

Randall Collins and **Michael Makowsky**, in *The Discovery of Society*, argue persuasively for the importance of a *critical* stance toward understanding society since "The social world as we know it . . . is mostly illusion." One source of illusion is the confusion between what is true (and can be verified by observations) and what we would like to be true—between *facts* and *values*. Sociologists are skeptical of conclusions that are not supported by evidence. Illusions about society arise from ideological distortions and from our own social positions and arrangements, which cloud our vision about our society and limit our knowledge of other societies. In addition to warning us about confusing facts and values, Collins and Makowsky caution us to avoid the *fallacy of psychological reductionism*, where social events and institutional arrangements are explained by the actions of individuals.

Society and Illusion

Randall Collins

Michael Makowsky

We all conceive of ourselves as experts on society. In fact, however, the social world is a mystery—a mystery deepened by our lack of awareness of it. Society is our immediate, everyday reality, yet we understand no more of it merely by virtue of living it than we understand of physiology by virtue of our inescapable presence as living bodies. The history of sociology has been a long and arduous effort to become aware of things hidden or taken for granted: things we did not know existed—other societies in distant places and times, whose ways of life make us wonder about the naturalness of our own; things we know of only distortedly—the experiences of social classes and cultures other than our own; the realities of remote sectors of our own social structure, from inside the police patrol car to behind the closed doors of the politician and the priest; things right around us unreflectingly accepted—the network of invisible rules

and institutions that govern our behavior and populate our thought, seemingly as immutable as the physical landscape but in reality as flimsy as a children's pantomime. Most obscure of all, our own feelings, actions, thoughts, and self-images—the tacit bargains that we make and remake with friends, lovers, acquaintances, and strangers and the paths we steer amid emotions, habits, and beliefs. All these things are beneath the usual threshold of our awareness.

We think of ourselves as rational, choice-making masters of our actions if not of our destinies; in reality, we know little about the reasons for either. And if the social world is shrouded from us today, it becomes even more illusory the further back we go into our history. We need go only a few hundred years back in European history to an era when authority of kings and aristocracies was legitimized by divine right, when unexpected behavior from our fellows was attributed to witchcraft and seizures of the devil, and foreign lands were populated not merely by bloodthirsty Communists or the terrible Turk

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but by werewolves and Cyclopes. "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake!" James Joyce declared. Sociology has been part of that very slow awakening.

The social world as we know it and have known it is mostly illusion. Yet, if we were all completely deluded, there would be no point in trying to investigate and explain, and this writing as well as any other would be worthless. The existence of illusions is not incompatible with the existence of facts and of the principles of logic. But facts and logic are inextricably mixed with concepts and theories, and in the study of society the concepts and theories involved are ones that we daily act upon as well as use to explain how things are and why.

Sociology is not an impossible science, but it is a very difficult one. It has progressed by disengaging the web of everyday belief, not all at once but little by little, as one taken-for-granted assumption after another has been questioned and replaced. As was once said of philosophy, sociology is like rebuilding a boat, plank by plank, while floating on it in the middle of the ocean. The history of sociology is a progression of world views, each an advance on some other in that it asks some previously unasked question, avoids some previous confusion, or incorporates some previously unobserved fact. Each world view, including our own, has its illusions; waving the banner of science is no more absolute a guarantee of truth than any other. Nevertheless, there has been a series of major breakthroughs in understanding, including some quite recent ones, and we can be confident now that we are on the right path.

► THE SOURCES OF ILLUSION

At the center of the web that clouds our vision is the realization that our knowledge is both subjective and objective. "Facts" are things

that independent observers can agree upon; but we must look for facts in order to see them, and what we look for depends on our concepts and theories. . . .

We cannot usually notice something unless we have a name for it. This is true of the physical world—the botanist notices dozens of species of plants where the layman sees only a field—and it is especially important in understanding society. No one has ever seen a "society," although we have all seen the people who belong to one; no one has ever seen an organization, only its members, the buildings and equipment that belong to it, and its name or emblem written on signs and pieces of paper. We live in a social world of symbols: of symbolic entities such as "property"—land that would "belong" to no one but for a social convention, a set of rules as to how various people must behave toward it and what words they must use in talking about it—and of symbolic acts such as "marriage"—a recorded ceremony that enables middle-class Americans to recognize the otherwise indiscernible difference between a couple "illicitly" living together and a "respectable" family. These symbols are by no means obvious if one has never thought about them. The fish apparently does not notice the water until he is out of it. The idea of a *society*, as distinct from the *state*, did not develop until the commercial and industrial changes of the eighteenth century and the French Revolution woke people up to the recognition that there were two different forms of social institutions, each going its own way. One hundred years later, thinkers such as George Herbert Mead came to recognize the symbolic nature of society and thus provided us with concepts with which to analyze the operations of this world that we have so long taken for granted.

Much of sociology has developed by uncovering facts that had not previously been known, either because they were remote from

ordinary experience or because they had been deliberately ignored. The earliest efforts at sociology were inspired by European explorations in the Orient, the Americas, Africa, and the South Seas. Familiar ways of life in Europe could no longer be accepted as the natural order of God but had to be explained in light of practices now found to exist in vastly different cultures. The first efforts in this direction were naive and consisted mainly of doctrines of progress, which accounted for the European culture simply as a social advance over other cultures. Such theorizing, nevertheless, began a tradition of thought concerned with explaining society. It was an early thinker on social evolution, Auguste Comte, who first gave sociology its name and thus helped to create that "invisible college" of thinkers who have ever since asked questions about society.

Many facts, to be sure, could have been discovered without the voyages of Captain Cook. But the voyage to the other side of town is harder to make than a trip around the world, and a voyage of discovery in one's own home is the hardest of all. Conventional biases against looking for or recognizing facts that touch on one's life have been greater impediments to sociological understanding than the lack of facts themselves. These same biases that have kept most of social reality obscure have prevented us from seeing that they *are* biases. Not the least important aspect of an illusion is the fact that one believes it to be the truth. The great sociologists have contributed to the sociology of knowledge as an intrinsic part of their work. They have broken through illusions by analyzing the ways in which the conditions of social life determine the contents of our consciousness. The history of sociology has been a progressive sophistication about our own thought, uncovering sources of bias that we did not know existed.

The uncovering began with Karl Marx,

the first great thinker to see life from the standpoint of the common worker. Marx did not discover social classes, of course; ancient and medieval law as well as social thought spoke openly of the various ranks of society, which indeed everyone knew about from daily experience. Ideological denial of stratification is an innovation of modern America. What Marx discovered was that our own thought is a product of our social circumstances and that much of what we believe to be reality is but a reflection of our socially determined interests. Marx may have defined "interests" too narrowly in economic terms, but there is no doubt of the validity of this general principle. Marx was not the first to notice that governments tell lies or that newspapers, writers of books, and individuals in conversation put forward alleged facts and explanations that are actually selected and distorted according to the interests of their formulators. Much of the thought of the Enlightenment is epitomized by Voltaire's effort to unmask the absurdity of supernatural explanations for human events. Marx went beyond Voltaire when he pointed out how the socially conservative attitudes adopted by the Church were only to be expected from the leaders of a wealthy, landowning institution whose higher ranks were filled from the aristocracy and whose leaders, like Cardinals Mazarin and Richelieu, often served in the government of the kings. . . .

Marx's recognition of ideological bias in social ideas is not a counsel of despair. The bias cannot be wished away, but it can be gradually pushed back by continuous effort to examine our own and others' ideas for their adequacy in explaining the full range of facts about society. This is not to say that biases cannot be found in modern social science. They are deeply embedded, especially in the areas of politics, deviance, and stratification. But we can have some faith that the search for the most powerful explanatory the-

ory will lead us away from ideological distortion, whether from the right, the left, or the center.

One result of Marx's unveiling of ideology has been a distinction (first emphasized by Max Weber) between depictions of reality and evaluations of it, between "facts" (here used broadly to refer both to empirical data and to theories summarizing and explaining the data) and "values." This seems obvious enough: It is one thing to find out what the state of affairs is in the world, another thing to decide whether we think it is good or bad, just or unjust, beautiful or ugly. This distinction is important because most of our thought about the social world is evaluative: We are more interested in finding wrongdoers to condemn and heroes to praise than in explaining what happens or even in ascertaining the facts. Just after World War II it was popular to point to the "big lie" techniques of propaganda as a sign of totalitarian regimes and to stereotypes and distortions as the warning signs of extremist political thought. A closer acquaintance with serious sociology would have shown that such distinctions are naive: that all governments try to manipulate their own legitimacy, that all politics deals in slogans and ideology, and that the popular world view is made up of stereotypes. If we are to expose the authoritarian and the brutal, deeds are much better indicators than words.

The distinction between facts and values thus has a twofold usefulness: It warns us to note which statements are saying something about reality and which are only assuming something about that reality in order to arouse our feelings about the good or evil of it, and it points us to the hard discipline of separating out and testing a body of knowledge whose validity does not depend merely on our moral point of view.

In the history of sociology the struggle against value biases is far from won. Indeed, controversy currently rages over this very

issue. There is a strong tendency, especially among younger sociologists whose personal sympathies are vehemently on the side of dominated racial minorities in America and oppressed peasants in the Third World, to declare that all sociology must be value-biased and hence that the only choice is the moral one: Which side are you on? In support of this position, it is pointed out that academic social scientists have claimed to be value-neutral and yet have created theories that extol the virtues of American democracy, minimize the plight of oppressed groups, and rationalize military support for brutal dictatorships in Chile, Central America, and elsewhere. But the lesson is not clearly drawn. Propaganda for the left is no more valuable *intellectually* than propaganda for the right or the center, whatever one may think of its *moral* virtue.

The distinction between facts and values remains crucial, even in this context. If we do not make an effort to uphold the ideal of intellectual objectivity in assessing theories and facts, no valid knowledge is possible—even the sort of knowledge that practical and activist people claim to have about the problems of the world. If objectivity is not maintained, both serious theory and intelligently guided action will be impossible. A successful explanatory theory is universally acceptable as knowledge; but in the realm of value judgments, everyone's basic values are as good as everyone else's, and no logical argument can force people to change their minds. . . . In the end the fact-value distinction remains absolutely crucial, and not only for the development of objective sociological theory. Whatever our values may be, only by taking a position of detachment are we able to see society realistically enough to act on it with any insight into our chances of success. . . .

[There are] a number of sources of illusion in our views of social reality: taking our social arrangements for granted because we

know of no others, ideological distortions based on the interests and perspectives of our social positions, inability to detach ourselves from an evaluative stance, repression of things that make us feel shameful or guilty. By the time these swaves of bias came to light, sociology was on the eve of the twentieth century. We shall touch on only two kinds of illusions and thereby bring ourselves up to the present: the fallacy of psychological reductionism and the misconceptions that a too-literal identification with physical science can engender. The man who cut through the first of these most strikingly was Emile Durkheim.

People will commonly attempt to explain social events by the actions of individuals: to look for great individuals in history, agitators in riots, traitors in defeats. By the end of the nineteenth century the dominant evolutionist thinkers—speaking especially in defense of a *laissez-faire* economic policy—described society as the interplay of individual decisions, in which deliberate social policy could have little effect. Nevertheless, their basic mode of explanation was individualistic. People struggle for a livelihood and rise and fall according to their individual qualities; modern society itself exists because of contracts between individuals.

Durkheim struck through in a new direction: The distinctive thing about social institutions is that they persist while individuals come and go; they have a force of their own such that individuals who violate social norms not only do not change the norms but are punished as deviants. Furthermore, society can never be logically explained in terms of the motives of individuals. As Durkheim put it, society is a reality *sui generis*. "Social facts," such as the rules that people enforce upon each other, the forms of the institutions within which people act, and even the ideas that they hold, cannot be explained by examining the workings of an individual and

multiplying the result a millionfold. These facts must be explained by *social*—that is, supraindividual—causes. Living organisms are made up of chemical molecules; yet physiology must be explained on its own level, in terms of the functioning of the parts in relation to each other. By the same token, society is made up of individuals but is not explicable simply in terms of individual psychology. With his emphasis on social structure as the subject matter of sociology, Durkheim gave the field a distinctive focus of its own. He also showed that such supposedly individual phenomena as suicide, crime, moral outrage, and even our concepts of time, space, God, and the individual personality are socially determined. With Durkheim nineteenth-century individualistic rationalism commits suicide. We know now that we are all social creatures and there is no turning back to the naïve optimism of the nineteenth century that could see in the rational education of the individual the solution to all social ills.

The final major development of sociology took place in the early twentieth century, for the most part in the United States. Instead of relying on historians, newspapers, and their own speculations, sociologists began to go and see for themselves: first with community studies, then with surveys, participant observation of organizations, and small group experiments. This research tradition has done much to counteract illusions based on ideology and on other biases. We have discovered, for example, that the conservative claims that crime is due to hereditary degeneration or racial traits (theories once popular among biologically oriented sociologists of the evolutionist school) are false, as are liberal outcries that social mobility has been declining in the United States. The great merit of an active research tradition is that it is largely self-correcting; as long as we insist that theories must explain facts, their biases are likely to reveal themselves sooner or later.

But even this research tradition has its dangers and illusions. One of these is the problem of overspecialization and technification. Sociology has become a large-scale cooperative enterprise and, as in any large bureaucracy, the individual members tend to lose sight of the overall goals—producing and testing theories to explain all of social behavior and institutions—and become caught up in the immediate details of day-to-day research. One danger, then, has been the trivializing of research and a tendency to substitute purely technical standards, such as statistical refinements, for substantial contributions to our knowledge about society.

The physical sciences provided a model for the modern research enterprise; they have also provided a final, distinctively modern illusion about society. Many American social scientists, especially those who have not fully absorbed the great breakthroughs of Durkheim, Weber, Freud, and Mead, still find their ideas in a version of nineteenth-century tradition. Like the British utilitarians and their American followers, they continue to take the natural sciences as an uncriticized model for understanding society. Utilitarian rationalism has been modernized as behaviorism, the doctrine that asserts that human behavior is to be explained in terms of external stimuli—rewards and punishments—without any reference to scientifically inadmissible concepts such as "mind." In sociology, the old positivist doctrine shows up in the notion that the only valid material for a scientific theory is quantitative data, such as that collected in large-scale questionnaire surveys, carefully measured experimental behaviors, and census tabulations. Only "hard data," consisting of observed and preferably quantified behaviors or enumerations, are valid; "soft data," encompassing the experiences of participants, observers, in-depth interviews, case studies, historical writings, and introspection, are excluded.

The merit of this distinction turns out to be an illusion. Human social behavior and social institutions are basically symbolic. Society exists and affects the observable behavior of individuals only through systems of invisible names, rules, and positions that individuals can identify with and orient toward. As might be expected, strictly behavioristic theories have not borne much fruit in psychology; rather, it has been in the area of cognitive development and functioning that progress has been made. In sociology the extreme positivists have been found mostly among researchers who have been caught up in short-run technical concerns and hence have contributed little to advancing theories that explain society. It has been by insisting on the principle that we be able to explain *all* the facts that social science corrects itself, even against illusions created by an excessive zeal to emulate the methods of the natural sciences. Symbolic reality is *the* empirical reality for sociologists; it is life as all individuals experience it. Numbers derived by totaling the answers of many individuals to a few short questions about what they believe or have done are quite a long way from the firsthand experience of those individual lives that we are ultimately trying to explain. In this sense Erving Goffman and his students, with their firsthand accounts of how people manipulate the social reality they present for each other to experience, are the latest of the important innovators in sociology.

We are coming to see that there is no necessary battle between "hard" and "soft" in the social sciences. Both quantitative but superficial data and direct phenomenological experience of a few situations have their values and weaknesses. When used to complement each other, they help us both to understand in depth and to check up on the generalizability of the understanding. Like a navigator plotting the position of a point from his or her own moving

ship, we are learning to "triangulate" our accounts of social reality from several vantage points. . . .

If sociology has a contribution to make, it is this: If we can be more realistic about our world, more wary of the dilemmas of social organizations, more aware both of the necessities of social coordination and of the dangers of social coercion, and more sophisticated about the illusions with which our institutions populate social reality, we can perhaps make our world more livable. It may be that if enough people realized the connections between political illusion and political coercion and the deadening effect of psychic chimeras on our everyday encounters, the quality of life would improve a great deal. A significant part of the new generation has already shown itself more realistic than those before it—more capable of cutting through social hypocrisies about sex and politics, through rituals of status deference and illusions about personal relationships.

Whether a new culture of honesty and personal emancipation will enable us to control the coercive and alienating institutions of modern society is still in doubt, but greater illumination is one of our few weapons. . . .

▶ QUESTIONS

1. Explain what Collins and Makowsky mean by the distinction between facts and values.
2. Illustrate the fallacy of psychological reductionism in a newspaper account of a current social issue.
3. How do Emile Durkheim's insights help us avoid the fallacy of reductionism?
4. Is it possible for sociology to be completely objective? Defend your position.
5. If bias is a greater problem when we study our own surroundings than when we investigate those of others, how can we overcome or reduce this bias?