

Society and Freedom: An Introduction to Humanistic Sociology

Joseph A. Scimecca

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Reviewed by

Gerry Postiglione, Ph.D.

School of Education

LOK YEW Hall

University of Hong Kong

Hong Kong

In reviewing past issues of *The Journal of Mind and Behavior* it quickly becomes apparent that the issue of human freedom and humanistic thought has not been excluded from the pages and that study and research into the frontiers of the mind and behaviour has not left humanistic science behind. (See articles in past issues by Wayne K. Andrew, Joseph Rychlak, Edward Deci and Robert Ryan). And although this is an inter-disciplinary journal, these contributions have come strictly from psychologists. Until recently, sociology has remained in the shadows of humanistic thought, at least compared to psychology. However, *Society and Freedom* is a clear indication of the growing maturity of humanistic thought in sociology. Here is a total view of the discipline which has become a comprehensive statement on the part of this recently-emerged subfield of sociology, working on the premise that humans are free to create their social world—and that whatever impinges upon that freedom is ultimately negative and destructive.

Similar to the critical theorist Jurgen Habermas who argued that a dialectical sociology is motivated by an emancipatory interest to liberate the individual from alien structures and definition which arise out of systems of dominations, Scimecca sees a humanistic sociology as motivated by an interest in making individuals aware of how it is possible to unknowingly fall victim to the routine workings of social structures. Scimecca's argument is straight forward: the aim of (humanistic) sociology should be to challenge conditions that restrain human potential thereby insuring a maximization of alternatives in human social contexts. This active aim generates a new definition of sociology. The definition of sociology for the humanist thus becomes: the study of human freedom and of all the social obstacles which must be overcome in order to insure this freedom; a discipline of thought in which the dignity, interests, and

values of human beings are of primary importance (p. 1, 2). From this point his task naturally becomes one of critically and comprehensively examining all of the major theories of sociology at the macro level and many of the social-psychological theories of self at the micro level. Humanistic potential is delicately strained from various sources and then synthesized. A process of search, identification, and analysis is brought to bear on the major figures of functionalism, exchange theory, conflict theory and symbolic interactionism. Functionalist and exchange theories are found to be near totally devoid of humanistic potential while others like conflict theory and symbolic interactionism theories are shown to offer much humanistic potential. In this respect, Scimecca points out that C. Wright Mills did attempt to combine George Hebert Mead's social psychology (symbolic-interactionism) and a Marxian-Weberian version of social structure (conflict theory). This model of humankind and society is approximately referred to as critical humanism. The resulting view is that there is nothing in basic human nature that renders individuals incapable of attaining freedom; it is only through ignorance of their enslavement by social structure that makes them unfree (p. 19). Thus, reason becomes the safeguard of freedom.

Since any attempt at building a humanist sociology would be incomplete without a statement on the self as it relates to conceptions of social structure, this becomes Scimecca's first task. The theories of Freud, Skinner and Mead are searched for humanistic potential. The result is a total rejection of Skinner and a splicing of certain parts of the other two. Ernest Becker is positioned upon their foundation because of his dynamic integrated theory of self. It becomes clear that by joining Becker's view, which lacks a sufficient concept of social structure, with Mills model, which lacks a fully developed concept of self, it is then possible to create a total paradigm for the humanist sociology.

With this firmly implanted, Scimecca demonstrates how a redefinition of the basic concepts of sociology is possible. In doing this, very careful emphasis is given to the concept of role. Rather than the traditional emphasis—a passive one—on “role taking”, the focus becomes an active one—on “role-making”. “The process of role-making implies a reflexivity, a critical awareness on the part of the individual” (p. 85). Here, Ralf Turner's concept of role-making becomes a solid link between Mills and Becker. Coming full circle, the result is a finely articulated model which, although open for criticism, is cleverly constructed.

Scimecca also examines research methods in sociology, and as might be expected, he reveals the limitation of positivism to freedom and human potential. Qualitative rather than quantitative research, though

not without its own flaws, is considered to be the best way to understand human social interaction.

Since the value of any type of sociological framework is found in its utilization in societal analysis, humanist sociology is taken to task in American society by getting to the core issue of inequality. After describing the extent of inequality in American society and establishing that those inequalities are not inevitable, the basic institutional orders of American society are viewed in terms of their structural arrangements. A critical analysis reveals the role of the subordinate institutional order (e.g., family, education, religion) in legitimizing the hegemonic domination of society by the economic, political and military order. Illustrative examples of this phenomena are given.

One of the tests of this book will be whether or not it can answer some of the sharper criticism of the field, such as sociology's relative inertness in bringing about any actual change. This is confronted in the final chapter and the results are a set of promising recommendations grounded in a foundation of humanistic thought.