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MAKING PROBLEMS

REFLECTIONS ON EXPERIENCE

AND RESEARCH

The writer who is to be anything more than an echo of his predecessors must always find expression for something which has never yet been expressed, must master a new set of phenomena which has never yet been mastered. With each such victory of the human intellect, whether in history, in philosophy or in poetry, we experience a deep satisfaction: we have been cured of some ache of disorder, relieved of some oppressive burden of uncomprehended events.

—Edmund Wilson, “The Historical Interpretation of Literature”

Edmund Wilson’s¹ observation about writing history, philosophy, or poetry applies as well to social science. The great critic and author of *To The Finland Station*² captures something fundamental about sociological practice as a creative act—or so, at least, it seems to me when I reflect on why we do this kind of work, what deep-down urge drives our activity, and what we hope to

accomplish when the work is done. This is not to deny the importance of other perfectly good motives for doing social science, particularly at the university, including decent wages, hours, working conditions, and more deference than we really deserve. We are social scientists because it is a good job. But we, or let me just say I, derive something more from the work, some deeper “ache of disorder” and satisfaction with its cure. Wilson’s metaphor might be translated as an awareness of disquieting but tractable questions about society and the rewarding challenge of their solution. That, for me, is how the personal and the professional interact.

It was not always so. The ache of disorder and satisfaction of comprehension are ways of experiencing sociological work that came to me slowly as the result of a series of projects and successive reflections on the accomplishments and limitations of each. I had to learn how to formulate sociological problems as a condition of appreciating their satisfactory solution when it appeared. And I am still learning, still vexed in each new project by “what is the problem?”

Yet one’s evolving problem sense begins somewhere. For me, it began in the late 1950s when I entered college and soon exited, at UCLA. I came to the university with little sense of purpose, floundered in youthful debauchery and an ill-conceived course of study, and after a year found myself menially employed in the southern California aircraft industry. So began my search for what we used to call a “rewarding career.” What *did* I want to study? How was I to get out of the defense plant and into some fulfilling line of work?

Los Angeles in the late 1950s was a lively place, a new kind of city, prototype of suburban sprawl, capital of a popular culture industry with global reach, and for all the ridicule of its goofy lifestyles, a notably rich and accessible public culture. It was a place in which people of modest means could participate in a democratic cultural life without intimidation or restriction of privilege. Public educational facilities from junior (now community) colleges to the state university were abundant and open. Listener-sponsored radio featured programs in the arts and lectures by public intellectuals. An unremarkable week in the life of an aircraft mechanic might include night school at Valley J.C., a lecture on sane nuclear policy by Linus Pauling, a Van Gogh exhibit at the county museum, and a coffee-house appearance by Joan Baez. The popular novelist Leon Uris opened a book store in my San Fernando Valley neighborhood and schmoozed with regular customers, particularly when he approved their selection of titles such as C. Wright Mills’s *The Power Elite*.³ Uris loved Mills, calling him “such a trenchant writer.”

I returned to university gradually, via the tolerant community and state college systems, on the strength of a nascent interest in social science. To be

more precise, I returned in the hope of finding an engaging career line that involved the social issues raised in a burgeoning (slick, inexpensive paperback) literature that examined the social world in a new way. Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom*,⁴ for example, which described how people could abandon their individuality to enthralling mass movements in times of social dislocation, seemed to me powerful, cogent, and most important, an altogether new way of comprehending the world—through social science, new to me but also new to the popular repertoire of work for which one could train. I felt the same fascination for contemporary works like William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man*⁵ and Gordon Allport's *The Nature of Prejudice*.⁶ They described the world in ways I recognized, and they did it as a craft, a research method that was actually taught at the university. Indeed, at UCLA the sociologist Melville Dalton had written *Men Who Manage*,⁷ a book about the organizational life of a chemical firm, which impressed me mightily as a perfect description of the aircraft plant where I had worked. Soon I would discover the same verisimilitude in an article by Joseph Bensman and Israel Gerver on "Crime and Punishment in the Factory," in Erving Goffman's *Asylums*, and in Gresham Sykes's *Society of Captives*,⁸ as those studies compared with places where I had worked during graduate school. Social science was hip—hip to the commodification of suburbia, the inner workings of corporations, and the underlife of institutions. These academic writers knew how people cheat on the assembly line or revenge the indignities of institutional discipline. Today, forty years later, I still recall how vividly all this impressed me, how intrigued I became with this kind of work and the possibility that I might be able to do it.

The work fascinated me for its craft and cogency, but equally for its edge. Sociology challenged conventional wisdom and its ways of knowing. It was "debunking," in Peter Berger's phrase.⁹ From the vantage of the public university in populist Los Angeles, sociology seemed the perfect antidote to elite pretension, a demonstrable claim to knowledge as a public good. Social science was "radical" in the literal sense of getting to the root of things. It was democratic in practice and result. In the iconic figures of Mills or Veblen, it also smacked of rebellion. I liked everything about it.

For the next six years, I learned sociology in peripatetic fashion, moving from the California state college system (Northridge) back to UCLA and then on to Berkeley and Santa Barbara, looking for an encouraging program and discovering in the process the many varieties of "standard" sociology. Garfinkel's theory at UCLA bore no resemblance to the theory of Bendix or Smelser at Berkeley, which was not too surprising, but even statistics and methods were worlds apart on the same coastline—a useful early lesson in

canonicity. With the encouragement of David Gold and a generous NIMH (National Institute of Mental Health) fellowship at Santa Barbara, I took up a dissertation topic that mirrored the interests that attracted me to the field.

Floyd Hunter's *Community Power Structure*¹⁰ was another sociological classic that combined insight and method, a radical way of examining American politics at the tractable local level and a challenge to notions of bourgeois piety. Hunter had devised a way of identifying the big shots who ran "Regional City" (Atlanta), often behind the scenes and in the narrow interests of business. Hunter's (reputational) method inspired legions of imitators and critics. Indeed, as my dissertation proved, the community power controversy came to center more on the ideologies and associated research methods of social scientists than it did on the nature of local democracy. Lost in the academic controversy was Hunter's argument that Alinsky-style community organizing was naive and ineffective in contrast to a scientifically informed strategy of social change that identified and targeted the levers of power. In a series of works that followed, I wrestled with questions about power—how to identify its many forms, what difference they made, and whether democracy worked. The dissertation landed me some journal publications and a good job at Northwestern University. Suddenly I *was* a sociologist rather than a mere admirer.

All this took place at a unique historical moment, although few of us understood fully at the time just how history was shaping our careers. We were on the crest of a wave of university expansion and democratization in higher education. Louis Menand notes:

In the Golden Age, between 1945 and 1975, the number of American undergraduates increased by almost 500 percent and the number of graduate students increased by nearly 900 percent. In the 1960s alone enrollments more than doubled, from 3.5 million to just under 8 million; the number of doctorates awarded annually tripled; and more faculty were hired than had been hired in the entire 325-year history of American higher education to that point.¹¹

Social science was a leading sector in the expansion measured by growing student enrollments, faculty, doctorate programs, and published research. Research became the key quality standard and income source of universities. Social science in its contemporary, largely university-based form, was created in this period by those broader historical changes that defined the period: post-World War II recovery, welfare state expansion, social mobility and professionalization, and the equality revolution. This was not only the history that created modern sociology; it was also, for those of us who entered the

university at the time, an instance of what Mills called the “intersection of history and biography,”¹² the proper subject matter of sociology itself and the essence of the sociological imagination. Our careers were shaped by the same historical processes we made a career of researching. Mills, and later Alvin Gouldner,¹³ recognized the reflexive nature of sociology as a uniquely human activity in which we examine the social world through a lens that can, and should, be turned on ourselves. The objective is not primarily to understand ourselves in this fashion also but to understand society and our relationship to it as actors and observers.

The point, then, is that my sociological work and its satisfactions depend on making tractable problems—formulating consequential questions and generating new knowledge bearing on their solution. I think this is true for other practitioners and describes our method of operation. This is what distinguishes sociology from journalism, history, or poetry. This is what Karl Marx did when he asked, “Where does value come from?”¹⁴ and turned to human labor in the production of commodities for an answer. This is how Max Weber began *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, in a section entitled “The Problem”:

A glance at the occupational statistics of any country of mixed religious composition brings to light with remarkable frequency a situation . . . namely, the fact that business leaders and owners of capital, as well as the higher grades of skilled labor, and even more the higher technically and commercially trained personnel of modern enterprises, are overwhelmingly Protestant.¹⁵

It is what Ralf Dahrendorf had in mind when he urged that sociological work begin with a “sense of puzzlement, [a] problem-conscious”¹⁶ attitude.

For years, I have tried to develop this problem sense in my own research and to pass it along to students by describing my experience with various research projects. Let me illustrate with a study begun in 1992 and recently published as *Storied Land: Community and Memory in Monterey*.¹⁷ The inquiry started with a general question about history and its social representation: how history is publicly understood and portrayed in texts, monuments, museums, art, and commemorative practices. My interest was concerned not so much with formal or academic history as with what Carl Becker calls “the history that common people carry around in their heads.”¹⁸ It is well known that history is often represented selectively, that it propagates myths and revisionist versions of events. How and to what extent does that happen? The question puzzling me involved not only the social construction of history but also the effects of that process—how society is shaped by beliefs about the past.

I came across this problem in an earlier study of an environmental movement in which groups invented a particular version of their history in the process of mobilizing a struggle to preserve their community.¹⁹ The past was socially constructed in the present to achieve group goals in the future. Perhaps I had uncovered a specific instance of a general phenomenon. How did this thing work in other times and places? I wanted to answer that question in a study tailored to the purpose. Where was I to start?

As it turns out, explanations are available for the selective representation of history in popular culture. The most vivid example I recall occurs in the strife-torn communities of Belfast in northern Ireland. Throughout Ireland, particularly in the North and dramatically between 1969–94, conflicts stemming from British colonial occupation, religious differences, and social inequality have generated a violent struggle over civil rights and sovereignty. The Falls Road community of West Belfast is home to many of the Catholic and republican victims of this struggle. The Falls is also a center of resistance and, lately, of a peace process initiated in 1994. Like nearby Protestant areas, the neighborhood streets of the Falls are adorned with large murals that celebrate the struggle and its martyrs. One of the more artful of these murals proclaims, “History Is Written by the Winners.” The message seems unambiguous. British colonialism dominates the area, oppresses its people, and silences their struggle by controlling the historical record. Yet if we step back from the literal message and consider the social milieu, a more nuanced meaning appears. The mural is protest art—colorful, striking, and politically engaged. It is a vital part of the record. It says, “Our history has been silenced, we protest, and we intend to do something about it.” The sociological version of this idea is that powerful interests in society typically control the representation of history, but they are not dominant or immune to challenges from below.

In fact, sociologists have raised this general question previously with the concept of collective memory.²⁰ The term derives from Maurice Halbwachs,²¹ a follower of Émile Durkheim and an early exponent of the notion that societies have memories embedded in their language and thought that predate and shape individual memories. Since Halbwachs’s original work in the 1930s, a number of subsequent writers have expanded the idea of historical memory: how the past is selectively remembered and, indeed, why history itself is less an objective record of events than a collection of stories, narratives, about the past.²² Yet, this literature takes us only part of the way. Repeated studies by sociologists, historians, and anthropologists tell us that history is socially constructed but they do not explain why it is. To be more precise, social scientists have advanced theories of how collective memory operates, but they have not subjected those theories to critical evaluation.

All sorts of speculative answers have been offered but not evaluated against their alternatives. In short, we are no better off than the Belfast muralist, who knows that powerful interests generally control but never monopolize history and that challengers can change it under certain circumstances.

Social theorists have developed explanations of this process that may be usefully grouped under two headings. One school of thought maintains that collective memory is a tool of social control, that the state and powerful interests ensure their political and economic control through insidious means of *cultural domination*.²³ The function of collective memory is to maintain order and legitimacy. Lloyd Warner develops the argument in his classic study of "Yankee City," a New England community dominated by a ruling group of business interests that revealed its cultural vision in the town's tercentennial celebration and parade. The historical event was an exercise in legitimization of the local elite who sponsored the production. "If they were to retain their own legitimacy it was mandatory for them to trace their ancestry to the very beginnings . . . for the maintenance of their position it was necessary to invent new myths and new expressive rituals to hold the power of the ancestors."²⁴

Alternatively, a theory of *social memory* centers on the idea that groups form distinct memories through the agency of formative class, ethnic, gender, educational, occupational, spatial, and generational experiences.²⁵ Collective memory is less a matter of instrumental myths and ruling ideas than a plurality of mental worlds that may exist in conflict with or insularity from competing ideas.

Cultural domination and social memory represent two well-developed yet sharply contrasting explanations of how the past is represented. Although I benefited from reading this literature on collective memory, I was not much closer to an answer to my original question. Thinking about my own experience and earlier research, the theory of cultural domination did not work (people challenged power) and the theory of social memory seemed descriptive and overly general. The rich literature did prove useful, however, in helping me to reformulate my research question, which now became "How is public history constructed by contending groups and how does it change over time?"

The case study I selected to develop my own account of collective memory was the social construction of California history from the times of Spanish colonization to the present. As the result of previous work and early problem formulations, this case had been part of my thinking all along. Analytical questions and research methods move back and forth. The California case required more than mere selection. It needed refinement in light of

the theoretical question. First, I needed detail, local knowledge that would reveal precisely how history is produced, by whom, under what conditions, and with what effects. Second, I needed to follow this process over a time span sufficient to identify the principal historical narratives and their evolution. Third, of course, I needed a place and a set of events that were well documented in the archival record and built environment. These methodological requirements indicated one solution: in California, only the Monterey area has a continuous, well-documented history, beginning with its settlement as the capital of Spanish California and evolving through Mexican sovereignty, American conquest, western settlement, industrialization, and the advent of a modern service economy—from stories of Father Junipero Serra's mission to John Steinbeck's Cannery Row. That is all true, but it is not the full story. In fact, when I began this study I was living on the Monterey Peninsula, engaged by its history and natural beauty and convinced that there was a sociological brief for combining the collective memory problem with the historical place.

The result of all this is available in *Storied Land*. I discovered, first, that I had to reconstruct the 230-year history of Monterey as accurately as possible before I would be able to explain why certain narratives had been developed in previous works and other voices silenced. If, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues, history is a record of both what happened (events) and what is said to have happened (narratives),²⁶ then I needed to master materials on both levels. Next, I identified five periods in the historiography of Monterey: Spanish colony (1769–1821), Mexican territory (1821–46), American frontier (1846–1905), industrial town (1905–50), and modern city (1950–present). Each period displayed a distinct configuration of events and pattern of historical representation. The Spanish period, for example, witnessed the failure of a viable colony but also the creation of a hagiographic missionary narrative that portrayed Franciscan priests as a civilizing force among Native-American barbarians. The missionary narrative had its critics among English and French commercial voyagers and doubtless among the Indians themselves, whose voice was silenced but whose resistance crops out of the missionary and archaeological records. Following U.S. conquest in 1846, one dominant narrative of American progress repudiated the colonial past in self-congratulatory accounts of settlement that papered over extermination of the Indian population and growing class inequalities. For a time, the theory of cultural domination worked. At the turn of the twentieth century, however, a prosperous fishing and canning industry developed in Monterey, supporting new historical narratives that represented, on the one hand, propertied interests in a story of the romantic Spanish past and, on the other hand,

a new working-class narrative typified in Steinbeck's popular novel *Tortilla Flat*.²⁷ Today the region has been transformed from industry to a service economy of higher education, marine research, and tourism. New histories revolve around environmentalism and ethnic heritage, reflecting both national trends and local enterprise.

Theoretically, these results suggest that both the theory of cultural domination and social memory have merit. Each captures part of the broader historical experience, moments of its evolution. Yet neither really resonates with the process in which history is socially constructed by acting groups. Missing in these general explanations are grounded accounts of how historical actors and narrators actually behave, how they interact in real situations, and how they construct history. A theory of public history centered on collective action remedies these problems. Collective memory in general and public history in particular are social processes, social worlds like others that are usefully conceived as organized ensembles of collective action.²⁸

The study demonstrates that the construction and maintenance of historical narratives is a contested, chancy, changing process. Narratives have pragmatic origins. They are produced by groups with an agenda. Public history is constructed, in the main, not for the purposes of posterity or objectivity but for the aims of present action (conquest, social reform, building, political reorganization, and economic transformation). Narratives make claims for the virtues of their individual and institutional authors, often as counterpoint to rival claimants. They characterize the past in certain ways for the purpose of shaping the future. The ability of narratives to effect change depends in the first instance on their institutional power, whether they are produced by a powerful church, conquering state, fledgling town, or contending voluntary associations. Whatever their origins, the effects of historical narratives depend on history itself, on the interplay of actors, social circumstances, and situational contingencies. History must be understood as an amalgam of events and narratives—what happened and what is said to have happened inseparably connected in a moving social process. In *Through The Looking Glass*,²⁹ the White Queen says to Alice, "It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards." Studies of collective memory show that this seeming paradox in fact describes how the past is represented in the present for future purposes.

With this Alice-in-Wonderland or collective-action theory of the socially constructed past, I had reached a satisfying answer to my question. The ache of disorder was relieved, the burden of uncomprehended events lifted. Others must judge whether my explanation of collective memory satisfies their questions. I hope it does.

NOTES

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16. Ralf Dahrendorf, "Out of Utopia: Toward a Reorientation of Sociological Analysis," *American Sociological Review* 64 (September 1959): 123.
17. John Walton, *Storied Land: Community and Memory in Monterey* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
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21. Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper, 1980).
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23. See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971); Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); Richard Maddox, *El Castillo: The Politics of Tradition in an Andalusian Town* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

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25. James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

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27. John Steinbeck, *Tortilla Flat* (New York: Covici, Friede [1935]).

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