

COMMITTEE IV
The Relationship Between Science
and The Arts and Its Relevance to
Cultural Transformation

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FAR FROM THE EPICENTRE: SOCIAL SCIENCE AND DRAMATIC ART

by

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Far from the Epicentre: Social Science and Dramatic Art

When I was originally asked to write this paper, I took my topic to be an inquiry into similarities between sociology and the theatre. Subsequently, I have been asked to describe the effect that the 'earthquake' of modern physics has had upon the social sciences - how, especially, changes in the concepts of time and space have had their impact upon the social sciences. It is this last question that I shall address first. I shall then attempt to bring my paper into line with other papers in this committee that are concentrating on a relationship between a science and an art-form by describing some of the assumptions and methods that social science shares with dramatic art - with the additional hope that this will further illustrate why neither discipline would be likely to be startled by either Heisenberg or Einstein.

There are, thus, two themes interwoven in what follows: the first is addressed primarily to those who assume that it is always physics, foremost among the sciences, that unearths new ways of looking at the world. It is suggested that it is not necessarily the case that the more fruitful frontiers of social science are inevitably moving closer to the physical sciences, but that, in certain respects, the physical sciences have, at their more fruitful frontiers, moved closer than they were (before the 'earthquakes' which shook some of their basic

assumptions) to a position that shares at least some of the characteristics which typify the social sciences. The second theme is that, in certain respects, the social sciences have more in common with a particular art-form than they have with other forms of science.

Starting from the assumption that we can often learn as much from a discovery of what is not the case as we can from a discovery of what is the case, let me suggest some reasons why the social sciences have not been as affected as certain other disciplines by the shifts that occurred in modern physics during the first half of the present century. Obviously, sociologists of science who study the history of physics, and, indeed, sociologists who study the effects that changes in physics might have on other aspects of social life are concerned with such changes as data; but this, in itself, is irrelevant to whether the methodology, assumptions, concepts and/or perspectives of social science are affected.

It has been proposed that the metaphor of a cultural earthquake (radical changes in concepts, assumptions and/or perspectives) in one area is a useful tool for the understanding of changes that have occurred in other areas - and that the severity with which a particular discipline's understanding of the nature of reality will be shaken depends

upon the discipline's position on a metaphorical Richter Scale.

Although such a metaphor may indicate or illuminate unsuspected connections in some instances, I would like to suggest that, so far as the earthquake of modern physics is concerned, its 'new' concepts, which have, no doubt, resulted in changing perspectives elsewhere, have left the social sciences relatively cold - not merely because social science is so far from the 'epicentre' of physics, but because the concepts and perspectives that are considered to be so radical in the natural sciences are, in fact, 'old' concepts and perspectives for the social sciences. More particularly, the problems that arise from an awareness of the relativity of space and time, the fallacy of misplaced concreteness (reification), and the possibility of unavoidable 'distortion' due to a two-way relationship between the observing subject and observed object have been presenting a challenge to the social sciences since the time of their conception.

Lest there be any misunderstanding, let me make it quite clear that it is not being suggested that an 'earthquake' emanated from the social sciences and that physics changed as a result.

Not being a complete relativist so far as human knowledge is concerned, I would, indeed, assume that it was the subject

matter of both disciplines that independently 'suggested' (perhaps even imposed) the eventual necessity (or, at least, the desirability and usefulness) of such concepts as relativity, uncertainty and observer-distortion. It ought, furthermore, to be recognised that the subject matter of the two disciplines is very different. The reasons why uncertainty is an integral part of social life are not the reasons why a principle of uncertainty is applicable to sub-atomic particles: the concept of 'choice' can be used only as an anthropomorphic metaphor in physics; but it is a concept which, while not without its problems, has to be taken seriously in at least some areas of sociological investigation.¹ Similarly, the reasons why sociologists might affect the social context that they are observing are not the same reasons that physicists might affect the sub-atomic world that they are observing: we do not assume that physicists have any 'meaning' for sub-atomic particles.

So far as relativity is concerned, social scientists have long been aware that social reality is relative to space and time; sociologists have never thought of their subject matter as being independent of space and time in the sort of way that pre-earthquake natural scientists might have expected (and, to all intents and purposes, still can expect) that (*ceteris paribus*) the properties of carbon and/or gravity would be the

same in 5th century China as they are in 20th century Washington. Furthermore, any social scientist who has but the slightest acquaintance with anthropology and/or history could not but be aware of the fact that the very concepts of space and time have always been relative to social culture - some societies, to take a very simple example, see time as cyclical rather than lineal; and space has been conceptualised in social terms rather more frequently than in the geometry of Euclid.

At this point, it might be helpful to make some remarks about the nature of social reality. There are those who, while aware that mechanistic views of the world are of limited value in certain areas of physics, and that there are areas in which modern physicists are not studying a concrete, material reality, find it, none the less, difficult to grasp that sociologists have a 'real' object of study. Although such people might blithely assert that 'matter is process', they are likely also to assert that either social reality is not real, or that it cannot be scientifically studied - or that, for it to be considered real and/or capable of scientific investigation, social facts must be reduced to the level of human bodies.

This is rubbish. Society has numerous 'emergent' properties

(such as power structures) that cannot be reduced to individuals. Of course social reality is not a concrete reality in the sense that human bodies - or tables - are concrete realities. Neither social structure nor social culture is 'out there to touch'; but, nowadays, only the most crude understanding of science would insist that a phenomenon has to be tangible to be real or capable of being studied. In short, 'social science' is not a contradiction in terms. Despite intrinsic limitations (some of which are due to the complexity and some to the essentially relative nature of its subject matter), the sociologist is making testable (refutable) statements about an abstract, but none the less real, entity.

A careless use of philosophical terms such as realism, idealism and materialism can create confusion when talking about the nature of social reality. [To confuse matters even further, materialism in the Marxist sense, which assumes that the economic base is fundamental to social functioning, is opposed to an idealism that claims that it is ideas that are, in the final analysis, the source of such phenomena as change and control in social life. The debate that arises from using the terms in this way is, however, one that is internal to sociology and need not concern us for our present purposes.] What is of concern is that there is a sense in which one must

adopt a position that espouses, in their more traditional senses, both realism and idealism at an ontological level (and both empiricism and some rationalism on epistemological questions).

One has to be idealist about social reality in that it exists only in the minds of men and women; but, at the same time, it exists independent of the volition of any one individual. Social structure and social culture cannot be controlled by any particular individual; every member of a society - even, perhaps especially, those in positions of authority - has to take the norms, expectations and values of society into account. The individual has to live within a social context that is independent of his or her own volition (which does not mean that there cannot be some rejections or 'negotiations'). In other words, sociologists must also be realists. The object of their study is not something that can be observed directly, but (as with some of the forces of physics) its effect can be observed and (unlike the physicist) sociologists can, as fellow participants in social life, hope to understand some of the meanings with which social reality is imbued for the actors who play out their roles according to the norms of the social reality within which they find themselves.

Perhaps it is not altogether surprising that sociologists frequently use terms like 'actor' and 'role' in their descriptions of social actions. For the rest of this essay, however, I shall be comparing the professional actor with the professional sociologist, rather than with the people whom the sociologist studies.

Let me begin with some points of clarification: first, it must be stressed that I am in no way denying that there are many important differences between not only the sciences and the arts in general, but also between the social sciences and dramatic art. Of course such differences exist. I do not, however, intend to consider such differences in this essay - indeed, one would hope that several of the more important differences would be too obvious to merit mention at such a gathering. And, of course, it is not denied that there is considerable variety to be found within both sociology and the theatre: industrial sociology differs from the sociology of religion, structural functionalism differs from ethnomethodology; and there are many different types of theatre: drawing-room comedy is very different from the traditional Japanese Noh play, a proscenium production differs in many significant respects from theatre-in-the-round. I do

not, however, intend to turn continually to these differences in order to insert nice qualifications which would do little but detract attention from the main thrust of the argument.

Partly because they happen to be the areas about which I have the most personal knowledge, but mainly because I think that they make most tellingly the points which I wish to stress, the comments that are to be made about the social sciences will be restricted to sociology, and comments about acting will be restricted to the theatre, although some remarks may apply equally to other social sciences or be relevant to film, television and/or radio - and, of course, some comments are equally applicable to other sciences and other art-forms. My aim is merely to indicate that there are common features in the practice of 'doing' sociology and 'doing' a theatrical performance, and these, I would like to suggest, are features that arise out of the nature of sociology and the theatre - and their shared concern with the human predicament.

One further point that arises out of the Pre-ICUS discussions and that ought, perhaps, to be mentioned: it was noted that there is a difference between the work done by individual sociologists or actors and 'sociology' or 'the theatre'. I have no argument with this position - in other contexts, I have, indeed, urged an awareness of such distinctions; but for

present purposes I would like to point out that it is also the case that there is no sociology without individual sociologists, and no theatre without actors. In this essay, I am not particularly interested in the content of the body of knowledge, or even the particular form of methodology that is accepted as sociology by any particular group at any particular time, nor am I particularly concerned with the 'real' form or meaning of theatre; I am not attempting to provide a description of the history or nature of sociology or the history or nature of theatre. My aim is solely to draw the reader's attention to some of the ways in which sociologists and actors proceed in a similar fashion because of the nature of their subject matter.

Although not all sociologists and not all actors proceed in precisely the ways that I shall be indicating (and some might legitimately deny that they ever think of their work in the terms in which I shall be describing it), I would, none the less, claim that the description is not a purely personal or idiosyncratic account of how sociology and acting are done. The kind of endeavours that I describe represent, I believe, practices that are recognisable in the work of many sociologists and actors; I would, moreover, be prepared to argue that they are practices that are well-nigh necessary (although not sufficient) for the very existence of most

sociology and theatre as we know them, for such endeavours arise from fundamental assumptions that, in turn, arise out of some fundamental *raison d'être* of both sociology and the theatre. It is to some of these basic assumptions that we now turn - assumptions about the material with which both sociologists and actors work: that is, their fellow men and women.

To start at the individual level: although no two people are ever identical, I find it necessary to assume as a sociologist, and I found it necessary to assume as an actress, that all human beings share common ingredients. This applies not merely to our biological make-up (and even men contain some 'female' hormones, and women some 'male' ones), but also to our psychological make-up. It is the 'mix' - the different balances of these characteristics (traits, propensities, needs, wants, drives), rather than any differences between the characteristics themselves, that result in our differing from each other. All of us are capable of feeling, displaying and receiving love, hate, sympathy, rejection, fear, joy, aggression, peace and a thousand other emotions; but some predispositions, feelings, emotions, and capacities for understanding, are stronger in some people than in others, and these variations in strengths and weaknesses result in different patterns of behaviour.

Since actors and sociologists are themselves men and women, they (like all men and women) can, indeed must, draw upon personal knowledge to recognise the ingredients in others - in a different balance. When the actor plays a murderer, he does not need to have committed a murder in order to know what wanting to murder someone might feel like. He needs to have access to his more murderous instincts - although (if the thespian community is not to be under constant threat) he will keep such instincts under the control of less murderous feelings. When the sociologist investigates a religious movement, she does not have to share the beliefs of those whom she is studying, but she does need to be able to recognise such feelings as awe, devotion, submission and/or spiritual inspiration. The actor 'sublimates' his feelings and emotions to those of the character he is portraying; the sociologist relies upon *Verstehen* (empathic understanding) in order to recognise what is going on. The methodology of physical or chemical scientists does not include a similar necessity to empathise with its object of study; nor does the artist drawing a landscape or a bowl of flowers need to assume a common humanity with his subject.

But, of course, neither acting nor sociology are merely navel-contemplating exercises. It is only through the

empirical observation of others that actors and sociologists can develop an awareness of the extent to which their own and others' balances of characteristics are typical or atypical. [The sociologist, in so far as she is a scientist, needs to be more precise than the actor in this particular endeavour and will engage in more systematic comparisons with the use of such methods as the 'control group'.]² This is not to say that either the sociologist or the actor is interested in the typical only, but that both will want to learn what kind of behaviour one can expect to be most likely in any situation.

Mention of 'situation' brings us to a second basic assumption.

No man is an island: the comedies and tragedies of both real life and the theatre arise out of the situations within which men and women find themselves. A fundamental assumption of social science is that man is a social animal, to some extent created through his or her interactions with others. As a result of their different 'mixes' (be these the consequence of nature or nurture), each individual will react to a given situation in a different way; but it is also the case that a single individual will act in a different way in one situation from the way that he or she will act in another situation. There is even a sense in which each person is a different individual in different situations; there is a sense in which a person talking to his maiden aunt is not quite the same

person as he is when making love to his mistress - or addressing the House of Representatives.

A further, related, assumption that both sociologists and actors have to take on board is that change, process and interaction are endemic to social life. Neither the actor nor the sociologist can assume that anything stands still. Life is not a rehearsal, nor is it a film that can be replayed. Both deal in verbs, not nouns; characters and situations change - they may develop, disintegrate, learn, accommodate or whatever, but even the most structured of situations consists of constant action - even when the action is doing nothing. Although the theatrical performance may try to grasp some eternal truths, it, itself, exists only at the moment of its enactment; although the sociologist may try to generalise, no study of social reality can ever be repeated exactly.

The precise techniques used in exploring social reality need not concern us here, but it is interesting that in both dramatic art and sociology there are opposing schools of thought which emphasise, respectively, the determined and the free nature of humans - and these give rise to somewhat different procedural approaches. In the theatre, there are those who concentrate primarily on technical skills (how to breathe in from the diaphragm and exhale on a laugh), and those

who avidly read Stanislavsky² and follow the Method school of Lee Strasberg. In social science, there are the behaviourists who work with a mechanistic view of man, studying people as though there were no more to their actions than complicated stimuli and responses; and there are the humanists who stress the autonomy and creativity of individuals. In practice, of course, most actors incorporate both technique and 'method', and most sociologists are inclined to incorporate either more or less behaviouristic or humanistic assumptions, rather than exclusively adopting one or other stance.

The actor does not need to subject his art to the systematic discipline of empirical science, but he does need to learn how to be heard at the back of the gods when whispering a confidence that the actor five feet to his right plausibly cannot hear; he has to know how to fall down a flight of stairs without hurting himself - and how to slap his leading lady's face without hurting her; and he has to be able to talk convincingly in a whole range of accents and dialects, and to walk, talk and sit 'in period'. To acquire such skills he has to do quite a lot of homework both in and out of rehearsals; he will have to do background reading and to observe people as they go about their lives; and, at the same time, if his performance is not to be superficial and/or 'dead', he will have to know how to draw on (and control) his own emotions and

feelings.

The sociologist can face a similar challenge that encompasses the art and/or the technique of controlled abandon. She certainly has to learn the techniques of her trade; she has to know how to analyse documents, construct questionnaires, conduct in-depth interviews, and she has to be able to interpret statistics. But throughout all these activities she has to be aware of the meaning of actions. The sociologist cannot further our knowledge of social reality by merely observing external behaviour in the way that a natural scientist observes the properties of carbon, or the neurologist observes the functioning of cells under different conditions - although, of course, she does have to observe external manifestations of behaviour. In short: observation and explanation for the sociologist involve understanding.⁴

What sociologists have in common with actors is the necessity to draw upon, and yet continually to monitor, their own experiences as human beings who are potentially both similar to and separate from those whom they are portraying/studying. This can result in what may be described as a 'methodological schizophrenia'. The actor, while drawing upon what can be perfectly genuine emotions, will, none the less, be aware of his audience's reactions; he will wait for the laugh to

subside; he will move slightly down-stage in order to keep in the spotlight that has been moved; he will notice that the essential prop. has not been set where it ought to be (the gun with which he is to kill the intruder, perhaps) and make alternative plans (to plunge a non-existent paper-knife into the intruder's unsuspecting back, perhaps). The sociologist who is playing the role of the participant observer must allow herself to react and to feel the emotions that are generated by the social situation in which she is participating, but, at the same time, she is observing both herself and those with whom she is interacting at another, analytical level.

In such situations, although it might seem as though it is the actor who is observed and the sociologist who is observing, there is, in both instances, continual interaction: both are observed and both are observing. The actor's performance in the theatre changes in response to each audience; the matinee on Wednesday with the bus-load of pensioners is not the same as Saturday's sophisticated second-House. And the audience changes with each actor; the understudy elicits a different response from that given to the principal whom he is replacing, despite the fact that the rest of the production is (almost) unchanged. The sociologist who is studying a social situation is aware that the very fact that she is present can make a difference to the situation - those whom she is

studying may, of course, be putting on a special show for her, but, more subtly, the presence of anyone added to a particular situation can make a difference to that situation.⁵ It is also true that the situation can affect her, not merely in the sense that she gains knowledge of what is taking place, but, possibly, at a more fundamental level so that her whole outlook on life might be altered in one way or another. Some sociologists of religion have, for example, become converted to the movement into which they were researching.⁶

The ultimate purpose of actors and sociologists who attempt to understand how people behave in certain situations is not to become the persons whom they study, but to communicate their understanding to their respective audiences. Despite the one being an artist and the other a scientist, both are involved in an attempt to understand in order to portray to others something of the human condition - be it for amusement, to 'raise consciousness' or as the basis of serious policy decisions. The point that I wish to emphasise is that, while both the actor and the sociologist wish their portrayal to be accurate, neither is attempting to reproduce reality. This introduces my final point, which touches upon the art and/or technique of communication.

The work of both actors and sociologists involves selection,

judgement and interpretation. Neither drama nor sociology offers a direct reflection of reality. Both, by selecting some aspects and not others, present less than reality - and, by presenting their offerings in such a way that new understandings are given to their audience (by providing a comparative context, for example) they present more than a mere reflection of reality.

Of course, neither the actor nor the sociologist has a completely free rein in what they may present to their public: the sociologist may not report that a religious community indulges in wild sexual orgies if, in fact, its members lead lives of celibate asceticism; and, even in the theatre of the absurd, one will usually find symbolic truths being asserted. But my point is that the purpose of the actor and of the sociologist is unlikely to be thought of as merely to document dry, facts about the social world and its inhabitants. Within the constraints of recognisable reality, both actor and sociologist may also attempt to make the unfamiliar seem familiar and to make the familiar seem unfamiliar: they may wish to jolt their audience out of a taken-for-granted perception of everyday life - to lead it round a corner so that it might see reality from a fresh perspective.

The art of the actor who plays a bore is to portray boredom

without being boring. The art of the sociologist who describes a strange cult or an everyday occurrence, is not merely to indicate how 'bizarre' the one is and how ordinary the other is, but also to show how the first can 'make sense' once one looks at it from a slightly different point of view, and how the second contains not merely God-given, 'natural' and necessary elements, but a certain degree of arbitrariness and, very probably, a number of unresolved contradictions. In other words, both the actor and the sociologist will set themselves the task of re-presenting reality so that others can both recognise and be surprised.

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In conclusion: I argued in the first part of this paper that sociology was not significantly affected by the 'earthquake' of modern physics. The reason was not that it was unaware of the 'new' concepts, but that it had long had to cope with the fact that the structures and cultures of society vary according to time and space, and that the concepts of time and space have, themselves, been perceived in ways that are relative to the social context within which they are perceived. It was, further, argued that the concept of uncertainty (or, more familiarly, unpredictability) was endemic to the sociological exercise - as was an awareness of

the fact that a researcher can, in some instances, influence the material under study.

A brief account of the nature of social reality suggested that, although society is not a concrete, material entity, this does not mean that its properties are reducible without loss to its individual members in isolation; nor does it mean that society is not 'real' - it certainly has a very real effect on its individual members. Nor yet does its non-material nature mean that it is any less amenable to systematic empirical study than many of the processes studied by modern physics.

It was, however, stressed that although sociology has long been challenged by such concepts as relativity, uncertainty, misplaced concreteness, and observer bias, the reasons for these playing a role in social science were not equivalent to the reasons that the concepts are now to be found in modern physics.

The second part of the paper attempted to highlight some of the characteristics of 'doing' sociology that differ from those of 'doing' physics. The approach was to compare some of the assumptions and procedures of the sociologist with some of those of the thespian. Here, the underlying theme was that

specific demands, sometimes of an apparently paradoxical nature, are made upon those professions that aim to increase and to communicate a knowledge of the predicament of humankind in diverse social situations. In this respect, then, social science and dramatic art share a significant distance from the epicentre of the 'earthquake' of early 20th century physics.

NOTES

1. For a fuller discussion of the concept of choice, see Eileen Barker *The Making of a Moonie: Brainwashing or Choice?*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1984.

2. The importance of the control group for a sociological investigation is discussed and illustrated in Chapter 5 of *The Making of a Moonie*.

3. The most famous books being Constantin Stanislavsky's *My Life in Art* (London:Geoffrey Bles, 1924) and his *An Actor Prepares* (London:Geoffrey Bles, 1937).

4. In this context, the distinction is frequently drawn between explanations in terms of causes and understanding in terms of reasons.

5. Of course, two-way interaction need not always take place; psychologists do, for example, sometimes use two-way mirrors, and actors can make films,

6. See, for example, Benetta Jules-Rossette *African Apostles:*

Ritual and Conversion in the Church of John Maranke (Cornell University Press, 1975) for a researcher who converted, and E. Burke Rochford Jr. *Hare Krishna in America* (New Brunswick:Rutgers University Press, 1985) for an account of a near conversion.