Review Article

Talking about Consciousness

Review of P. Berger, and B. Berger and H. Kellner, **The Homeless Mind,** Random House, New York, 1973, $6·95; Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1974, £0·50.

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This book is prefaced with the engaging assurance (pp. viii-ix)[1] that it is meant to be "tentative, hypothetical, exploratory", and that criticism, "even attack", is welcomed; after which any reviewer—including this one—would wish to err on the side of charity. All the same, I think it important to say harsh things about the book—to make an example of it. This is partly because it shows us empiricism foraging on relatively unfamiliar terrain, and so may help illuminate the habits of that beast. But, more important, it offers a vital negative lesson about how to approach the study of consciousness in a development context.

The authors address themselves to the following question: If 'modernity' is taken as comprising a certain roughly determinate set of institutions, what are the elements of consciousness which, because they have to go with those institutions, will always have to form part of modernity? Their view of institutions is, as they readily acknowledge, a standard one, with Weber to the fore: "technological production" and bureaucracy are quintessential, arising in any society—capitalist or socialist—which is undergoing modernization. Secondary institutional features include urbanization, means of mass communication, and so forth. The account of modernity's subjective side has only a little more novelty to it. Rationality, abstraction, impersonality, future-orientation, all appear in various guises. But their claim is not to have made discoveries about either the objective or the subjective features of modernized society. What they are concerned with is the link **between** objective and subjective. This occupies their all-important part I. In the course of it they develop the theme of 'pluralization of life-worlds'. Life within modern society, they suggest, gets split up into multiple spheres, each of which encloses a particular way of thinking as well as a particular kind of activity. Consequences are a preoccupation with life-planning, and equally a constant sense of being a mere migrant—that is, homeless.

In part II the authors endeavour to apply their scheme of analysis to Third World experience. They move out from their central theme—results in consciousness of the emergence of modern institutions—to consider also the converse relationship: adaptation of institutions to cater for the 'discontents' that will animate populations whose consciousness is being 'modernized'. The rise of state bureaucracies and of Third World forms of socialism is discussed in these terms. They survey ways in which modernization has been confronted by ideology, distinguishing between ideologies which endorse modernity; those which demand its subjection to specified non-modern values; and those which reject it altogether. This leads to the scrutiny, in part III, of an instance of the latter 'demodernising' impulse, the contemporary 'counter-culture' in the USA and Western Europe. The authors have a lot of fun showing how it has been animated by the futile aspiration to liquidate patterns of consciousness that go with modernity. Their concluding plea is for a recognition that any attempt to re-order either mind or social system will have to respect the limits they set for one another.

The book has sharply luminous moments: remarks on the unprecedented security of bourgeois childhood, for example (pp. 191-194); discussion of the difference between modern and non-modern temporality (pp. 148-151). There is courage in it, the uncommon courage to make a frontal approach to the question: how will the objective social order yield its day to day working consequences in consciousness, understood as a whole? In such respects it is reminiscent of the famous 'Berger-and-Luckmann'[2], a work which several years ago fostered in many of us an initial enthusiasm for the sociology of knowledge, and which remains one of the few pieces of required reading on the subject.

By and large, however, the present book is profoundly unsatisfactory. Its failings are diverse, but if I am not mistaken they compose a coherent story.

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[1] Page numbers throughout refer to the Random House edition.

[2] P. P. Berger and T. Luckmann, **The Social Construction of Reality,** Allen Lane, Penguin Press, London, 1967.

1. Categorism

As one reads, a series of puzzles builds up. How do BB & K come to write at length about 'technological production' and bureaucracy without offering any definition of either? Why the resounding and recurrent banality? Whence the fondness for the tautology as means of expression? (My favourite example is their definition of 'mechanisticity': "This means that the work process has a machinelike functionality so that the actions of the individual worker are tied in as an intrinsic part of a machine process", (p.26)). If they could not dispense with tautology, which admittedly has an elemental strength and elegance, might they not have spared us the proliferation of terms (a large portion of the part I conceptual apparatus) that are just plain redundant? And why the inconsistency in the use of their own terms? Every author is entitled to flag somewhat at intervals, but faults of authorship on this scale demand specific explanation.

In my view, they can only be symptoms of the malady *categorism.* This is the tendency to suppose that thinking up a category within which to fit a phenomenon is the same as understanding the phenomenon. It has perhaps an affinity with the old scholastic doctrine of nominalism, that the reality of a thing resides in its name. It is endemic to empiricist social science (we thus establish where BB & K, for all their references to Teutonic theorists, actually belong). Indeed, if empiricism be defined by the dictum "Think of a category and put some facts under it", then clearly categorism is one of its two essential tendencies, apparently contradictory but really complementary. For the empiricist, there is on the one hand 'empirical work', our old friend the accumulation of observable facts; and on the other hand, 'theorizing', which means slapping down another category once every few pages, i.e. categorism. (Not that the latter activity is unrelated to any theory; only the relationship is oblique and highly mediated—see below). The lackadaisical character of BB & K's argument is after all not so puzzling. It is natural that pleonasm, inanity and a cheery indifference to real-world denotation should hold sway, when —to speak bluntly—playing with categories is the name of the game.

2. Myopia

When BB & K suppose that the modern individual has "plentiful experience" of dealing with bureaucracy (p. 43), indeed normally feels 'encircled' by it (p. 60); not only knows his biography to be 'open', a 'migration through different social worlds', but even glories in this fact (p. 77); typically relies on the family as his 'life-planning workshop' (p. 72); enjoys "enormous latitude in fabricating his own particular private life" but tends to get "furiously frustrated" by his inability to make a good job of it (pp. 186-187), it becomes clear that their universal modernity is actually the projection of the life and times of a successful liberal professional in the advanced West.

More than mere ethnocentricity is in question, though there is some of that: if modernity typically means a 'privatization' expressing itself in the primacy of the family, what are we to make, for instance, of the findings of K. M. Kapadia and S. D. Pillai[3], that the response to 'anonymity' in an Indian industrial township was the strengthening of joint family and caste, not of nuclear families? There is also parochiality of time. Having chosen, for instance, to rest their analysis so heavily on what young people around them were doing and saying in the late 1960s, BB & K oblige the 1975 reader to point out that Western youth is already to a considerable extent 'into' different things. Still more serious is the social parochiality. How many carworkers or textile operatives, even in the most thoroughly 'modernized' economies, really travel through 'different social worlds' in the course of their lives—or, if they have to, really revel in doing so?[4] As to the notion that 'modern' people suffer 'enormous latitude in constructing their lives, let us not dwell upon it. The authors have strained to see modern subjective life in depth; but their vision proves to be short-range.

A corresponding myopia bedevils their attempts to analyse social change in concrete instances, actual or possible. They would have us believe that the primary reason why 'upwardly mobile young people' in African countries look to government bureaucracy for employment rather than to industry, is that the former is better able than the latter "to accommodate itself to traditional patterns of social relations" and therefore (*sic*) promises more "status, privilege and power" (p. 127). They offer a scenario (pp. 220-222) for a possible crisis in rich Western countries: lower classes adopt current middle-class child-rearing practices; their progeny consequently start drifting off to the communes as well; people begin to fear that modern institutions will be left destitute of personnel; in order to protect their way of life, the non-drop-outs (united mothers and fathers?) resort to 'highly coercive' counter-measures . . . . A moment's reflection on the way these countries have actually got into trouble in the past four years will put into relief the fairy-tale quality of such prognosis.

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[3] **Industrialization and Rural Society**, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1972, pp. 31 and 187-188.

[4] Cf. J. Goldthorpe et la, **The Affluent Worker**, CUP, Cambridge, 1969.

3. **Non-location**

Their major institutional, extra-subjective phenomena—technological production, bureaucracy, 'pluralization of life-worlds'—are given no location: neither *vis-à-vis* each other, nor in a complete social order, nor with respect to history. Though technological production and bureaucracy "empirically . . . . have often operated in conjunction, they may also operate separately" (p. 103). The authors reckon that bureaucracy's presence in a particular social sector can be "arbitrary" (p. 42); that it can have more or less "autonomy" (p. 107); that sometimes it will be a lesser determinant than productive activity, sometimes a greater (p. 131). Technological production and bureaucracy, in their account, bob up and down alongside one another like a pair of toy ducks in the bathwater of social process. The concept of "life-world" is introduced with a string of instances (pp. 65-66) from public versus private worlds, to the world of the medical clinic, to the intrusive world of an interfering neighbour. But they say nothing about how in general this differentiation happens historically, nor even about the criteria by which one life-world is distinguished from another. Of particular concern is the failure to locate 'technological production' in history: failure to define it, to relate it to earlier forms of manufacturing activity, to differentiate between possible current forms.

'Modernity' itself, the entire nexus, floats unlocated in the same way as its institutional components. It appears as a discrete phenomenon like inflation or racism. Thus, the world-view which 'it' comprises has a dynamic of its own (p. 40); 'it' can be credited with the accomplishment of "many far-reaching transformations" (p. 185): on the other hand, 'it' can only go so far before running up against necessary limits (p. 229). But unlike inflation or racism whose rise or decline is subject to explanation, their 'modernity' is self-contained. Facts of the modern period do nothing to explain it, because it subsumes them all; nor do facts from earlier epochs, for BB & K are silent on the matter of its genesis. Carefully though they inscribe in their introduction the principle that "modern society . . . . is a **historical** entity" (p. 8), the arrival of 'modernity' in history is left a mystery.

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It will be clear by now what all this adds up to. BB & K are candid about having no 'comprehensive theory' of social life (pp. 10, 100, 101). The preceding catalogue of faults measures the cost of trying to get by with categorism, instead of that theory.

But of course there is no such thing as a completely atheoretical book. When theory is missing from the explicit argument, we can be sure that it has simply withdrawn itself to some more elementary level of composition. Thence as ulterior theory it promotes categorism in its characteristic oblique fashion: licensing and requiring a categorist approach, but *ex hypothesi* never articulating itself in the categories consequently thrown up. What is BB & K's ulterior theory? I detect two main aspects.

(i) The individual is inflated to become chief agent in social history. People occur in the plural only as many individuals summated. For example, BB & K have nothing to say about social relations in industry except that these involve anonymity (experienced by individuals); and indeed, their fundamental part I is almost entirely devoid of reference to social groups or social conflict.

(ii) Consciousness (of individuals) is what counts. In BB & K's overt postulates it is but one among several terms in a relationship; in their ulterior theory it is constantly assuming supremacy. Explanation of social development has its real locus in the mental world. "Loss of integrative meanings" is " the essential ordeal of modernization" (p. 158); and a (subjective) sense of 'homelessness' is **the** price of the transformations wrought by modernity (p. 195). Consider also the outstandingly foolish passage (p. 130) where they assert that in East African countries . . . . "*uhuru* has enjoyed considerably greater popularity among the masses than *kazi* (work) has", and proceed to attribute this 'fact' to a "failure . . . . of imagination".

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The book's central purpose is to suggest possible links between objective and subjective, their pattern and their strength. How successful have BB & K been in this endeavour? Not very. Obviously enough the inadequacies listed above will have impaired their analysis of linkage. But if the ulterior and only effective theory is the one specified, its success will be an impossibility. Study of the social determination of knowledge is not reconcilable with such a theory.

Two examples. (a) They discuss the way in which workers in an African mining centre gradually "identify with modernity", distinguishing especially between migrant and settled labour (p. 122); the process is treated as one of learning, of increasing 'understanding', with length of 'exposure' the key variable. They miss entirely the vital difference of objective **interest** between the migrant and the settled worker. For the former, modernity means low wages, low skills and temporary employment, so that he has good reason not to identify with it; vice versa for the latter[5].

(b) They use Duvignaud's study[6] of Shebika, a Tunisian village, as evidence for the pure power-of-communication thesis: the course of a community's development can be influenced by a flow of ideas in and of itself, **"even if nothing else changes"** (p. 141, their emphasis). Duvignaud found in Shebika an intense communal concern about the village's decay, interrelated with high expectation focused upon the government and modernity, quasi-mythical benefactors alone capable of restoring prosperity. On BB & K's reading, what generated this crucial pattern of consciousness in a village "virtually untouched by the technological, economic and political agents of modernization" was the influx of information and propaganda **via** mass media, school and travellers' reports (pp. 141-142).

Let us allow the authors their peculiar premise that the national radio service, the army whence young villagers have returned, and the village school, somehow fail to count as 'agents of modernization'. Carefully documented by Duvignaud, however, is a series of circumstances integral to the explanation of the Shebika pattern of consciousness, such as: a dominant sense of 'degradation' resulting from rapid alienation of village land to outsiders; an excessive man-land ratio; growing pressure from Bedouin neighbours; involvement in the national struggle against the French up to independence; the occasional experience of lucrative temporary employment on government road building work[7]. These circumstances BB & K have chosen to disregard in favour of 'flows of information'.

Conclusion

We learn from this book a lesson of capital importance: analysis of the links between consciousness and society has to be set within a theory of social development as a whole, adequacy of the former depending on adequacy of the latter. It might be said with little exaggeration that in the errors and vacuity of BB & K's book we witness the defeat of the sociology of knowledge as specialist enquiry. At any rate, their failure puts in doubt the very common supposition that study of consciousness and its determination is somehow in antithesis to study of the social structure. It prompts the realization that in effective work on consciousness, the social order and its dynamic would move out of vision but, on the contrary, more sharply into focus.

References

Giovanni Arrighi, "International corporations, labor aristocracies and economic development in Tropical Africa" in Robert I. Rhodes (ed) **Imperialism and Underdevelopment,** Monthly Review Press, New York, 1970.

Jean Duvignaud, **Change at Shebika,** (trans. Frances Frenaye), Allen Lane, Penguin Press, London, 1970.

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[5] Arrighi, pp. 235-239, 1970.

[6] Duvignaud, 1970.

[7] Duvignaud, op. cit., pp. 26-27, 29, 81-83,152.