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 SOURCES

Notable Selections in Sociology

Edited by

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DPG
The Dushkin Publishing Group, Inc.
We dedicate this book to John, Alec, Ned, Joe, David, Neil, Katy, and Adam. We have tried to pass the best part of ourselves onto them, even as profound, important, and fascinating ideas are passed from generation to generation in Sources: Notable Selections in Sociology.

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Preface

The subject matter of sociology is ourselves—people interacting with one another in groups. Sociologists seek to understand in a systematic and scientific way the social behavior of human beings and human arrangements. Sociologists question seemingly familiar and commonplace aspects of our social lives, and offer novel and surprising answers. To study sociology is to explore society in new and dynamic ways.

Sociology is a form of scientific inquiry that gives us the intellectual tools for understanding our world more profoundly. As a discipline, sociology has evolved its own history of ideas and thinkers, research methods, and theories. In this volume, we have put into your hands directly those researchers and writers whose works have enduring value for the study of society.

Sources: Notable Selections in Sociology brings together 44 selections (classic articles, book excerpts, and case studies) that have shaped the study of society and our contemporary understanding of it. We have included the works of distinguished sociological observers, past and present, from Marx and Engels on class to Mills on the sociological imagination to Bernard on the female world and Bell on technology and social change. The selections also reflect the long-standing tradition in sociology of incorporating useful insights from related disciplines. Thus, the volume includes contributions by anthropologists, political scientists, psychologists, ecologists, and economists.

Each selection was chosen because, in our opinion, it has helped shape the sociological inquiry. Each contains essential ideas used in the sociological enterprise, or has served as some kind of a touchstone for other scholars. As a whole, Sources is designed to be an accessible, reasonably comprehensive introduction to sociological classics. We have tried to select readings across a broad spectrum, i.e., the ideas, insights, and themes presented in these selections are not necessarily limited to a particular society. Accordingly, they should enable students to analyze the behaviors and institutions of many nations.

Plan of the book These selections are well suited to courses that attempt to convey the richness of the sociological perspective and require more than a superficial grasp of major sociological concepts and theories. The selections are organized topically around the major areas of study within sociology: the selections in Part 1 introduce the sociological perspective; Part 2, the individual and society; Part 3, stratification; Part 4, social institutions; and Part 5, society
those positions convey the best reward, and hence have the highest rank, which (a) have the greatest importance for the society and (b) require the greatest training or talent. The first factor concerns function and is a matter of relative significance; the second concerns means and is a matter of scarcity.

**Differential functional importance.** Actually a society does not need to reward positions in proportion to their functional importance. It merely needs to give sufficient reward to them to insure that they will be filled competently. In other words, it must see that less essential positions do not compete successfully with more essential ones. If a position is easily filled, it need not be heavily rewarded, even though important. On the other hand, if it is important but hard to fill, the reward must be high enough to get it filled anyway. Functional importance is therefore a necessary but not a sufficient cause of high rank being assigned to a position.

**Differential scarcity of personnel.** Practically all positions, no matter how acquired, require some form of skill or capacity for performance. This is implicit in the very notion of position, which implies that the incumbent must, by virtue of his incumbency, accomplish certain things.

There are, ultimately, only two ways in which a person’s qualifications come about: through inherent capacity or through training. Obviously in concrete activities both are always necessary, but from a practical standpoint the scarcity may lie primarily in one or the other, as well as in both. Some positions require innate talents of such high degree that the persons who fill them are bound to be rare. In many cases, however, talent is fairly abundant in the population but the training process is so long, costly, and elaborate that relatively few can qualify. Modern medicine, for example, is within the mental capacity of most individuals, but a medical education is so burdensome and expensive that virtually none would undertake it if the position of the M.D. did not carry a reward commensurate with the sacrifice.

If the talents required for a position are abundant and the training easy, the method of acquiring the position may have little to do with its duties. There may be, in fact, a virtually accidental relationship. But if the skills required are scarce by reason of the rarity of talent or the costliness of training, the position, if functionally important, must have an attractive power that will draw the necessary skills in competition with other positions. This means, in effect, that the position must be high in the social scale—must command great prestige, high salary, ample leisure, and the like.

*How variations are to be understood.* In so far as there is a difference between one system of stratification and another, it is attributable to whatever factors affect the two determinants of differential reward—namely, functional importance and scarcity of personnel. Positions important in one society may not be important in another, because the conditions faced by the societies, or their degree of internal development, may be different. The same conditions, in turn, may affect the question of scarcity; for in some societies the stage of development, or the external situation, may wholly obviate the necessity of certain kinds of skill or talent. Any particular system of stratification, then, can be understood as a product of the special conditions affecting the two aforementioned grounds of differential reward.

7.3 ROBERT MICHELS

The Iron Law of Oligarchy

Robert Michels (1876–1936), a German sociologist, Socialist, and economist, is best known for his formulation of the “iron law of oligarchy,” which argues that in all large organizations, oligarchy (the rule by a few) is inevitable. According to Michels, although they are initially committed to democracy, Socialist parties are no less oligarchic than conservative parties. In principle, the leaders are elected democratically, but once in power, they gain the knowledge and control of resources to remain in power. Michels argues that leaders, originally elected to serve the mass, eventually become “professional” leaders and attain an independence from the mass. The mass then lacks the necessary resources and skills to remove the leaders from power. Over time, the leaders in power promote officials of like thought and opinion, thus establishing a self-perpetuating leadership group or oligarchy.

**Key Concept:** the iron law of oligarchy

The most formidable argument against the sovereignty of the masses is . . . derived from the mechanical and technical impossibility of its realization.

The sovereign masses are altogether incapable of undertaking the most necessary resolutions. The impotence of direct democracy, like the power of indirect democracy, is a direct outcome of the influence of number. In a polemic against Proudhon (1849), Louis Blanc asks whether it is possible for thirty-four millions of human beings (the population of France at that time) to carry on their affairs without accepting what the pettiest man of business finds necessary, the intermediation of representatives. He answers his own question by saying that one who declares direct action on this scale to be possible is a fool.

There are, however, other reasons of a technical and administrative character which render impossible the direct self-government of large groups. If Peter wrongs Paul, it is out of the question that all the other citizens should hasten to the spot to undertake a personal examination of the matter in dispute.
and to take the part of Paul against Peter. By parity of reasoning, in the modern
democratic party, it is impossible for the collectivity to undertake the direct
settlement of all the controversies that may arise.

Hence the need for delegation, for the system in which delegates represent
the mass and carry out its will. Even in groups sincerely animated with the
democratic spirit, current business, the preparation and the carrying out of the
most important actions, is necessarily left in the hands of individuals. It is well
known that the impossibility for the people to exercise a legislative power
directly in popular assemblies led the democratic idealists of Spain to demand,

Originally the chief is merely the servant of the mass. The organization is based upon the absolute equality of all its members. Equality is here understood in its most general sense, as an equality of like men. In many countries, as in idealist Italy (and in certain regions in Germany where the socialist movement is still in its infancy), this equality is manifested, among other ways, by the mutual use of the familiar "thou," which is employed by the most poorly paid wage-labourer in addressing the most distinguished intellectual. This generic conception of equality is, however, gradually replaced by the idea of equality among comrades belonging to the same organization, all of whose members enjoy the same rights. The democratic principle aims at guaranteeing to all an equal influence and an equal participation in the regulation of the common interests. All are electors, and all are eligible for office. The fundamental postulate of the Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme [Declaration of the Rights of Man] finds here its theoretical application. All the offices are filled by election.

The officials, executive organs of the general will, play a merely subordinate part, are always dependent upon the collectivity, and can be deprived of their office at any moment. The mass of the party is omnipotent. . . .

The technical specialization that inevitably results from an extensive organization renders necessary what is called expert leadership. Consequently the power of determination comes to be considered one of the specific attributes of leadership, and is gradually withdrawn from the masses to be concentrated in the hands of the leaders alone. Thus the leaders, who were at first no more than the executive organs of the collective will, soon emancipate themselves from the mass and become independent of its control.

Organization implies the tendency to oligarchy. In every organization, whether a political party, a professional union, or any other association of the kind, the aristocratic tendency manifests itself very clearly. The mechanism of the organization, while conferring a solidarity of structure, induces serious changes in the organized mass, completely inverting the respective position of the leaders and the led. As a result of organization, every party or professional union becomes divided into a minority of directors and a majority of directed. . . .

As denationalization develops, not only do the tasks of the administration become more difficult and more complicated, but, further, its duties become enlarged and specialized to such a degree that it is no longer possible to take them all at a single glance. In a rapidly progressive movement, it is not only the growth in the number of duties, but also the higher quality of these, which imposes a more extensive differentiation of function. Namely, and according to the letter of the rules, all the acts of the leaders are subject to the ever vigilant criticism of the rank and file. In theory the leader is merely an employee bound by the instructions he receives. He has to carry out the orders of the mass, of organization increases in size, this control becomes purely fictitious. The mechanism of the organization is such that there should be a certain number of persons who devote all their activities to the work of the party. The mass provides these by delegation, and the delegates, regularly appointed, become permanent representatives of the mass for the direction of its affairs. . . .

Leadership is a necessary phenomenon in every form of social life. Consequently it is not the task of science to inquire whether this phenomenon
is good or evil, or predominantly one or the other. But there is great scientific value in the demonstration that every system of leadership is incompatible with the most essential postulates of democracy. We are now aware that the law of the historic necessity of oligarchy is primarily based upon a series of facts of experience. Like all other scientific laws, sociological laws are derived from empirical observation. In order, however, to deprive our axiom of its purely descriptive character, and to confer upon it that status of analytical explanation which can alone transform a formula into a law, it does not suffice to contemplate from a unitary outlook those phenomena which may be empirically established; we must also study the determining causes of these phenomena. Such has been our task.

Now, if we leave out of consideration the tendency of the leaders to organize themselves and to consolidate their interests, and if we leave also out of consideration the gratitude of the led towards the leaders, and the general immobility and passivity of the masses, we are led to conclude that the principal cause of oligarchy in the democratic parties is to be found in the technical indispensability of leadership. The process which has begun in consequence of the differentiation of functions in the party is completed by a complex of qualities which the leaders acquire through their detachment from the mass. At the outset, leaders arise spontaneously; their functions are accessory and gratuitous. Soon, however, they become professional leaders, and in this second stage of development they are stable and irremovable.

It follows that the explanation of the oligarchical phenomenon which thus results is partly psychological; oligarchy derives, that is to say, from the psychical transformations which the leading personalities in the parties undergo in the course of their lives. But also, and still more, oligarchy depends upon what we may term the psychology of organization itself, that is to say, upon the tactical and technical necessities which result from the consolidation of every disciplined political aggregate. Reduced to its most concise expression, the fundamental sociological law of political parties (the term "political" being here used in its most comprehensive significance) may be formulated in the following terms: "It is organization which gives birth to the domination of the elected over the electorate, of the mandarins over the mandatories, of the delegates over the delegators. Who says organization, says oligarchy."

Every party organization represents an oligarchical power grounded upon a democratic basis. We find everywhere electors and elected. Also we find everywhere that the power of the elected leaders over the electing masses is almost unlimited. The oligarchical structure of the building suffocates the basic democratic principle. That which is oppressed that which ought to be. For the masses, this essential difference between the reality and the ideal remains a mystery.

**Key Concept:** the power elite

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8.1 C. WRIGHT MILLS

The Higher Circles

Radical sociologist C. Wright Mills (1916–1962) was a leader of mid-twentieth-century American sociological thought. He believed that social scientists should not be merely disinterested observers, a practice that Mills referred to as "abstracted empiricism," but that they should be activists asserting their social responsibility. In his book *The Power Elite* (Oxford University Press, 1956), Mills offers his view of the U.S. system of power. In the following excerpt from *The Power Elite*, he argues that there is a "power elite" in the United States that is composed of a small group of individuals who occupy powerful positions and exert a dominant influence on the country's decision-making process. Mills notes that the American economy shifted from a system of small units to one that is dominated by 200 or so giant corporations that are interrelated politically and administratively. They are the key economic decisionmakers. Prior to World War II, the military had little or no influence, but since the 1950s, the military has exerted great influence and commanded major resources. Finally, the political leadership has become centralized and has taken on power that, in the past, was dispersed. According to Mills, the "power elite" interact socially and develop a common set of values and beliefs of what they believe is right and good for the United States.

**Key Concept:** the power elite