
Sociology is always going to be important in any society where conventional truths aren't properly challenged. I mean we know every day as we switch on the television or read newspapers there are interviewers and columnists and pundits who are attempting to provide new ways, new directions for society, new ways of arguing this or arguing that, but in many cases it's a debate which occurs within fairly closed parameters.

It's as though the differences between the Labour Party and the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats, what are presented as differences as many people watching these sort of find it difficult to tell the precise differences. They find it difficult to see how any of these are challenging what could be described as the existing order. Of course politicians don't want to challenge the existing order; they may want to rig it this way or that, but they don't want to fundamentally challenge it.

And what sociology does, or should do at its very best, is to go beyond these pundits, these professional interviewers, go beyond the politicians, and it should raise even more fundamental questions about matters that are very rarely referred to, fundamental questions about democracy itself. I mean you won't hear any politician sitting down, having a discussion about what's happened to democracy. But a sociologist might want to say in an age in which according to some sociologists we're entertaining ourselves to death, in what ways has politics simply become a branch of the entertainment industry? Are those early ideas about the way in which democracy might be the very best system we could possibly have has been undermined by the way in which society has developed in other ways? Or we might want to say in an era in which it somehow seems to be taken for granted by so many pundits that capitalism is here to stay and is really the only way in which societies can be effectively organised.

Now, if you like that socialism, Marxism is on the back foot and not being entertained or thought about, sociologists want to come along and say just a minute, why are we taking it for granted, why are we allowing capitalism to be the one mode of societal organisation which isn't going to be undermined in some way, which isn't going to be changed, which isn't going to be transformed? Or we might want sociologists to come along and look at such other matters as religion, to talk about the ways, again going back if you like to the entertainment

industries, the extent to say that has religion, has the decline in religious belief, has that coincided with the rise of celebrity culture, is there a way in which people's adherence to these new idols of the steam means they are no longer in hoc to the idols who used to exist in heaven and hell, or rather in heaven. It was the devils who were in hell, wasn't it?

So what you want sociology for is to ask the questions that nobody else is asking. Wider, bigger, broader, more subversive, irritating, awkward, devilish, difficult, unanswerable in some case questions, to keep poking away at the ice which constantly freezes over the contemporary world in which people say well it's only natural, it's only common sense, well that's the way we do it, we've always done it like that, how could we do it otherwise, what do you mean? This is where sociologists come in and say but you could think in this way, you could have that thought, couldn't we have these institutions, couldn't we get rid of that, isn't it possible, might not we do this?

Foucault talks in his book, the Order of Things, about the possibility of being able to think as people did think in different eras. He talks rather wonderfully about how in the classical era people's thought, their epistemology, their idea of how you might know about the world, was based upon the idea of collecting things and putting them in order. You got all the flowers and you arranged them in order, you set them next to each other, which ones matched - it was like you were unravelling god's jigsaw, and at the end of it, using this method of induction, all the pieces would fit together and then you'd see god's pattern. You would have understood how god had put all these elements into the earth, you'd put them together, you'd have answered the question.

Of course when you move into the 19th century, the quite different way of thinking begins to take over. Now if you want to understand what's going on in the world, you have to turn to history. All of a sudden, when you have something like evolution coming along, you have the different stages of history. Now not just evolutionary in terms of biology, but evolution in terms for Marx, in terms of societies, how you move from primitive societies to feudal societies, bourgeoisie, to communist societies, here are all the various stages being spelt out. Freud similarly has a historical story. You start with a young child, then you go through sort of the phallic stage, the anal stage and then you reach the latency stage.

So all of a sudden in the 19th century, it seemed to people if they wanted to understand the world. If they wanted to understand capitalism, if they wanted to understand biology and animals, if they wanted to understand psychodynamics, you needed to do it through looking at history. History would provide you with the answers, what went before and what might come afterwards. Now this in the 16th, 17th century would be an entirely alien way of thinking.

So my long answer, I apologise for the length of this, but my answer to your question is it should ideally introduce people to the possibility of different ways of thinking, different epistemologies, to say the ways in which you think you know about the world are not the only ways of knowing about the world. And I can take you to societies, to underdeveloped societies, and I can show you there are people who assemble the world in different ways. They classify it in different ways. What they mean by belief differs, what they base their beliefs on is different.

If I said to you, for example, I've got a nice simple question, I can remember starting a seminar on religion by saying to the students, do you think the Greeks believed in their gods, all those strange gods we hear about, fighting and brawling with each other, did the Greeks believe in them, and how would we know whether they did believe in them? And if they did believe in them, did they believe in them the same way that say perhaps people in this group might believe in Jesus or they might believe in the resurrection, or they might believe in the reincarnation? What is the nature of different beliefs?

So, again, again, sociology really exists. Its purchase upon the world should be such as to throw it around, to upset ideas, to upset received opinions, upset conventional wisdom, and most of all send its students to bed thinking about how they could be thinking in quite different ways.