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WHAT DOES SOCIOLOGY HAVE TO CONTRIBUTE BEYOND
WHAT THE HUMANITIES AND ITS SISTER SOCIAL SCIENCES
HAVE TO OFFER?

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What Does Sociology Have to Contribute Beyond What the Humanities and its Sister
Social Sciences Have to Offer?

Abstract: *Invitation to Sociology* makes known that sociology is a coherent and value-added academic discipline. In exploring the continuing relevance of *Invitation to Sociology*, the time is ripe to reconsider sociology as a value-added intellectual enterprise. This paper answers this question: What does sociology have to offer beyond what the humanities and its sister social sciences already provide? This paper answers this question by identifying the four elements that compose the sociological tradition. These elements are social action, embeddedness, social problems, and social construction. I argue that these elements are more pronounced in sociology than in any other academic discipline and hence contribute to the value-added character of sociology.

I. Introduction

Forty-six years ago, Professor Berger apprised a wide-ranging audience—“students toying with the idea of taking up sociology seriously ... [and the] ‘educated public’” (1963: vii)—of the value-added character of sociology. In recognizing the continuing relevance of his classic *Invitation to Sociology*, the time is ripe to *reconsider* the value-added character of the intellectual world of sociology.

I will state the purpose of this paper in interrogative form: What is the value of sociology as a scholarly activity beyond what the humanities and its sister social sciences have to offer? It is this question that Dr. Berger (*ibid*) addressed—and the one that I will explore in this paper. An ability to answer this question unambiguously, almost fifty years following the publication of *Invitation to Sociology*, illumines that there is something unique about the sociological enterprise.

Before take-off, however, it is important to touch on an issue that makes this reconsideration a timely one. When finished, I will return to the question raised above by expounding on what I and Dr. Berger consider to be the distinctive value-added elements of sociology.

II. Context for Considering the Value-Added Elements of Sociology

The importance of this exploration into the value-added components of sociology derives from a cause of unease amongst professional sociologists. This source of uneasiness has to do with tension within sociology regarding the coherence of the discipline. I will,

therefore, look to enhance the value of this exploration by working to counter the notion that sociology is an *incoherent* discipline.

2.1 Is Sociology an Incoherent Discipline?

The contemporary knock against sociology, particularly amongst sociologists, is that there is a high degree of specialization, but little agreement on foundational issues to provide ballast for its numerous and varied areas of study. Put simply, sociology is replete with intellectual *differentiation*, yet suffers from a dearth of intellectual *integration* (Coleman, 1990;ⁱ Stinchcombe, 1994; Steinmetz and Chae, 2002; Turner and Kim, 2003; Turner, 2006; Healy, 2007). The unfortunate result of this is that, according to Turner (2006: 26), “sociology has trouble specifying clearly what its subject matter is; it has no clear conception of the proper mode of theorizing, [and] with no theory in the discipline accepted as the best explanation of phenomena for the present, it has little consensus over how to conduct research” Furthermore, given Turner’s (2006) depiction of a coherent discipline,ⁱⁱ one wonders whether sociology will ever become integrated.

To be sure, there is an element of truth in this view. But the point is overstated.

Nevertheless, bear this contextual observation in mind while I explore the distinctive elements of sociology. I will return to the issue of differentiation without integration in the conclusion.

III. Four Major Traditions in Sociology

In spite of sociology's theoretical and substantive differences, there is a core that links sociologists in their teaching and research endeavors. *Invitation to Sociology* is just one of a considerable number of well-known works that presume such a core. Other seasoned works that presume this core are as follows: *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893), *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), *The Philosophy of Money* (1908), *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), *The Sociological Tradition* (1966), *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967), and *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (1978). These are not simply sociological works that may be distinguished from the humanities and the other social sciences. Rather, these are theoretical and empirical works that contemplate the core elements of the discipline, and attempt to identify centripetal themes that may constitute a common ground for sociology.

Furthermore, these works suggest that there is something distinctive about sociology. And what I want to do is to make explicit what Dr. Berger left implicit in *Invitation to Sociology*: Sociology has a small number of major traditions (and theoretical lenses), and none has quashed the others. These traditions are as follows: (1) Social Action, (2) Embeddedness, (3) Social Problems, and (4) Social Construction. While I will elaborate on these traditions consecutively, I make no claim to originality. These traditions represent the integration of numerous sociologists dating back to the emergence of sociology as an academic discipline in the late 19th century.ⁱⁱⁱ What's more, I do not want to be construed as averring that the traditions I discuss are exhaustive of—or

mutually exclusive of—what is distinctive of the sociological enterprise because they overlap in interesting ways. I will now focus on the four major traditions of sociology.

3.1 Social Action

The most distinctive feature of the sociological enterprise is its investigation of human interaction, or what Max Weber called social action. That is, sociology focuses on the patterns and the consequences (both intended and unintended) of purposive human action. A now famous passage from Max Weber (1978: 4) articulates what sociology is, and accents its intellectual focus:

Sociology (in the sense in which this highly ambiguous word is used here) is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences. We shall speak of “action” insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to his behavior—be it overt or covert, omission or acquiescence. Action is “social” insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course.

Thus, the key to understanding the development and the practices of social institutions (e.g., households, firms, and communities), or the “course and consequences” of human behavior, resides in discerning the subjective meanings of human *interaction*. Hence, sociologists spend a considerable amount of time studying diverse human relationships.

The words of Dr. Berger will put this in sharper relief (ibid: 19):

He [the sociologist] will find rewarding the company of priests or of prostitutes, depending not on his personal preferences but on the questions he happens to be asking at the moment. He will also concern himself with matters that others may find much too boring. He will be interested in the human interaction that goes with warfare or with great intellectual discoveries, but also in the relations between people employed in a restaurant or between a group of little girls playing with their dolls. His main focus of attention is not the ultimate significance of what men do,

but the action itself, as another example of the infinite richness of human conduct.

The sociological focus on social action has not only been a chief component of sociology since its birth, but it permeates sociological analysis in four different analytical settings: (1) the search for the social mechanisms that integrate societies, (2) purposive/rational action (or exchange processes), (3) network analysis, and (4) the investigation of face-to-face interaction.

Investigating and elaborating on the social mechanisms that contribute to social order, however tenuous, was the foremost analytical task of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim – the recognized founders of the discipline. While each crafted different verbal pictures of the emergent social order, all three focused on the social outcomes—intended and unintended—of social action.

Karl Marx, for example, drafted a written portrait of society wherein the essence and the operation of social institutions—e.g., the family, the labor market, and the legislature—could only be intuitively grasped in relation to the historical appearance of capitalism—or labor emerging as a commodity and the resulting proletarianization of workers. Weber, however, argued for a more nuanced image of the development of social institutions. In exploring the cultural significance of the social mechanisms that contributed to social order, he focused on a number of different aspects of how “rationality” suffused society. Weber, throughout his socio-economic writings, investigated what he considered to be the three chief outcomes of rationality permeating society: economic phenomena (e.g., the emergence of money as a means of exchange for human beings), economically

relevant phenomena (e.g., the emergence of the practice of law and legal concepts that helped to formally resolve civil disputes), and economically conditioned phenomena (e.g., the emergence of the means-ends framework as the preeminent criterion of how human performances ought to be evaluated). Durkheim, as did Marx and Weber, regarded the influence of the economy—and particularly the division of labor or specialization—as culturally significant. He, however, contended that it was not peculiar to economic life. His challenge to the classical economists, principally Adam Smith and Karl Marx, in *The Division of Labor in Society*, was their eliding the increased specialization of functions in, for example, the political, the administrative and the judicial realms of society. In each case, however, the sociological analysis is centered on social action—and its outcomes—and the social mechanisms that influenced the action.

Moving to contemporary sociology, it is clear that not much has changed regarding the significance of social mechanisms on social action in attempting to explain the unity of large social systems. Consider the world systems approach to interpreting macro-social changes in rural communities in Japan and Australia (see, e.g., Hogan, 2004). Whether the macro-social changes are a result of increasing immigration in Australia or the introduction of democratic decision-making in Japan, the social changes cannot be understood apart from situating both countries within their relationships with other countries—and particularly within the global economy.

Implicit within the sociological focus on social action, is the idea of purposiveness, which is the second setting highlighting the salience of social action to sociology. James

Coleman argues that purposiveness is the key principle for understanding exchange processes and rational choice sociology (see Swedberg, 1990: 49-59). Though exchange processes were manifest in the anthropological work of Bronislaw Malinowski, it is within sociology that non-commercial exchange processes flourished into a central theory germane to understanding social behaviors at all levels of analysis (see, e.g., Homans, 1958).^{iv} What makes purposive action and exchange processes relevant here is its focus on social action, rather than on individual action, as reflected in what Coleman (1990: 17-18) argues is the core thesis of purposive action:

Since social scientists take as their purpose the understanding of social organization that is derivative from actions of individuals and since understanding an individual's action ordinarily means seeing the reasons behind the action, then the theoretical aim of social science must be to conceive of that action in a way that makes it rational from the point of view of the actor. Or put another way, much of what is ordinarily described as nonrational or irrational is merely so because the observers have not discovered the point of view of the actor, from which the action *is* rational [emphasis in the original].

It goes without stating that purposive (or rational) action is not unique to sociology. The sociological concept of "interest," for example, activates the actor in a way similar to "utility" in microeconomic theory. The sociological actor acts to realize her best interest as the economic actor acts to maximize her utility. However, there are two value-added components of the sociological variant of the rational actor analytic. First, the sociological interpretation of interest has given more precise meanings to the core sociological concepts of authority, norms, and control (Coleman, 1990). Second, this teleological principle has assisted sociologists in explaining the transition from micro-to-macro level phenomena and from macro-to-micro level phenomena. Sociologists working in the sub-field of law and society, for instance, now have a coherent paradigm

for explaining how social structures (e.g., laws or rules) “which transmit consequences of an individual’s action to other individuals and rules which derive macro-level outcomes from combinations of individuals’ actions” (see Coleman, 1990: 21-23).

The third setting illuminating sociology’s focus on social action is network analysis.

Briefly defined, social network analysis is the formal study of the forms and outcomes of social action. Appropriately, network analysis ought to be traced back to the sociology of Georg Simmel (1955) in his *Web of Group Affiliations*. However, it was not until the late 1980s that it took shape as an analytic tool that aids in the systematic investigation of the ways in which human relations can both circumscribe and impede social action. Network analysis has been applied to nearly all areas of inquiry, from the study of collective action and health (Centola and Macy, 2007; Siegal, 2009) to the study of corporate organizations and organizational culture (Granovetter, 1985; Reagan and Zuckerman, 2001). Though it has been widely applied throughout both the human and the physical sciences, a recurrent critique of network analysis is that it suggests an *oversocialized* model of social action (see Boettke and Storr, 2002 and Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994). This is indeed the case in many of its applications. That said, its limitations do not weaken its most general claim—network positions are a key component to understanding what ensues among individuals and groups.

The fourth setting that exemplifies sociology’s long-lived focus on social action is the investigation of face-to-face interaction. Erving Goffman was the intellectual lion of this area of study. Goffman (1967: 2) argued that the study of face-to-face interaction has

little to do with individuals and their psychology. Rather, its rightful study should focus on the “the syntactical relations among the acts of different persons mutually present to one another.”

These four settings are operative at all levels of sociological analysis; beginning in the micro-level (purposive/rational action), moving to the meso-level (organizations) and through the macro-level of analysis (world systems and social mechanisms). This preoccupation with social action, to some extent, makes sociological inquiry distinctive among the human sciences. As Dr. Berger (*ibid*: 18) remarked, “the sociologist is a person intensively, endlessly, shamelessly interested in the doings of men.... The sociologist may be interested in many other things. But his consuming interest remains in the world of men, their institutions, their history, their passions.” It is no exaggeration to aver that no other social science places such a premium on elaborating how social action is the heart of social life.

3.2 Embeddedness

Interconnected concentrically with the discipline’s focus on social action is the second distinctive tradition of sociology: Embeddedness (or the institutional context). Whatever the object of sociological analysis—conversation between adolescents on a corner, gangs, treatment for children placed out-of-home, increasing immigration, racial attitudes, collective action problems, and the like—it cannot be fully comprehended without paying careful attention to the institutional context.

Consider C. Wright Mills' (1959: 6) contention that "The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two." What Mills is arguing is that individuals come to view themselves as social actors when they come to view their behaviors, relationships, emotions, and desires as embedded within a particular historical-institutional context and can thus be understood, by and large, in relation to that context. This truism is an instance of the broader principle of contextual embeddedness.

There are a considerable number of other examples. Rather than enumerating examples, I will identify the two categories that illustrate the significance of the embeddedness principle to sociology. The first looks at the situated character of social action and meaning. The second explores the importance of relativity and (differing) points of perspective.

Nowhere is the institutional context of social action accented more strongly than in interpretive sociology—and its contemporary variant symbolic interactionism. For symbolic interactionists, social action is principally dependent upon what people make of the situation in which they find themselves. I should emphasize that structural and cultural factors are important to symbolic interactionists. The structural and cultural factors are dealt with, however, within the institutional context of the situation in which they are embedded and the circumstances that the actor is faced with (Blumer, 1969).

The sociological emphasis on the embeddedness of social action was emphasized in chapter 4 of *Invitation to Sociology*, which is entitled, “Sociological Perspective —Man in Society.” Dr. Berger (1bid: 87) avers that

...institutions provide procedures through which human conduct is patterned, compelled to go, in grooves deemed desirable by society. And this trick is performed by making these grooves appear to the individual as the only possible ones.

Thus, for Dr. Berger, and the modal sociologist, social action is a decidedly situated activity that is both constrained and facilitated by the institutional context wherein it is embedded. Thus, understanding social action calls for grasping its institutional context or embeddedness.

Meaning, sociologically considered, operates in much the same fashion. As Dr. Berger (ibid: 23) apprises, “Social reality turns out to have many layers of meaning,” and with “The discovery of each new layer changes the perception of the whole.” These phrases indicate that each seemingly minor human action is deeply embedded within an expansive web of meanings. As Jorg Guido Hulsmann (2003: xlv-xlvi) reminds in the Introduction to the Third Edition of Ludwig von Mises’ *Epistemological Problems of Economics*, “One cannot identify food, medicine, or weapons by looking at the physical object.” An apple, for example, can be conceived as food when pulled from the shelves of a grocery store and apprehended as a weapon of mass destruction if launched from an overpass.

Another area that emphasizes the importance of embeddedness to sociology is the degree to which processes—e.g., alienation, deprivation, anomie, and rational choice

processes—are relative states that cannot be understood apart from the institutional context of perspective and interpretation. Alienation, deprivation, and anomie are well-understood examples of the significance of embeddedness to perspective and interpretation. This, however, is not the case with respect to rationality and rational choice processes. Many sociologists understand rationality and rational choice as “absolute” concepts rather than “relative” concepts. But, the meanings of both rationality and rational choice are institutionally variable—and contingent upon the actor’s perspective (Smelser, 1998). A firm is acting “rationally,” (i.e., minimizing costs) from its perspective, by dumping waste into a river that is collectively owned. But, it is not acting rationally from the perspective of improving environmental health. This is a simple case in which one actor’s independent action imposes negative externalities and thus changes the incentive structure. Another famous example is the “tragedy of the commons.” Here, it is quite rational for a farmer to incessantly graze her sheep on a collectively owned pasture. But, there will be a marked reduction in the availability of pasture, for the sheep of other farmers, with each farmer grazing her sheep this way.

I have presented these well-known examples not to indicate how sociologists can benefit from learning the rational choice calculus—though this is indeed true. Rather, it is to emphasize that the meanings of constructs, such as rational choice, are variable. And, they depend not only on the institutional context, but also on interpretation and perspective.

I have presented two venues—meaning and perspective—that underscore the pervasiveness of embeddedness to sociology. I must add that the heart of the sociological analysis in each example is not apparent in the level of analysis—whether macro, meso, or micro—or in the subject matter—whether race relations, gangs, or face-to-face communication. Rather, the core of sociological analysis in each example is found in the attempt to *understand* the subject matter in terms of the institutional context in which it is embedded.

3.3 Social Problems

The third value-added sociological tradition is its sustained focus on “social problems” such as race, gangs, gender, substance abuse, crime, poverty, juvenile delinquency, inequality, and many more. Some sociologists study social problems out of a commitment to activism; others study them due to identification with a particular problem; but most of us study social problems out of sheer intellectual curiosity. Sociologists, generally, approach their investigation of social problems from two theoretical perspectives, namely, from an interpretive perspective and a social constructionist perspective. No matter what theoretical perspective the sociologist is operating from, or the rationale for investigating them, there is a massive body of sociological research on social problems. What’s more, this tradition has been a venerable focus of American sociology dating back to its association with W. E. B. Dubois and the Chicago-school sociologists who studied social problems such as immigration, ethnic relations, and social disorganization. Accordingly, the study of social problems has been a long-lived focus of the discipline. Of course, not all

sociologists have pledged to study social problems, and the profession's interest in them has both risen and fallen since the late 19th century.

That said, I do consider social problems to be suitably influential to characterize it as a sociological tradition. Consider the existence of voices among sociologists not only urging for research on social problems, but arguing that one of the foci of sociology should be social betterment.^v Etzioni (1997: 550), for example, has exhorted sociologists to use their privileged academic positions to “help better society.” Likewise, Michael Buroway (2005) has made known that sociology should reconnect with social reform and pursue an intellectual “agenda for social justice.” And, in perhaps the most clarion call for social betterment in the last 15 years, Turner (1998: 243-256) declares that sociology should adopt an “engineering orientation” that applies theoretical ideas to evaluating and renovating social structures that are the root cause of social problems.^{vi}

With so much disciplinary trespassing, I should add, scholars from the humanities and the other social sciences study social problems. Economists and historians, for instance, make regular contributions to the social problems literature. Other disciplines, such as cultural studies, add to the literatures on race, ethnicity, and gender. But, no other social science or humanities discipline focuses as broadly and steadily as sociology on the social conditions we generally recognize as social problems. And this focus is another value-added element of sociology.

3.4 Social Construction

The first wisdom of economics is that there is no such thing as a free lunch. In *Invitation to Sociology*, Professor Berger (ibid: 23) maintains that “the first wisdom of sociology” is that “things are not what they seem.” This brings us to social construction, the fourth, and final, value-added element of the sociological tradition. What I find particularly interesting about this tradition is that it puts forward that sociology is an ironic discipline. This irony manifests when there is an unforeseen departure between what is expected and what really happens. I must add that the sociological focus on social construction does not just constitute a value-added element of the discipline. According to Dr. Berger (ibid: 24) “this is the excitement” and the “humanistic justification of sociology.” He gives this caveat in his *Invitation*:

People who like to avoid shocking discoveries, who prefer to believe that society is just what they were taught in Sunday School, who like the safety and the maxims of what Alfred Schuetz has called the “world taken for granted,” should stay away from sociology (ibid: 24).

Professor Berger was not alone in his intellectual appreciation of the “world taken for granted” or the close connection between sociology and irony. Just twelve years later, in his *The Sociological Way of Looking at the World*, Louis Schneider (1975: xi) defined irony as a discrepancy “between the way things are and the way they are supposed to be, between promise and fulfillment, between appearance and reality.” In short, Schneider contends that the power of sociological analysis is its ability to reveal the irony in everyday human understandings. Richard Harvey Brown (1977: 181-182), asks this in *A Poetic for Sociology*: “How do the typifications of sociologists differ from those of the persons whom they study?” According to Brown, “what makes a [sociological] typification valuable is ... that it ironizes the conventionally accepted typifications of everyday life.” Simply put, sociology stands on its head “the obvious” or common

understandings. This tradition of revealing and focusing attention on the contradictory, the unanticipated, and the unintentional illustrates some of the discipline's most enduring concepts and principles such as the self-fulfilling prophecy, the definition of the situation, and the difference between latent and manifest functions.

Lest readers may consider that social construction is confined to theoretical constructs, I should note that it is an emblem of empirical sociology. Take, for instance, the thrust of Goffman's (1961) *Asylums*. There, Goffman illustrates that total institutions, and chiefly mental health facilities, assist (or demand) residents in exhibiting behaviors consistent with the facilities' particular images of how their residents ought to behave. Goffman (1961) reveals, to a certain extent, that institutional selves are institutionally created. Also, think about the findings of Whyte's (1955) *Street Corner Society* and the comparable contemporary findings of Venkatesh's (2008) *Gang Leader for a Day*. Both authors describe poverty-stricken, inner-city neighborhoods as communities exhibiting a semblance of social order engendered by profit-seeking (criminal) enterprises and purposive human interactions rather than being warehouses of social disorganization and communal chaos. Or, take a look at the findings of Wilson's (1997) *When Work Disappears*. Wilson (1997) demonstrates that many of the social problems endemic to American cities—e.g., drug abuse, fatherless households, violent crime, and pervasive unemployment—stem from the disappearance of blue-collar jobs from major U.S. cities in the wake of our global economy.

What makes each of these works fall under the intellectual framework of social construction, partly, is that their findings reveal the ironic nature of social life. These studies are only a small number of empirical sociological works that expose the frequent disjunction between the official and the unofficial, and the expected and the unexpected. Hence, it is reasonable to draw the conclusion that the intellectual world of sociology is ironic. And its irony contributes to sociology as a value-added theoretical and empirical discipline beyond what the humanities and its sister social sciences has to offer.^{vii}

4. Conclusion

Having accepted Professor Berger's (ibid) *Invitation to Sociology* almost nine years ago, I simply cannot recount the number of times that I have read a piece of sociological literature and said to myself, "I will never look at prostitutes or drug dealers (or another group) in the same way again!" Of course students in other disciplines have similar moments. Each moment is somewhat different, I contend, because the consciousness acquired as a sociologist is somewhat different from other disciplinary perceptions. This paper has identified and expounded on what I—and Dr. Berger—take to be the four value-added elements of the discipline, which congeal into the unique consciousness that sociology provides. These distinguishing elements are a focus on social action, a focus on contextual embeddedness, a focus on troublesome social conditions or social problems, and a focus on social construction or the discipline's predilection for identifying and elaborating on the irony of social life. To be sure, these elements are seen in other academic disciplines. But, unlike other disciplines, these traditions are *central* to

sociology. And hence, they provide sociologists with a one of a kind perspective that goes beyond what is seen in the humanities and other social sciences.

Most sociologists would agree. But, some would cavil, arguing that our research agendas and theoretical insights on these elements would be more elegant and forceful if sociology was organized around a singular theoretical paradigm. Unfortunately, some say, sociology suffers from too much intellectual differentiation and specialty-specific theories (Turner, 1990; Stinchcombe, 1994; Steinmetz and Chae, 2002; Turner and Kim, 2003; Healy, 2004; Turner, 2006). Though these scholars contend that the dearth of theoretical integration in sociology leads to a discipline divided (Buroway, 2005), it may also be viewed as a key ingredient for the uninterrupted current of illuminating, perceptive, and ironic observations. The social world is dynamic. And the objects of sociological analysis, e.g., social problems, rarely stand long enough to honor the conditions of our theories.^{viii}

So, instead of fussing about theoretical integration, sociologists' time will be better spent burnishing their theoretically-informed descriptions of human interrelationships and institutional contexts in order to improve their explanations of the emergence of one collection of social phenomena rather than another. With methodologically prudent empirical investigations, whether qualitative or quantitative, sociology will demonstrate its value-added character while concurrently illuminating the social world in a way that Professor Berger (ibid) hoped for in his *Invitation*.

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ⁱ Coleman (1990) did not explicitly contend that sociology is a fractured discipline. However, his *Foundations of Social Theory* was a clarion call to integrate sociological theory, which he averred was in disarray.

ⁱⁱ Turner (2006) argues that a coherent—and strong—discipline displays a number of properties: consensus over epistemology, common view of the nature of the reality to be studied, agreed upon research problems, agreed upon methods, ... accepted theories as the best explanation of phenomena, accepted and cumulative bodies of knowledge, control over professionals' access to research funds and journal outlets for scholarly work,

ⁱⁱⁱ Though sociology surfaced as an academic discipline in the late 19th century, distinctly sociological work was seen in the writing of Scottish Moral Philosophers Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, John Millar, and David Hume.

^{iv} Though the psychological assumptions of George Homans' (1958) work in non-commercial exchange processes were rejected by later authors, his explicitly sociological work predates both *The Calculus of Consent* (1962) and *The Logic of Collective Action* (1979).

^v I must add that there are many scholars within sociology who view the contemporary debate over public sociology as a disguised professional effort to focus scholars working on social problems to investigate not just the social ills, but ways of improving the social ills.

^{vi} I must add that Professor Berger (ibid: 25-53) acknowledges the focus on social problems as a value-added component of sociology. He, furthermore, had tremendous respect for the work of Robert Park and other Chicago-school sociologists. However, he is *underwhelmed* by the idea of undertaking the investigation of social problems for revolutionary or activist purposes. In his words,

... sociological understanding is inimical to revolutionary ideologies, not because it has some sort of conservative bias, but because it sees not only through the illusions of the present *status quo* but also through the illusory expectations concerning possible futures, such expectations being the customary spiritual nourishment of the revolutionary (ibid: 47).

^{vii} I must note that sociology's ironic perspective should not be construed as intellectual *inconsistency*. Social constructionism, to be sure, reveals that common (i.e., lay) understandings are often *misunderstandings* of the nature of social life, but it is no way inconsistent. Investigating social life and problems through the lens of social constructionism *consistently* leads sociologists, according to Professor Berger (and Schutz), to contend that the social world is frequently the "world-taken-for-granted."

^{viii} I am not suggesting that many sociological theories are useless. Rather, I am asserting that, for many theories, their scope may be circumscribed by time and space. Professor Berger spends a considerable amount of time in his *Invitation* highlighting the race problem. Just fifteen years later, eminent sociologist William Julius Wilson is being praised for his contribution entitled *The Declining Significance of Race*.