

# 10. Postscript: Irony and the profit motive

*Worldly Wiseman.* I would advise then that thou with all speed get thyself rid of thy burden; for thou wilt never be settled in thy mind till then: nor canst thou enjoy the benefits of the blessing which God hath bestowed upon thee until then.

*Christian.* That is that which I seek for, even to be rid of this heavy burden: but get it off myself I cannot: nor is there a man in our country that can take it off my shoulders; therefore I am going this way, as I told you, that I may be rid of my burden.

(John Bunyan. *The Pilgrim's Progress*)

## Introduction

In this book, we have primarily been occupied with two concerns. The first is the possibility of an inter-disciplinary approach to economic phenomena. We have tried to show that such a project is at least premature and perhaps even misconceived. The conclusions to which we were drawn with regard to the inter-disciplinary question led us to propose an alternative strategy, namely the re-beginning of enquiry, this time premised in what we called the egological approach. The studies offered in Parts Two and Three are initial exemplifications of the range of materials and issues which this strategy makes available.

Our discussion of these two concerns has, by and large, not involved explicit and extended

consideration of the standard and classical sociological orientations towards capitalist economic and business life. To have introduced them and then to have indicated just how and why we find them to be unsatisfactory would have both complicated our argument beyond necessity and lengthened this book beyond endurance.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, we do feel it is incumbent upon us to say something about classical or paradigmatic sociology (the use of this particular epithet will become clear in a moment) if only because it is the interests and outlooks of this conventional approach which will, in all likelihood, be the criteria against which our own approach will be assessed. To say absolutely nothing would be to invite others to locate our work in relation to the conventional approaches and hence allow them to frame the context in which our proposals are to be reviewed.<sup>2</sup> So, by way of an endnote, a postscript, we want to set out why we feel one way of locating and interpreting our work, perhaps the one most likely to be used, is inadequate. This is the proclivity of many (and not just students, we would point out) to locate all sociological studies somewhere along the macro-micro continuum. We fear that were we to make no mention of our objections to this conception, we might find our work defined as a contribution to the micro-sociology of economic life. And nothing could be further from our aim than that!

### Irony in sociology

The use of the macro-micro continuum gives rise to what Woolgar refers to an "instrumental irony" (Woolgar: 1983 p. 258). It is a methodological device (Anderson and Sharrock 1982) for the achievement of particular range of analytic purposes. What makes it ironic, in Woolgar's sense, is the outlook to which it leads. This is perhaps most often expressed in that witches' brew of theoretical relativism and epistemic realism; a potion which induces the illusion that what are termed 'macro' and 'micro social realities' are, in fact, no different from one another. What they express or "capture" are competing and/or complementary representations of how things are "really". In the hackneyed terminology, macro and micro sociologies are alternative paradigms. The complete description, the final accounting, will comprise a theory which unifies, synthesises, reconciles macro and micro reality.<sup>3</sup> Until that theory is available, there is nothing to choose between the versions.

It is here that the irony enters. Sociological accounts, or versions, of social phenomena are placed alongside those offered by the subjects themselves. To prevent the de-construction of sociology altogether, the turning of it into "just another member's version", the sociologist makes accounts reflective of the circumstances of their use. Thus, each sociological account is the construction of equally valid but different methodologies (an investigative apartheid, so to speak), while the accounts of the subjects of investigation are constructs of their practical, pragmatic, political, economic, or whatever interests. The net result is that while, for reasons we will discuss in a moment, sociologists can and do accept without question the superiority of their versions over those of the laity, they feel themselves forced to treat all sociological accounts as, at least in principle, epistemologically equivalent. Everyone can defend their own version as "true for me".<sup>4</sup>

Out of this tangle, we want to take just two ideas; the forcing of descriptions and theories into the macro-micro straightjacket and the way this leads to irony. We want to argue that the distinction between macro and micro is a false dichotomy; and its use leads to that worst of

all possible analytic outlooks, academic superciliousness. Invoking the macro-micro dichotomy tends to be associated with a pre-disposition to turn sociology into disapproval. Irony drifts into sneering.

### *Classical conceptions of the profit motive.*

To get something of a sense of the way in which these things work themselves out, we would like to consider two classical descriptions of the capitalistic profit motive and the people with which it is associated. We do not suppose that either would be taken by anyone as an adequate descriptions of contemporary entrepreneurial capitalists. It is not their representativeness which we are interested in but the general orientation which they embody. To begin with, the most obvious and the easiest case.

As the conscious bearer [Träger] of this movement, the possessor of money becomes a capitalist. His person, or rather his pocket, is the point from which money starts and to which it returns. The objective content of the circulation we have been discussing - the valorization of value - is his subjective purpose, and it is only in so far as the appropriation of ever more wealth in the abstract is the sole driving force behind his operations that he functions as a capitalist, i.e. as capital personified and endowed with consciousness and a will. Use-values must therefore never be treated as the immediate aim of the capitalist; nor must the profit on any single transaction. His aim is rather the unceasing movement of profit-making. The boundless drive for enrichment, this passionate chase after value, is common to the capitalist and the miser; but while the miser is merely a capitalist gone mad, the capitalist is a rational miser. (Marx 1976, vol 1, p. 254)

Compare this with the author who, for many, is Marx's major protagonist.

The people filled with the spirit of capitalism to-day tend to be indifferent, if not hostile, to the Church. The thought of the pious boredom of paradise has little attraction for their active natures; religion appears to them as a means of drawing people away from labour in this world. If you ask them what is the meaning of their restless activity, why they are never satisfied with what they have, thus appearing so senseless to any purely worldly view of life, they would perhaps give the answer, if they know any at all: "to provide for my children and grand-children". But more often and, since that motive is not peculiar to them.....more correctly, simply: that business with its continuous work has become a necessary part of their lives. That is in fact the only possible motivation, but it at the same time expresses what is, seen from the view-point of personal happiness, so irrational about this sort of life, where a man exists for the sake of his business, instead of the reverse. (Weber. 1930, p. 70)

For both Marx and Weber, the capitalist is driven to accumulate by a structure of socially determined attitudes - the profit motive. And yet, for both of them, this motive has become

detached from its original impulse. The profit motive now means acquisition for the sake of acquisition: business is an end in itself. Although their views of the character of these attitudes and the ways in which they are structured (i.e. the causal and other stories which they tell) are quite different, nonetheless their common interest lies in teasing out the interlocking system of constraints which force capitalists to behave in the way they do. As individuals, particular capitalists are conceived as instances of general structures. The capitalist is, to use Marx's term, "the bearer" of capitalistic social and economic relations. Like Pilgrim, they carry a burden they cannot put down.

Part of the irony in this derives from the paradox enshrined in the general approach. Each individual capitalist is viewed as enmeshed in a web of social, political, economic, psychological, cultural, and material forces which fix his outlook and attitudes. There is no real room for manoeuvre: no options are available. The capitalist could be no other way. At the same time, these self-same attitudes and outlooks are disparaged as money grubbing, exploitative, selfish, de-humanising, philistine or pointless. It is as if the capitalists who hold them had somehow made the moral choice not to be any different. The irony this encapsulates turns to snobbery when we are invited to sit in judgement over the vulgarity which this set of attitudes and values is said to display. At the micro level, the individual capitalist is to be condemned for being what, at the macro level, history requires him to be.

This whole orientation is made possible by a descriptive strategy which treats capitalists as anonymous types and locates them in de-personalised systems of economic and social relations. Marx, for example, discusses the capitalist in terms of the contrast between the circulation and consumption of goods and the circulation and non-consumption of money. The system requires accumulation without consumption (miserliness); the capitalist provides this in a rational, i.e. calculative, form. Weber too is interested in the capitalist as an abstract social type. Here, though, one of the crucial differences between Marx and Weber can be seen. Weber endows the capitalist with a structure of motivations which are not purely economic, and hence makes him more readily recognisable. Nonetheless, Weber's capitalist is still an anonymous bearer of sets of social and economic relations, even if the Protestant ethic may have been transmuted into the needs, or perceived needs, of business.

The irony is finally drawn out in the attitude which this approach fosters. This attitude tends to favour the use of sociological - using that term loosely for the moment - accounts of the capitalist's motivation to downgrade or de-legitimise those of the capitalists themselves. They are, to use a term of Harold Garfinkel's<sup>5</sup>, treated as "cultural dopes" in the sense that they don't really know what they are doing. Whatever they might think or say about their reasons for acting as they do, it is the sociological depiction of the structure of constraints which tells us what they are really doing and why.

The macro-micro contra-distinction is but one of the analytic devices which can be used to achieve this ordering of versions. The subjective accounts (a very important adjective that) which the capitalists provide are themselves the outcomes of the objective social forces which constrain capitalist activities. The purpose of a micro analysis must, then, be to demonstrate first how these subjective accounts are deployed (their rationales) and second the interconnection between this subjective organisation of their major features and the patterns of objective social relations which the sociologist knows determines them. The micro is no more and no less than the instantiation of the macro.

The micro-macro dichotomy is, then, an explanatory device. But it provides explanations which have been set in advance. The micro is explained in terms of the macro. The trouble is that the explanations which are yielded explain literally nothing, for while they tell us why capitalists as a social type behave in a particular manner, they say nothing at all about why individual capitalists do what they do. Unless, that is, one is prepared to allow the identification of individuals with the type. But in that case, as we have seen, analysis becomes caricature.

The macro-micro continuum is based upon a metaphor of points of view, and most crucially, of levels of points of view of what is "the same" social reality. The micro expresses an individualistic, subjectivist, interpretivist point of view. The macro is its inverse: global, objective, determinate. If, and this is the crucial move, the overriding aim is not to explain social life but to describe it, the notion of there being levels of points of view, or indeed of there being a unified, fixed, determinate social reality at all about which to have points of view, fades into the background.

What we are left with is the difficulty of fixing the relation between the theoretical constructs which appear in our descriptions and the phenomena we are seeking to describe. If we take the problem of description at all seriously, then these constructs must have some degree of empirical reference. They must give us some purchase on the activities ordinary actors engage in and be recognisable in the things they do and say. In the face of that task, the theorist's constructed duality, the micro social reality in which actors live and move and the macro social reality which encompasses and explains it, simply dissolves. The phenomena depicted as the macro reality, the structures and constraining forces, turn out to be exactly the same order of phenomena as those described from the micro 'point of view'. This does not mean we should now turn the irony on its head: that it is the micro which is really real and where the explanatory weight should lie. It is the duality itself we have to dispense with. The notion of a macro and micro reality is a theoretical construct premised in a metaphysics, and it makes no sense at all to talk about the reality of theoretical constructs or the metaphysics which give rise to them. What are real (as opposed to invented, fantasised, made up, or imagined) are the activities which actual actors engage in in their daily lives and the real worldly consequences which these activities have for them. Taking the problem of sociological description at all seriously means beginning, and most probably ending, with these.

### The Upshot

Where all this is leading is to a very simple conclusion. The image provided by many of the conventional accounts of the entrepreneur has him as a hapless Kirkegaardian figure: angst ridden and demon driven. This, we assert, is the consequence of utilising anonymous social types within ironising explanatory accounts. If, instead, we try to describe what the profit motive looks like in actual cases, to be sure we will find some of the things which the classic accounts point to. The entrepreneur does give over almost everything to the demands of business. A priority is placed on profit and profit making, monetary values and their calculation. As we have seen, cost cutting can be a way of life. But, and this is the important issue, what is left out is not just the vibrancy, the liveliness, the teemingness of business life, but the essential character business life has for those engaged in it. This is one of

involvement, enjoyment and practical necessity. Lawrence Hunt is recognisable in some of the things which Marx and Weber say. We know what they are getting at. But when they talk about rational miserliness or work as a necessary part of life, what they miss out are the sheer capacities, absorbed busyness, skillful élan, which Lawrence and people like him bring to their business activities. It is these capacities which make it simply impossible for them to go into a site and 'turn off'. They cannot help themselves. They have to know how the fridges are divided up, where the keys to the safe are kept, how often the light fittings are cleaned, what size cups are used to dispense soft drinks, and what items the staff are allowed to consume while on duty. They cannot stop themselves noticing who is wearing a uniform and who isn't; whether the prices are those currently in force; that the menu boards are badly laid out or covered in bits of masking tape to hide out of stock lines; that the jets on the dishwashers are wrongly positioned and the fridge needs de-frosting.<sup>6</sup> This isn't an impersonal curiosity, or merely a requirement of successful business life. They have to find out. They have to get things done. If one is to talk about social reality, then this is the social reality of the profit motive in the entrepreneurial business. It's a reality of checks to be made, things to be done, people to be seen, papers to be processed. The constraints and choices, the requirements and options which they are aware of and to which they relate are all concerned with the need to live and work in this real economic world and to deal with its technical and interactional, its social and economic features. Given the world in which they move and in which they earn their living, it could be no other way. Given their personal commitments, they would not want it to be any other way.<sup>7</sup>

#### Notes

- [1] The arguments and what we take to be their implications are set out in Sharrock and Anderson (1987b) and Anderson, Hughes and Sharrock (1985).
- [2] That this is a real risk can be seen from Cherrington et al's (1987) response to Pinch and Clarke's (1987). This response displays a complete failure to appreciate, or even understand, alternative sets of analytic objectives and methods. This sociological equivalence of tone deafness led to a series of wild accusations and half baked criticisms.
- [3] It can be seen that there is something of this tendency in Etzioni, (cf. Chapter 1). It was this which actually alerted us to his work in the first place. It also accounts for the continuing appeal of general theorists such as Giddens. See for example Giddens (1979).
- [4] This is a paraphrase of a joke of Alan Garfinkel's. It is re-told by Putnam (1981, p119). The really important point, of course, is that this equivalence is never taken seriously. Each sociologist is forced, or thinks he is forced, to justify his version. When that happens, the centre of gravity nearly always slips back to the macro end of the continuum.

[5] Garfinkel (1967).

[6] This list is just a collection of items taken from random observations Lawrence threw out within 5 minutes of entering the cafeteria in one Leisure Centre, and as he pointed out, by no means the worst one.

[7] Here is a parallel comment concerning just the same conclusion reached in respect of astronomers and astronomy.

Inquiries and objects are intertwined creatures of astronomers' powers. They are not philosophers' playthings. They cannot be recovered as the work of laboratory inquiries in any detail that is interesting to the astronomer who must make his living like this, who lives like this: as each day's work he must make astronomical discoveries. This is neither his burden nor his job; instead, he doesn't know any better. More aptly his obstancy is this: he would not want it differently. He could not want it differently. (Garfinkel, Lynch & Livingston 1981, fn. 25.)