

# *Invitation à la sociologie*

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## Préface inédite en langue originale

Of course I am pleased that a new French edition of this book is coming out. It has been a sort of publishing miracle – originally published in 1963, still in print and selling handsomely in the United States, and having been translated into thirteen languages (including Bahasa Indonesia, Icelandic, Basque and, most recently, Bulgarian). Needless to say, this is gratifying, in addition to being still rather profitable. From time to time I can indulge in a fantasy about, say, some young villager on Sumatra reading this book and acquiring a sociological perspective in the process (though I am now less sure that this will bestow a great benefit).

Other books that I have written in the past I would now want to revise, because of new insights or because I have changed my mind. Not this one. The view of sociology that I put forth in the book still seems plausible to me. If I were to rewrite it, I might tone down some of its exuberant formulations. It is a book written at a very youthful age. That is an age in which, as an academic teacher, one relishes debunking conventional views and making one's students uncomfortable. As one gets older, this becomes less pleasurable, and one acquires greater respect for the values that sustain social order. Also, *épater les bourgeois* is a less interesting exercise when little is left of the bourgeois culture that one wanted to outrage. Still, the book is there. Let it stand as it is.

The French publisher of the present edition has decided to include the article I wrote in 1992 in which I asked whether, given what has been happening in sociology, I should retract the « invitation ». Although the article is quite pessimistic about the development of the discipline, I answered the question in the negative. That too I would now let stand. I think that my diagnosis of the condition of sociology, correct then, is still correct today. But it makes sense to ask what, if anything, has changed in the intervening fourteen years. Actually, a lot has changed in the world. How has this affected sociology ?

I listed four important developments since World War II that sociologists failed to predict and still have difficulties understanding – the cultural revolution in the West subsumed under the label « late sixties », the rise of East Asia, the resurgence of religion, and the collapse of socialism. I think it is still true that many if not most sociologists have a hard time coping with these phenomena. The generation that participated in the aforementioned cultural revolution is now tottering toward old age and their ideas are less influential. The generation now moving into positions of power in the knowledge industry is less ideological, although the « commanding heights » of the culture on both sides of the Atlantic are still dominated by ideas that came out of the turmoil of the « late sixties ». These ideas underlie what in America has been called « political correctness » and they have been institutionalized in many sectors of elite culture. Once institutionalized, ideas do not change quickly. Thus an adequate sociological explanation of what happened between, say, 1965 and 1975 in Western societies is still missing.

The rise of Asia is continuing, now affecting countries beyond its original locations in Japan and the « Four Little Dragons ». Several countries in Southeast Asia are well on the way economically and India is shaking itself free from what had been called « the Hindu rate of growth ». Most dramatically, China is rapidly becoming an economic world power. And these developments are being widely noted and interpreted. Some of the interpretations are

absorbed into the rhetoric of the anti-globalization movement (itself a prolongation of the anti-capitalism of the « late sixties »). But within the social sciences there are two promising responses. One is that there is renewed interest in the so-called « modernization theory » of the fifties, which had been denigrated as « imperialist ideology » by its Marxist and *marxisant* critics. And then there is great interest in the idea of « multiple modernities », first proposed by Shmuel Eisenstadt and now taken up by several authors who see the emergence of modernizing societies with continuing non-Western cultural characteristics.

« Secularization theory » – the idea that modernity necessarily produces a decline of religion – is even less plausible than it was in 1992. The worldwide explosion of Evangelical Protestantism continues, especially in the form of the Pentecostal movement, and this has been widely noted and studied by sociologists of religion. And of course resurgent Islam has forced itself on the attention of nearly everyone. There are some holdouts who continue to argue the secularization thesis in one form or another (such as Steve Bruce in Britain and Ronald Inglehart in America), but most social scientists who study religion now agree that we live in an intensely religious era, and they are trying to modify our understanding of modernity accordingly.

Similarly, the collapse of socialism has been too massive to be ignored. But the anti-capitalism rampant in recent sociology is by no means defunct and it resurfaces in one way or another, though rarely now in explicitly Marxist formulations. But even those recur. If one lives long enough, almost everything comes back again. The slogans of the anti-globalization movement reiterate major themes of the « late sixties », and some sociologists (even some who were not yet born then) join in the chorus.

In the 1992 article I listed four ailments of the discipline – parochialism, triviality, rationalism and ideology. There is probably less parochialism now. Global networks include many sociologists, who happily contribute to the depletion of the world's fuel resources as they fly from one international conference to another. Triviality still dominates wide sectors of the sociological enterprise, partly motivated by methodological fetishism (what cannot be quantified is not worth studying), partly due to the interests of financial sponsors who want allegedly scientific results to undergird their agendas. Rationalism and ideology, paradoxically, are both alive and well. In terms of rationalism, there is the intellectual imperialism of economics, which has found a niche in the social sciences by the spread of « rational actor theory » despite its failure to explain much of anything (what is the costs/benefits calculus of a suicide bomber?). In terms of ideology, « postmodernist theory » has gained widespread approval by sociologists, who tell us in tones of great conviction that scientific objectivity is impossible. I think it is fair to say that we still have here a rather unhealthy discipline.

All in all, I would today be slightly more optimistic about sociology than I was in 1992. Not much. But then, at this stage of my biography, I have much less at stake in the development of the discipline.

And so, once again, let me express my gratification at this new French edition. I can now indulge in a further fantasy : this French sociologist meets a Bulgarian colleague at a conference in Kuala Lumpur, and they embrace each other as out-of-the-closet Bergerians. Maybe they will send me an encouraging postcard.

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