brief excursion into the sociology of occupations, which, you may recall is designed to illustrate the type of problem and mode of analysis which characterizes sociology as a discipline, we may now return to our main theme.

Sociology is new to the University of Wales as a degree subject as it is to many English universities, including Oxford and Cambridge: partly because of this it is often assumed that sociology itself is a new academic discipline. In fact, the first Chair of Sociology in this country was created in London in 1907, while in the United States the University of Chicago established a Department of Sociology in 1892. As a distinct social science it is certainly older and if it is taken no further back than Comte and Spencer, it has over a century of active endeavour to its credit. It is, therefore, somewhat surprising to find how little is known about the scope and methods of sociology and how much misunderstanding exists concerning its aims. Sociology is the systematic study of social

relations, as distinct from personal relations which are the concern of the psychologist, or economic relations, which are the field of the economist. It is the essence of sociology that social relations are seen to exhibit regularities which persist and are therefore predictable, and which enable us to think in terms of social systems. As Marshall has pointed out: 'if the existence of social systems could not be postulated, sociology could not exist'.<sup>1</sup> However, not all social relations are systematic and not all the parts of a given social system are necessarily articulated into a single functional whole. There may be conflict between one part of a system and another, or there may be discontinuities within the system. There are always forces at work to change a social system or sometimes even to destroy it.

Now this definition of sociology is not at all new and, moreover, it can equally serve as a definition of social anthropology, which can be regarded as that branch of sociology which has directed its major effort towards 'primitive' societies. However, as primitive societies disappear, or change into 'advanced' societies, and as anthropologists turn increasingly to communities which have hitherto been the preserve of the sociologist, the distinction between sociology and social anthropology becomes less and less useful and more and more of a hindrance. It is still true that the two have their own distinctive techniques, their own language, their own conceptual apparatus, and their own theory; and it will take a great many years before these become merged into a common discipline. But this convergence is highly desirable, particularly as seen from the point of view of anthropology, and it is my hope that the School of Social Studies will direct a considerable effort to furthering this

<sup>1</sup> T. H. Marshall, *Sociology at the Crossroads*, Heinemann, London, 1963, p. 31.

alliance. In creating a Chair of Sociology and Anthropology, this University College has given its blessing to the union and has anticipated a change that will eventually be accepted as necessary by other universities.

Having defined sociology in a very general way as the study of social relations, we can now turn to the related matter of the role of sociology, and particularly of sociological research, in our social and economic life. There are those who believe the findings of sociologists to be either self-evident, or worthless, or even positively harmful. It has been claimed quite often, for example, that sociological findings might be used by unscrupulous persons to manipulate social situations to the disadvantage of the majority (I sometimes wish this were true). The hostile reaction to Elton Mayo's notion of 'social skills' is typical of this point of view.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, there are those whose assessment of the value of social research is over-optimistic—who believe that a whole range of intractable problems can be solved by the appropriate sociological analysis. Both these extreme positions do a great disservice to the progress of sociology and they are in any case founded on a view of the discipline which has long been abandoned. Modern sociology does not claim to establish the social order in its totality as some of the early social theorists did. As Kötter puts it: 'To describe the role of social research . . . one has to distinguish between the ethical question "What shall we do?" and the technical question "What can we do?" Sociology as a science can only be helpful in adding to the solution of the second question.'<sup>2</sup>

In other words, certain kinds of social research can, by analysing the structure of social institutions, the

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Delbert C. Miller and William H. Form, *Industrial Sociology*, Harper, New York, 1951.

<sup>2</sup> H. Kötter, 'Soziologische Aspekte der Planung auf dem Lande', *Sociologia Ruralis*, vol. ii, no. 1/2, 1962, p. 27.

regularities in recurrent patterns of social relations or aspects of social systems, indicate what methods may be used to achieve certain aims. Research can also be used to compare the aims themselves with what we may call social reality in order to discover whether or not current ideology is consistent or compatible with current development. As a somewhat obvious example, we may consider the role of the sociologist in planning. If we are asked '*shall* we develop the Lower Swansea Valley (or this village, or that town) as a council estate (or some other kind of viable social unit)?' then sociology *cannot* provide an answer. But if we are asked '*can* we develop the Lower Swansea Valley in this way?' then careful research will contribute valuable data concerning the implications of certain courses of action and will point to the existence of well-established attitudes which may affect or run counter to the particular form of development which is envisaged.

It will be obvious from what I have just said that I do not believe that the sociologist can dissociate himself from the social problems of the society in which he lives. Indeed, perhaps more than most people, he has distinct responsibilities to work for the solution of these problems. At the same time, however, I do not hold the view that sociology is, or should be, concerned exclusively with these matters. It would be a most depressing and restricting outlook for sociologists if their work were to be assessed solely in terms of its practical value. And it is surely a common experience in many fields of study that research results may have applications which were quite unforeseen at the time of the investigation.

So much for the scope of sociology and its role: what of its methods of study? Here we come face to face with the well-worn but still vital problem of empirical research versus theory and concept building. It is an issue which—

for reasons that are not clear—seems to plague sociologists much more than many of our apparently complacent colleagues in the arts and sciences. Should we sit in the safety of our rooms and concern ourselves with developing concepts or with producing refined theoretical statements? Certainly sociology has a very long way to go before it has a unified body of agreed theory. Should we, on the other hand, concentrate our attention on specific research projects which take us out into the field to collect data for analysis in order to test particular limited hypotheses?

In many ways this seems to me to be an unprofitable and even unreal debate. The concept builders and theoreticians cannot work without facts about society, which have to be collected systematically by someone, just as the field worker cannot begin to select any information from the great mass available to him without a conceptual apparatus of one kind or another and some form of theoretical orientation. The issue is, therefore, essentially one of emphasis rather than of principle and its solution is surely dictated by common sense. In Great Britain at least (and particularly in Wales) sociologists have only begun to collect factual, objective information in a systematic way. The extent of our ignorance is frightening. Similarly, if one thinks at random of a field of social investigation—social class, old age, family structure, juvenile delinquency, &c.—there are dozens of hypotheses that have been tested in just one community or one sample population which need to be tested again elsewhere, or at a different time. Such a state of affairs indicates clearly enough where the greater part of our effort must lie.

There is another consideration. Valuable empirical studies have been steadily growing in number and this seems likely to continue. Valuable theoretical works are

extremely rare, while there is a great deal of low-grade theorizing, often characterized by jargon, involved thinking and noteworthy obscurity of style and expression. We may recall here the example quoted by Lundberg of a work in which the closing of a door is described as 'overt non-symbolic attitudinal behaviour'.<sup>1</sup> The plain fact is that theorists who can make a major contribution to sociology are very uncommon people indeed and it would be (at least) misguided for the majority of us to direct the greater part of our interests and efforts to theory building.

We have now arrived by a deceptively easy route at the central problem of modern sociology. Is sociology a social science? Are there any sociological or anthropological laws comparable to those discovered in the natural sciences? What kinds of general statements about society can be made after more than a century of research? How near are we to achieving the aims of the founders of our discipline? Many sociologists and social anthropologists take the view that our progress has been very modest in this regard and explain it as a direct consequence of the immense complexity of social life. There are so many variables to be taken into account that the more thorough our investigation, the more distant becomes the possibility of generalization or prediction. Few perhaps would go as far as Evans Pritchard in suggesting that our methods in sociology are *never* likely to allow us to make generalizations of the kind found in the experimental sciences, and yet most would agree that efforts at formulating sociological 'laws' have had little success. Probably the most thorough-going and impressive attempt in recent years has been made by G. C. Homans in his remarkable examination of the 'elementary forms' of social interaction. A typical Homans' proposition reads as follows:

<sup>1</sup> G. A. Lundberg, *Social Research*, Longman, New York, 1929, p. 213.

'The more valuable to a man a unit of the activity another gives him, the more often he will emit activity rewarded by the activity of the other.'<sup>1</sup> Thus, if there are two persons A and B who have social relations with each other, the more A needs help 'the more often he will ask for it and the more thanks he will give when he gets it'; similarly the more B needs approval the more often he will help A.

The validity and usefulness of this proposition you may judge for yourselves: if I may risk a general statement here, it is that if a group is presented with a proposition concerning social behaviour in general, then a substantial majority of its members will immediately seek to find exceptions to the proposition and will soon establish them to their own satisfaction. (Perhaps some of you have already done this with Homans' proposition and recalled examples of A's ingratitude to B!) If this is true, then it might seem to support the view that—even in the simplest instances of social interaction—there are too many variables to permit meaningful generalisation.

Are we then to abandon the aim of making general statements concerning regularities in social relations? Are we to confine ourselves in *the long term* to the testing of carefully limited hypotheses? We are not. As Merton has pointed out, if we concentrate our attention entirely on special theories of limited range we run the risk of ending up with a series of *ad hoc* speculations which are unconnected and inconsistent.<sup>2</sup> We must, therefore, in our search for regularities, constantly aim to consolidate our special theories into a set of concepts and propositions of wider generality. And it is the aim of consolidation that enables us to speak of sociology as a social science.

<sup>1</sup> *Social Behaviour*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1961, p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Free Press, Glencoe, Ill., 1957, p. 10.

In developing these notions concerning the scope and nature of sociology, I have, as yet, neglected an aspect that seems particularly relevant in this Inaugural Lecture. Sociology is a discipline which has been established within the new School of Social Studies of this College, from which will soon grow—it is hoped—a Faculty of Economic and Social Studies. One of the guiding principles in the creation of the School has been, and is, the integration or very close association of disciplines within degree courses. Students may read, for example, Sociology and Economics, Sociology and History, Sociology, Politics and Economics for a Bachelor's degree. And if these combinations and others of the same kind can be integrated successfully, then one can confidently expect its effects to be seen at the postgraduate research level.

The relations between the disciplines within the School—and particularly the relations between sociology and allied subjects—pose a large group of difficult problems, some of them intractable ones. This is much too large an area of discourse to be treated fully here, but it may be possible to touch on some aspects by means of an extended example. This example will also be used to illustrate some of the general observations made earlier: it is taken from the sociology of English rural life, within which the greater part of my own researches have been conducted.

In England, and to a greater extent in Wales, farming is carried on by the farmer and his family without the help of hired labour wherever possible. About two-fifths of the male labour force on farms is provided by farmers and their sons. The family farm is a basic social and economic unit in our countryside, with a long history stretching back at least to the Early Bronze Age, some 4,000 years ago. The very fact that it has survived as a viable unit for so long indicates clearly enough that it

functions efficiently and is able to withstand pressures and stresses from many directions. How this remarkable continuity is achieved is simultaneously a sociological, economic, and historical problem which needs, moreover, to be set in a geographical context. Each discipline will, of course, have its own approach to the problem and its own methods of reaching a solution. The questions each will ask will be different. The historian can show how, for a specific period of time, the family farm resists and adapts to particular sets of external forces; he can analyse the part the farm family plays in the social and economic life of a locality or region for a given period in the past. The economist regards the family farm as a family firm, as an enterprise controlling land and stock; typical of the problems he might concern himself with are the relationship between output per acre and net income, methods of reducing costs, or the effects of changes in farm practice on output. The geographer examines the relationship between climate, soil types, exposure, and other environmental factors on the one hand and land use, type of farming, size of holdings, &c., on the other.

The sociologist has his own concerns. He might, for example, examine the networks of social relations connecting farm families as kindred, neighbours, or as members of groups co-operating in threshing or sheep-shearing. He may analyse the social-class position of farmers as an occupational group, or the structure of authority within the farm family. My own researches have recently been concerned particularly with the means by which the farm family is perpetuated as a social institution for generation after generation. The problem can be stated in simple terms. For the farm family to exist from one generation to the next, it is necessary to have an inheritance system for land and goods and an efficient means of training each new generation in the necessary skills and techniques of

farming. (While the importance of this training is often underestimated, it need not concern us further here.) In England and Wales the ideal pattern is for one son to inherit his parents' farm, while other sons, if there are any, are found farms of their own elsewhere. This ideal pattern is, however, unworkable in practice, because if there is a son on each farm to inherit, there will be no farms available for non-inheriting sons to be set up as farmers in their own right, since the total number of farms is, of course, virtually fixed. What, then, happens in fact? In some farm families there are no sons and a daughter may inherit: she will normally marry a farmers' son, who will take over the running of the farm. In this way, some farmers' sons become farmers in their own right. A farmer and his wife may be childless, or their children may die young, or an heir (whether a son or a daughter) may not marry after taking over a farm. Less commonly, an inheriting son or daughter may wish to give up the farm for some other occupation. There are, therefore, many instances where the farmer fails to provide an heir, and these farms become available to be bought or rented for those farmers' sons who do not inherit the home farm. Indeed, it seems to be a fundamental characteristic of the farm family that—consisting as it does of parents and children only—it is a most imperfect instrument for ensuring biological continuity. It is this imperfection which makes the balance between families and farms possible and allows the perpetuation of the ideal pattern.

It need hardly be said that this analysis of the means of achieving continuity is simplified and compressed, but I hope I have said enough to indicate the way in which a sociologist might look at family farming. The analysis has been concerned with those regularities that make up the *social structure* of family farming, the framework

whereby social relations are organized. Thus, in looking at the pattern of social relations within the family, it should not surprise us that it is the relationships between father and son, rather than between mother and daughter, which dominate family life. The father is the head of the family and the final authority in the running of the farm: he makes the decisions in an occupation which appears to depend so much on experience for success and, above all, he chooses which son shall inherit the farm. There is no distinction between home and work, so that anything which affects one, inevitably affects the other.

We are now in a position to look at the relations between sociology and allied disciplines in terms of this example. It must surely be obvious, for instance, that the sociology of family farming cannot be properly and fully analysed except in a developed historical perspective. The mechanics of inheritance, which I have briefly described, are affected by the size of the family and particularly by the number of children. During the last hundred years, the family has decreased in size and it seems very likely that the ideal of placing all sons on holdings of their own is a relatively new feature associated with small families. In looking at farm families in the nineteenth century, when the majority of non-inheriting sons were obliged to become farm labourers, or to leave the land, we enlarge our understanding of the way in which the system is organized at present.

As to the economics of family farming, it seems to me self-evident that some understanding of the economic factors affecting the farm family is essential. Many farmers begin in their own right on small 'marginal' farms. These are marginal in the economic sense and we need to know what this means in farm practice and family prospects. Some family farms are large in total

acreage, but produce little, while other smaller farms are very productive; if we can discover why this is so it allows us to analyse more effectively the movement of farmers from one holding to another—which is a structural characteristic of the system of family farming.

There are further important geographical factors. Family farming is a means of cultivating land and land is, as it were, a commodity that geographers are concerned with professionally. Climate, slope, soils, exposure, and the configuration of the land surface are among a number of environmental factors which influence agricultural practice and land holding—and through them the social structure. Indeed, it is a general weakness of much empirical sociology that it appears to take no account of the physical environment in the widest sense. Social relations, of whatever kind, have their spatial aspect: it may take the form of specifically ecological relations as it does in family farming, or it may be no more than a simple variable such as distance—but it is always present in some form.

The law and politics, too, have their part to play in our analysis. Patterns of inheritance are subject to a complicated body of legal restrictions, which directly affect the perpetuation of family farming. If, for example, a farmer places a high value on his family land and attempts to keep it in the hands of his descendants by a will prohibiting its sale or mortgage by an heir, he finds himself in conflict with English law. There is no means of preventing such land being sold except during the lifetime of the owner with his consent. In the same way, political decisions at a national or local level will have their relevance, as when changes in farm subsidies, or in planning regulations, affect the daily lives of farmers.

These few examples—and they are not intended to be exhaustive—demonstrate that sociology has close links

with other disciplines, which need to be fostered and encouraged. It does not, of course, follow that the sociologist has to be an academic 'Jack of all trades', or that sociology aims at a grand synthesis, but rather that the notion of complete autonomy can lead only to a sterile scholasticism. And it also demonstrates why prediction in sociology is so difficult; as well as a large body of complex sociological variables, there are always others—economic, technological, psychological, and so forth—to be taken into account in analysing any major problem that concerns society.

In these brief reflections about sociology, to which you have listened so patiently, I have said nothing of sociologists. As a group, we still suffer more than our share of opprobrium, although we are in even greater danger by becoming fashionable. The kindest definition I have come across is that which describes a sociologist as a man with two children, who sends one to Sunday School and keeps the other at home as a control group. The hostility stems in part from the false association of sociology with socialism and sex, in part from a fear that we may somehow or other disrupt the social order, or the security of the individual, and in part from the labelling as sociology of a great deal of tendentious claptrap, which in fact does not belong to any recognizable serious academic discipline. Sociology should not be judged by what people say it is, but by what sociologists do: if it passes that test, it is indeed 'a proper study'.

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