

Research

ARE SOCIOLOGISTS GHOSTS?

by David Lehmann*

The academic conventions which underpin sociological reporting are very strong and very rarely challenged. The reason for this is not difficult to perceive: those who might question the conventions are the social researchers themselves, the credibility and respectability of whose work would be endangered as a result. The nature of conventions in general is such that even to state them explicitly is tantamount to challenging them. Yet he who ventures into the field has great difficulty in avoiding a re-examination of many conventions, even if the self-questioning he may be led into causes more embarrassment than comfort, and even if he prefers to forget or bury any embarrassing conclusions he may reach. The reflexions which follow arise from research carried out in Chile, during 18 months from 1968 to 1970, among rural workers and smallholders, and on Agrarian Reform settlements. As I hope to show, the dilemmas which face the fieldworker are not insoluble, but the implications of their solution contradict some accepted versions of the role of the social researcher both in the field, and as an intellectual in his own society.

I wish here to examine briefly two interrelated conventions which serve to legitimize sociological writing. One is the general assumption that the sociologist, at least when he or she puts pen to paper, is a neutral observer, unswayed by the various ideological positions which have been, or might be, taken up in relation to the matters he is writing about. According to this view there is a clear distinction between "committed" writing, which because of its open espousal of certain values or ideological positions is ipso facto "unscientific", and "scientific" writing which, because it conceals or ignores the value assumptions or ideological positions which underlie its reasoning and its conclusions, is ipso facto "objective". This particular assumption has recently come under quite heavy fire, largely as a reaction to the role of the American liberal academic establishment in the planning, execution and legitimation of policies in Vietnam and Latin America, but also for purely methodological reasons.

The second, related, assumption underlying social research, which I will deal with more closely, concerns even more intimately the role of the social researcher: this assumption involves two curiously contradictory tenets. On the one hand, the empirical facts presented for analysis are accepted among colleagues as a true representation of observed events. On the other hand, the fact that the writer was, presumably, on the spot when the events

* David Lehmann is Fellow in Sociology at IDS.

occurred, or at a later date, when they were recounted to him by some trustworthy informant, is quietly forgotten: the sociologist, it seems, was, and is, a ghost. The questions raised by this assumption have been dealt with, to some extent, in relation to social surveys, but they have not always been squarely faced in relation to the kind of field work normally associated with anthropologists.¹

Even if one accepts that his reporting may be unbiased, it is not difficult to perceive the practical difficulties the investigator may experience in maintaining a neutral role in the field, especially in highly conflictive situations. The traditional cautions are there, of course, but they fail to answer all but the most obvious questions. Much has been written on the ease whereby the particular formulation or enunciation of a question in an interview can obtain a required, or hoped for, answer. But in many situations the very arrival of the investigator on the scene, and the announcement that he is "doing a survey on ..." or "working on ..." predisposes the persons who find themselves submitted to his questioning to respond in a certain manner. An interviewer knocks on doors in a lower middle class suburb and announces that he is doing a survey on "how people spend their leisure time"; the person who thus finds himself the object of his unsolicited attention is likely to assume that, for the purposes of this particular relationship, the "constructive" use of leisure time is a good thing, and the replies are likely to reflect an attempt by the interviewee to present himself as conforming to this norm. The investigator who arrives, as I did, in a tense and conflictive situation, where workers and landowners are in a state of permanent hostility, will be unable to do any work with either unless he makes it fairly clear whose side he is on. If the workers see him consorting with the landlord they will suspect his motives. If the landowner sees him consorting with the workers, he will most likely consider him an outside agent and refuse to speak to him. Alternatively, if the landowner does speak to the researcher, he may well do so in a highly stereotyped manner, employing a rhetorical style designed to convince him of the correctness of his views, rather than reveal what he really thinks.

Neither the landlord nor the workers see the investigator as a disinterested outside observer - and often quite rightly so.

¹ The gamut of practical difficulties facing social anthropologists is covered, among others, by B. O. Paul: "Interviewing Techniques", in A. L. Kroeber: Anthropology Today, Chicago, 1953. Paul does not, however, relate these difficulties to the kind of results the field worker obtains and publishes.

He is seen as someone who has been "sent" by an agency, or by an authority, either in order to spy, or in order to write an administrative report on the situation. The investigator's first task, therefore, is to convince those concerned that he is neither a spy nor an official. This involves, whether he likes it or not, and indeed whether he is sincere or not, making it clear that he sympathizes with the cause of one side or the other. If he does not do this, either no one will speak to him, or no one will give him trustworthy information. And even if he does manage to earn the trust of those whose behaviour he wishes to examine, he will have to check and double-check the information he is given, for each individual involved will give differing and sometimes conflicting versions of an event. This is a very obvious point, yet the use of only one informant, especially by anthropologists, is still common practice.

In order properly to understand what is going on in a society, or part of a society, the investigator must acquire a role, and where there are deep conflicts between groups or classes, his role will remain unstable and ambiguous until it is established where his sympathies lie. Yet his problems do not end here either, for dissident members of the class with whom he sympathizes will be afraid of admitting their dissidence to him. This will be especially true in situations where the groups in conflict are organized in corporate or political organizations, and dissidents are in a small minority. In many cases, therefore, the investigator finds, if he cares to examine his methodological conscience, that the results he produces, insofar as they take the form of empirical generalizations with some pretence to representativeness, are basically unreliable. He will, almost inevitably, find himself producing, in many senses a "one-sided" picture of a conflict, since he will have access to reliable information from only one of the opposed groups, and from only part of that group.

One of the most interesting cases which I studied of a latifundio with a strong workers' union was a farm called Las Encinas. The exact membership of the union was not clear in this farm, but the members certainly constituted the vast majority of the 50 workers of varying status employed there. From the outset it was obvious to me that any research to be done in this and similar situations had to be carried out with the consent and collaboration of the President of the union; quite apart from practical considerations of the effectiveness of the field work, I felt that my research should be of benefit to the workers and to their organizations, and that they should therefore have a role in its execution. In the specific case of Las Encinas, as in others, the first step in the field work was to arrange a meeting with myself and all the members of the union, in which I would explain as clearly as possible the aims of my work and what it entailed so

far as they were concerned. As a result we initiated a long and mutually fruitful relationship in which the members of the union, especially their President, and the "gringo" sociologist, exchanged opinions and impressions on all kinds of matters. Nevertheless, this procedure had its costs. When I tried to interview a tractorista he stubbornly refused to talk to me, without giving any reason at all. Eventually it emerged that, far from being a committed member of the union, he was the patron's stooge, and other workers were sure that he came to meetings only in order to inform his employer of what was going on. The patron, as I soon found out, was indeed very well informed about the union.

Shortly after making contact with the union, I went to see the patron. The members of the union knew that I would be going to see him, in order to get the "other side of the story" and to obtain some data; nevertheless, when they saw me riding about the farm on horseback at his side they were not a little suspicious. Such behaviour on my part seemed to belie any impression they may have had that I was sympathetic to their cause. Although I did not lose all credibility with the workers, the visit was not repeated more than once, while the patron, who had originally "consented" to the research - though he was not in a position to forbid it - became increasingly sceptical of its true nature, deciding in the end that I was not to be trusted at all. It seems to me that in this situation, and in others of a similar kind, the investigator is forced to take sides, if he is to penetrate anywhere near the core of the situation which interests him.

The relationship between peasants, or rural workers, and the sociologist is conceived by the former as a relationship of exchange. The social types, apart from the landowner, who come to rural communities from outside are very limited in number: the most frequently seen are merchants and politicians. The former seek to buy or sell, in exchange for money or goods, the latter seek votes, in exchange for all kinds of present and future benefits. When the official from the Agrarian Reform agency arrives he is immediately trapped into this pattern: the peasants perceive, not unreasonably, that he is asking them to do him a favour by accepting land, and he soon discovers that to obtain any reaction from them he has to offer them something in return. The peasants, in turn, find that it is to their advantage to place obstacles in the path of the officials, since in this way they obtain an increasing number of benefits. The sociologist faces a similar situation: the peasants and workers' immediate reaction to his approaches is: "What's in it for us?" "Is it in our interest to cooperate with this person?" And the question is far from irrelevant, for sociologists have learnt slowly and painfully that the results of their research can be used - with and without their knowledge or consent - for purposes of which they disapprove, or are ashamed.

Faced with this situation the sociologist can take one of two paths. He can bring outside pressure to bear on the peasants so that they feel they may lose the favour of some valued ally if they do not cooperate with him. A good example of this method is offered by numerous foreigners who obtain official and semi-official support for their work and identify closely with official bodies, such as an Agrarian Reform agency. They obtain cooperation, but they face the risk that the peasants may deceive them as much as they deceive the officials. Alternatively, the sociologist may attempt to gain the trust of the peasants by identifying himself with their problems and with their grievances, and by making them participate in his research. This is very difficult, and I did not carry it as far as I should have liked. An attempt was made, however, to deal with groups of peasants collectively, in the context of whatever organisation they belonged to, if any. The process of selection of those to be interviewed individually was carried out publicly and collectively: a list of the relevant population was drawn up, and a sample was taken in such a way that it was, so to speak, "seen to be random". Once this had been done, those selected felt under some sort of pressure to agree to be interviewed, since those not selected, not displeased at being left unmolested, felt that they could only definitively avoid being bothered if the others cooperated. I had hoped to present to those involved some conclusions of my work, but only managed to do so on one occasion, on an Agrarian Reform settlement (asentamiento), giving rise to a highly animated discussion among the asentados.

A Brazilian philosopher and educator, Paulo Freire, has worked out, with explicit political aims in view, a whole system of concientizacion based on the idea that peasants and rural workers (and, no doubt, urban workers too), can be brought to a greater awareness (conciencia) of their situation by carrying out research into the structures and institutions which surround them, in an ongoing context of organized activity and discussion. Such an experiment has been carried out by ICIRA (Institute for Research and Training in Agrarian Reform) in Chile this year, apparently with many of the desired effects. But even if the sociologist does not have political aims, even if he prefers not to be seen as an agitator, he will penetrate much deeper into the minds of those he is seeking to understand if he allows them to participate in his work. Nevertheless, I would claim once again that there are many situations where this is impossible without some form of open commitment to the aims which they, or their organisations, are pursuing.

Finally, I should like to take up one or two further points of controversy arising from this discussion. It is quite clear, in the first place, that research carried out in this manner

cannot claim to give a representative picture of the attitudes of those involved. In general, the investigator will not have access to dissident and minority opinions, and if he does, those who hold these opinions will try to conceal them from him. The alternative, however, as I have attempted to explain, is to pursue "representativeness at all costs", leading to results which are completely, and not only partially, superficial. Furthermore, it seems to me that, especially in areas where a more or less convincing and weighty body of knowledge has yet to be built up, our analysis should go much deeper than apparently straightforward attitudes. For one thing, attitudes tend to be particularly context-dependent, and in rapidly changing situations they do not have a great deal of predictive value. For another thing, before trying to discover what people's attitudes to particular phenomena are, we should try to find out what certain key words mean to them, and what they really mean when they use them. We should also be investigating the fields of association of these words. To give one example; for the Chilean peasants and rural workers the word "property" is not an abstract noun, but a term denoting quite specifically "a piece of land which one owns", whether it is prefixed by a definite or by an indefinite article. They therefore tend to regard terms such as "collective property", "cooperative property" or "communitarian property" as complete nonsense, embodying a contradiction in terms. People who come and offer them such things must, they seem to feel, be either joking or trying to trick them. Yet this does not imply that they are against collective forms of ownership and work as such; if one speaks to them of trabajo en común (literally "work in common") they may well accept it as a viable form of social organization - but not as property. The real question then becomes - is their vision of improvement centred on the concept of property? And it can often be found that, especially among rural workers, this is not the case: their response to certain situations seems to indicate they they seek security and an increase in their standard of living, and that this is not necessarily linked to legal ownership of land. They may believe that security and improvement depend on some form of direct access to the produce of the land, especially when a process of expropriation is seen to be in action, but this need not be classed as property as they understand it.

We must also, before going into attitudes, seek to discover the fundamental conceptual structures, which underlie peasants' and rural workers' analysis of their situation. These structures, like the meanings I have briefly analyzed, are essentially cultural in nature, and if we accept that culture is a constant, collectively given in a more or less homogeneous population, then it does not call for statistical analysis, but for careful analysis of the meaning of the words used by almost any group taken from that population. In this context, the question of representativity becomes a secondary concern for the investigator.

A final point refers to the data needed for this kind of investigation. The interviews I carried out in Chile centred less on attitudes to various phenomena, than on the definitions given of them by the interviewees. Instead of asking whether they approved of one political party rather than another - a question which in any case is liable to provoke reticence - I asked what was the difference between the parties, and what, in general, they thought politics was for. A great deal of liberty was left to inquire deeply into their answers and find out what lay behind them. A number of questions also concerned the differences which they perceived between different groups and classes in society. Equally important, however, was the collection of data regarding the history and action of the various organizations in which they were involved or for which they were eligible. It is useless to seek out what people think, unless we also inquire into what they do, and have some kind of theoretical framework which integrates these two pieces of information, and takes into account the correspondences and contradictions between the two.