



Making Sense of the World Differently

Not much was happening in the shoe department. Elsewhere in the store people fussed over backpacks, tents, plastic kayaks, and other outdoor gear. But the two young men who sold hiking boots were enjoying a break. I was a few feet away, looking at hats, and could hear their conversation. One of them, leaning back against the counter, arms folded across his chest, was telling his coworker about college.

“It was a lot of fun,” he said, “but I didn’t learn anything I didn’t already know.”

“Yeah?” said his partner, a bit of wonderment in his voice.

“Yeah, my business communication class was good. We learned how to write memos. But most of the rest of it, pretty much all my classes—it was all just common sense. If it wasn’t for getting the degree, it would have been a waste of time.”

Hearing this took my mind off the hats. I imagined asking the young man how he had gotten so smart at eighteen that he could listen to professors and read books for four years and not learn anything new. I wanted to puncture his arrogance and scold him for wasting the time of those who had tried to teach him. Other college professors might have felt the same way.

My anger faded as I realized that the boaster could not have meant what he said. Surely he had learned *something* in college. So what was he saying? Perhaps he belittled his education because he was angry that it hadn’t gotten him a better job. Or perhaps he was trying to say to his buddy, “I’m no better than you for having gone to college. Common sense is what matters.” If this is what he meant, it was not such a bad message.

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Still, I was sad that he spoke of his education as a waste. Even if he had learned more than he realized, he had also missed a lot. He had not learned how to look back on himself, how to see who he was, what he was becoming, and how he was connected to others. If he had, perhaps he could have explained, without making his buddy feel bad, how his education had benefited him.

I do not suppose that courses in memo writing or other technical subjects are likely to foster much self-awareness. That is not their purpose. But other kinds of courses, and whole fields of study, claim this purpose as their reason for being. My own field of study, sociology, is often justified on the grounds that it helps people gain insight into themselves and into society, so they can live more satisfying, self-determined, and responsible lives. If sociology, or any discipline, can do this for people, then I think it has good reasons for being.

Yet sociology courses sometimes foster less self-awareness and insight into society than sociology promises to deliver. This failure is most likely to occur, it seems to me, when courses aim primarily to teach about sociology as a discipline: “See how scientific we are? See all these theories and concepts and findings? You had better be impressed by all this!” No teacher says these things in quite this way, of course, but sometimes this is the message that comes through. Perhaps you have heard it yourself.

When sociology is taught as a body of work created by strangers, it can seem like an exotic and fanciful thing—something that one can take or leave, depending on how interesting it is to listen in on the sayings of sociologists. If this is how sociology comes across, most people will tune it out before long. After all, what sociologists say among themselves is less interesting than social life itself. Most people, sensibly enough, would rather pay attention to social life than to the academic study of social life.

And so it often happens that an encounter with sociology leaves only a faint impression. A few scattered facts and concepts are remembered, but there are no changed habits of mind, no well-learned ways of making a different kind of sense of the social world. It is as if, after so much telling about the pictures that others have made, we have forgotten that the point is to teach people how to make pictures for themselves.

If you would like a written portrait of the discipline of sociology, you can find one in many places—but not here. This book is not

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about the concepts, theories, and findings of sociology, although it makes implicit use of these. It is about how to think sociologically and about why this is worth doing. It tells and shows how to pay attention to and make sense of the social world in a sociological way. I call this the practice of being sociologically mindful. Once you master this practice, you can make the pictures for yourself.

Sociological Mindfulness

Do you recognize the typefaces used in this book? In what style is it bound? On what kind of paper is it printed? If such questions seem strange, it is because you have not learned to practice a certain kind of mindfulness with regard to books. It is the same with many things around us, familiar things that affect us deeply. We fail to see what they are because we lack the necessary kind of mindfulness. Fortunately, we can learn.

Mindfulness is more than paying attention. To be mindful of a thing is to see and appreciate its unique qualities. For example, to be mindful of a person is not just to be aware of and pay attention to that person. To be mindful of a person, as a human being, means trying to see and appreciate his or her uniqueness as a thinking and feeling being. When we are mindful of a person in this way, we see past stereotypes and prejudices.

Children often see things with amazing clarity because their minds are fresh and the world is new and wondrous to them. A child's mindfulness, however, is indiscriminate, as if one kind of grasp can get ahold of everything. As adults we learn to be mindful in ways that suit the things we encounter. We learn that people, for example, must be understood in terms of what makes them people: ideas, feelings, desires, bodies, and habits. Likewise, books must be appreciated for what makes them books: words, paper, design, binding, and so on. For each kind of thing we learn a different way of grasping it.

Sociological mindfulness is the practice of tuning-in to how the social world works. We are all tuned-in to some extent, of course, just by being members of society. But to be truly mindful of the social world we must learn to see it for what it is. We must learn, in other words, the ideas necessary to see what makes the social world

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a unique phenomenon. These are ideas about *how to pay attention* to the social world. Sociological mindfulness is the practice of paying attention in these ways.

What do we see if we practice sociological mindfulness? We see, for example, how the social world is created by people; how infants become functional human beings; how we are interdependent with others; how people's behavior is a response to the conditions under which they live; how social life consists of patterns within patterns; how contingencies shape our fates; how appearances are strategically crafted; how power is exercised; how inequalities are created and maintained; and how we can create valid and reliable knowledge about the social world.

A Justification for Sociological Mindfulness

Why bother to be sociologically mindful? What is the point of all this analytic thinking about social life? My answers to these questions are based on three beliefs.

The first is that a good life—one that is stimulating, intense, joyful, purposeful, caring, and dignified—can be had only in a society that is peaceful, cooperative, egalitarian, and minimally regimented. My second belief is that everyone has an equal right to a good life, and so no one should enjoy power and privilege at the expense of others. My third belief is that because human lives are intertwined, we are all obliged to consider how our actions affect others, especially their chances of living a good life.

I hope you find these beliefs reasonable as starting points. If you want to mull them over, here is an angle from which to do so: Think of the people you love and the kind of life you wish for them. Is it a life of violence, deprivation, and suffering, or is it something more like my vision of a good life? If it is the latter, then I hope you will consider the possibility that mindfulness may be useful as a way to create better lives for more people.

Mindfulness is useful because it helps us see *how* our lives are intertwined and how our words and deeds help or harm others in nonobvious ways. Being sociologically mindful is especially important for helping us see that the consequences of our words and deeds often escape our intentions.

For example, a person who tells a racist joke may intend only to be funny. Yet what this person does is to reinforce beliefs that some

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kinds of people are stupid, vain, immoral, or inferior. Even if no one is offended when the joke is told, in the long run people can be hurt. The sentiments expressed in the joke might decrease sensitivity to others' feelings and to their needs for help. Or it might be that the joke makes others seem unworthy of friendship, thus cutting people off from each other. The harm, in other words, can be indirect, subtle, and delayed. It doesn't matter that no harm was intended. It can happen nonetheless.

Harm can arise even when our actions seem honorable. For example, working hard at one's job is usually a good thing to do. But when people work for companies that make weapons, cigarettes, or pornography, or when they work for companies that advertise, sell, or defend such products, violence, death, disease, and misery are the ultimate results. No one may intend others to be hurt, yet that is what happens, and those who make it happen are responsible. The harm could not happen if not for their hard work.

The kind of awareness that sociological mindfulness produces can be unsettling because it sometimes forces us to see things we would prefer not to. But by failing to be mindful, we can inadvertently damage or destroy what we would like to preserve. Or we might, through short-sighted action, diminish our own and others' chances of living good lives. By helping us see beyond our intentions to the consequences of our actions, sociological mindfulness can help us avoid traps like these, though it does not make them easy to escape.

Being sociologically mindful also means paying attention to the hardships and options other people face. If we understand how others' circumstances differ from ours, we are more likely to show compassion for them and to grant them the respect they deserve as human beings. We are also less likely to condemn them unfairly for doing things we dislike. By helping us appreciate the conditions under which others act, sociological mindfulness can help decrease the amount of hatred and conflict in the world.

Being caught up in our daily concerns, we often fail to see and appreciate all of our connections to others—to those who make our clothes, grow our food, clean up our messes, pay for the schools we use, use the schools we pay for, benefit or suffer from actions by politicians we elect, look to us as examples, and so on. Sociological mindfulness helps us see these threads of social life and how they sustain and obligate us. The main benefit of this awareness is that it can make us more responsible members of a human community.

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That seems to be as good a reason as any for learning a new intellectual practice.

The Rarity of Sociological Mindfulness

If sociological mindfulness were common, I wouldn't need to argue for it. You would simply take it for granted that we all need to be aware of and to think carefully about how the social world works. You would probably think it strange for anyone to make a big deal about doing so. But it seems that sociological mindfulness is actually quite rare in our society.

One reason might be that sociological mindfulness doesn't seem like much fun. Who wants more rules for how to think? As soon as there are rules, then we must worry about getting it right or wrong. So we might feel like saying, "Enough with fancy intellectual schemes! I'm doing just fine with common sense, thank you. Besides, I would prefer to *live* life rather than analyze it to death." This sentiment is not unreasonable in a society where we are constantly being offered ideas of dubious merit.

Another reason that sociological mindfulness is rare might be a belief that it won't matter. Why bother thinking analytically about social life if doing so won't make a difference? Some smart and caring people withdraw from the world because they do not believe they can do anything to change it. They feel powerless, as do many people in our society. I think this is what really impedes sociological mindfulness. We tend to be mindful of things that we feel responsible for and have some control over. But if we feel powerless to change a situation, we probably won't try to analyze it deeply. We might feel lucky just to avoid trouble.

American individualism also inhibits sociological mindfulness. As Americans we learn that it is good to be self-reliant, to achieve on our own, and to look out for ourselves. Under some conditions these are helpful ideas. But they can also blind us to our interdependence with others, and keep us from seeing how our ties to others lead us to think, feel, and behave in certain ways. Ideas that lead us to think of ourselves solely as competing individuals, free to do anything we want at any time, can keep us from being mindful of the social world in which we are immersed.

It is also possible that a desire for money and status may so pre-occupy us that we fail to think much about how society works or

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how other people experience it. Or we might fear the loss of security that can come from questioning the beliefs we grew up with. Or we might be so angry at those who abuse us that we lose all sympathy for others who are worse off. Or perhaps we prefer not to reflect on how we participate in oppressing others, because it would make us feel guilty or sad.

People resist being sociologically mindful for many reasons, but not because they are naturally selfish, competitive, or cowardly. If such feelings arise and inhibit sociological mindfulness, it is because of how people have grown up. In a less competitive society where good jobs were available for everyone, people could feel more secure and would probably be willing to spend more time reflecting on how society works. When it seems like life is a race, few people may want to stop to analyze what all the racing is about or where it is leading, lest they fall behind.

Being sociologically mindful goes against the grain in Western society. It may also go against many of the impulses that have been instilled in us as Americans. How can these resistances be overcome? With ideas, first of all, since people must think it is worthwhile to practice sociological mindfulness. I hope that the ideas I have offered so far have persuaded you, at least partly, if you needed persuading.

Here is one more idea that might nudge you toward more mindfulness: Even if you are young now, you will probably die in forty to sixty years; if you are older, you have fewer years remaining. The time will pass quickly. How do you want to use it? You could try to acquire as much wealth and fame as possible. That seems to be the main ambition for many people in our culture; there are, however, other goals for a human life. You could try to enrich the lives of others by teaching, creating art, restoring a piece of the earth, promoting health, resisting violence, or organizing for change. The question is, What kind of mark do you want to leave on the earth for having lived? If you would like to leave the earth a better place than you found it, sociological mindfulness will help you see what needs to be done.

A Continuing Conversation

No matter how carefully we study the social world, our knowledge of it is always incomplete. Even if you could read about everything, there would still be experiences that remained foreign to you. And

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even if you could read and experience far more than the average person, you would still be interpreting everything from your particular point of view—a view shaped by your upbringing in a particular place, time, culture, and community. There is no way around this constraint on our knowledge.

Because people see and experience different things in life, and have different ways of interpreting what they see and experience, people are bound to disagree about how the social world works and about how it ought to work. What then? If the disagreements concern matters of taste (“You *like* opera? Yecch!”) or are trivial, then perhaps we can just shrug them off. “No big deal,” we might say, as we wonder how it is that other people can embrace such odd notions.

Other times there is more at stake. One person might think that democracy is ensured by elections in which the candidate who gets the most votes wins a place in government, and the loser can try again next time. Another person might think that such a system is undemocratic, because it means that 49 percent of the people can end up with no voice in government. A disagreement such as this, when it involves a large number of people who have taken up sides, can lead to violent conflict.

Being sociologically mindful can help us to avoid the destructive potential of disagreements over matters large and small. If we are mindful, we will realize that our knowledge is always limited, that others know what the world looks like from where *they* stand, and that we cannot claim to have a monopoly on the truth. So at the very least we will want to listen to others and try to understand how and why they have a different view of things. We will also want to look back at ourselves and try to figure out where our knowledge has come from.

Being sociologically mindful is thus likely to engage us in a conversation aimed at understanding several important matters: how the social world works, how and why others are different from and similar to us, and how we can get along with others despite our differences. As long as we are engaged in such a conversation—as long as we are thinking, talking, and trying to understand each other and ourselves—we will not be beating anyone over the head and insisting that they do what we say. Nor will they be doing this to us.

The kind of conversation I am referring to can involve many people and can be carried on through print and other media, as well as through talk. It can also occur over long stretches of time—days,

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weeks, years. In fact, if we are lucky, this conversation will go on indefinitely, because that is the only way we can avoid violence and work together to create social arrangements that will allow as many people as possible to live good lives. Practicing sociological mindfulness is a way into this conversation and a way to keep it going.

This book is part of the conversation, and no serious conversation about how the social world works, or how best to make sense of it, proceeds without disagreements. And so I am sure that you will disagree with some things I say here. When this happens, please talk back to the book and raise questions, in your own mind and with others. Disagreement can move a conversation ahead if we take it as an opportunity to look more deeply into why others see the world differently. I hope that whatever disagreements this book might provoke can be used in this way.

At the end of each chapter I list a few sources at which you might want to look. These are not sources that “prove me right.” They are relevant pieces of the conversation—pieces upon which I have drawn and from which you might also benefit, if you care to consult them. If you do, you will see where some of my thinking comes from, how it is a response to what has been said before, and how my thinking goes its own way. This will give you a larger view of the conversation to which this book and its readers now belong.

All I can do in these pages is to invite you to consider a way of thinking that I believe holds great promise for making better sense of the social world and for living in it more humanely. I hope you will agree that sociological mindfulness is useful for these purposes. If I didn’t believe this myself, I would not have written this book. But whatever you think, I will be satisfied if you are willing to keep the conversation going. Sometimes that is the best we can do, and sometimes it is enough.

◆ ◆ ◆ DIALOGUE ◆ ◆ ◆

Labels and Roots

I have heard that students who dislike parts of *TSEL* will proclaim, “Schwalbe is a liberal!” as if to thereby refute whatever I have said. The same thing sometimes happens in class. Students who call themselves “conservative,” and who are bothered by an argument

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in a text, will sometimes try to dismiss the argument by labeling it, or its author, as “liberal.” When I hear this, I ask, “Does applying a political label to an argument make the argument right or wrong?” I use this question to direct attention to the argument itself and away from distracting labels.

The problem is not that such labels—conservative, liberal, radical—are meaningless. The problem is that they are often used in a careless way. If we pause to define them, they can be useful.

In classic political theory, a conservative is someone who values tradition as an embodiment of accumulated wisdom. Conservatives thus believe in conserving existing social arrangements. As you might guess, conservatism tends to appeal to members of privileged groups, because they benefit the most from existing arrangements. Note, however, that conservatism has, in principle, nothing to do with support for tax cuts, aggressive militarism, prayer in school, or forced motherhood.

In classic political theory, a liberal is someone who believes that we should use the power of human reason to continually improve society. Whereas a conservative might say, “If it isn’t broke, don’t try to fix it,” a liberal might say, “We should always strive to improve our social machinery, whether it seems ‘broken’ or not.” Liberalism thus appeals to people who have faith in human progress, and who believe that tradition is often a barrier to progress. Note here that liberalism has, in principle, nothing to do with support for welfare, government spending, or reproductive rights.

Liberals are thus more suspicious of tradition and more congenial to change than conservatives. Even so, liberals usually agree with conservatives that the basic structure of society is fine. If there are problems, according to the liberal view, they can be solved without a major overhaul of society. A radical view is different from either the liberal or conservative. But radical does not mean far-out or wild.

The word *radical* comes from the Latin word *radix*, which means “root.” Properly speaking, then, a radical is one who looks for the root of things. And so when it comes to analyzing social problems, a radical will often try to see if those problems are rooted in the way that society is organized.

Here is an example. Let’s suppose that we see a lot of children failing to do well in school. Let’s also suppose that people of all political persuasions agree that this is a problem we should try to solve.

A conservative might say that we should not presume that the problem lies with the schools. After all, a conservative might say,

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our way of schooling is the result of many years of successful experience. This way of schooling has worked well in the past and still works well (or seems to) for most students. So let's not rush to trade proven methods for new educational fads. Perhaps we just need to encourage students to try harder.

A liberal might say that as society changes, old methods need to be reexamined. Perhaps students today are different somehow, a liberal might say, and so schools might need to adjust to this new reality. Yes, students ought to try hard, but we must also make sure that teachers are trained to work with students from diverse backgrounds. Perhaps schools also need more resources to ensure that all students, and especially those who are not members of privileged groups, are taught well.

In this example, the conservative view doesn't rule out looking at how schools work. It just doesn't look there first. The liberal view doesn't rule out looking at students' study habits or efforts. It just looks elsewhere first. Neither view, however, raises questions about how schools are organized, how they operate in the context of a capitalist economy, or how they serve the interests of powerful groups.

How is the radical view different? First, I should say that there is no one radical view. There are as many radical views as there are ideas about root causes. So there are alternative radical analyses of the problem of children not doing well in school. But here, in brief, are some possible radical views of the problem.

The first thing to ask is, Who does and doesn't do well in school? (We would need to define "doing well," but let's put that aside for the moment. I should also say that I am referring to public schools.) As it turns out, schools tend to work well for white students from middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds, and less well for students of color and students from working-class backgrounds. This is one clue telling us that we will need to take class and race into account. But this in itself isn't what would make a radical analysis radical. There is more to it.

A radical view might say that, in a capitalist society, the real purpose of schools is to reinforce and justify inequality. To expect them to do otherwise is, according to the radical view, naive. Yes, a few people will be able to use education as a way to move up the class ladder. But for the most part schools will operate as sorting machines that prepare working-class children for working-class jobs, middle-class children for middle-class jobs, and so on. To see this, all you have to do is to look at the results that schools produce,

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and not confuse uplifting rhetoric (about education providing equal opportunity for everyone) with reality.

A radical might point out other things. For instance, in a society with vast economic inequality, many children will be poorly prepared—relative to kids whose families have greater resources—to succeed in school. And so it is predictable that many children will fail. A radical might say that if job opportunities are so limited that a lot of students doubt that school will pay off for them, then they probably won't accept the disrespect and boredom that school imposes, just for the sake of good grades. Expecting to be discriminated against because of racism can also undermine people's motivation.

A radical might agree that schools could be tweaked to work better (e.g., anti-racism training for teachers, more resources for underfunded schools), and that some students might benefit from encouragement to try harder. Yet the problem of kids not doing well in school can be understood only by looking at basic features of the surrounding society: a class-based economy and pervasive white racism. It is in these basic features of our society, a radical would say, that the problem is rooted. And so, unless we pull up the roots, the problem will never be solved.

Which analysis is correct? It is impossible to say, without studying what's actually happening in the world, and that is a separate project. I can say, however, that being sociologically mindful requires taking the bigger picture into account and trying to see how one part of the social world—the economy, for instance—is related to other parts—schools, for instance. If we don't do this, we will fail to see important things about how our society works. I can also say that if liberal and conservative remedies have not worked, then we might reasonably suspect that the source of the problem lies deeper than either of these perspectives can see.

After saying all this about liberal, conservative, and radical perspectives, here is the upshot: The label put on an analysis doesn't matter very much. What matters is whether the analysis is based on solid evidence and careful thinking. To try to discredit an analysis simply by giving it an unpopular label is not intellectually responsible. All analyses are open to challenge, of course. But an intelligent challenge worthy of equal consideration must be in the form of a counterargument.

At the very least, an analysis of the social world, or of any part of it, must be sociologically mindful, or else important things will be missed. As for the perspective presented in *TSEL*, I would say, *You are welcome to label it if you wish, but remember that a label is not in itself*

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an intelligent judgment, let alone a counterargument. A perspective should be judged based on the values it proceeds from and reinforces and based on the insight it can give us into whatever we're interested in. On those grounds, I welcome your evaluation of the perspective and arguments offered here.

 PATHS FOR REFLECTION 

1. Think of a group of people about whom you know a lot. It could be a clique, a club, or a team to which you belong; it could be people you work with or used to work with; or it could be your family. In any case, think of a group about which you are an expert. Now imagine that an outsider takes a quick look at this group of yours and says, "These people seem like fools. Why would anyone act in such ridiculous ways?" You would probably think that this outsider was ignorant and unfair. But suppose that this outsider really wanted to understand the people in your group. How would you guide the outsider toward this understanding? Of what would the outsider need to become mindful?

2. Some people think that education happens when students are sent to school and made to listen. Another way of thinking is reflected in this old saying: "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." This means that until we are intellectually and emotionally ready to hear certain messages, no one can get those messages through to us, but that when we are ready, we will find the teacher we need. How does this idea help to make sense of the young man who (at the beginning of Chapter 1) claimed not to have learned anything in college? Presuming we are ready to learn, what might we do to better our chances of connecting with people who can teach us?

3. Another professor who uses this book asked her students to answer my question about what kind of mark they wanted to leave on the world for having lived. When she showed me what her students wrote, I noticed that many had said something like this: "When I die, I want to be remembered as someone who cared about and helped others." That is a fine aspiration; we would all do well to strive to be known as caring and helpful people. But being concerned with how others think of us is different from being concerned with how we might affect the world through our actions.

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So it seems to me that my friend's students misinterpreted the question. Then again, I suppose that many people would interpret and answer the question in the same way. How would you explain this tendency? Is there anything about our culture that might lead people to answer the question in the way my friend's students did?

◆◆◆ RELATED READINGS ◆◆◆

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