

Sin and Sociology: The Loss and Potential Recovery of a Concept

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Sociology was born in and has experienced its greatest intellectual growth during times of rapid social change. The questions driving sociologists emerged from the end of feudalism to the institutionalization of modernity. The discipline thrived as an academic effort to uncover and explain the logic and dynamics of these changes. The most widely used models and methods were taken from the natural sciences and became the exemplars for the development of sociology. Empiricism and rationality are still the dominant tools used by sociologists to understand yet a new world. One shaped by the globalization of work and politics, as well as a third technological revolution.

The frontiers of science and technology encompass a biological revolution that is unraveling the human genome and heralds changes in the span and quality of human life. Simultaneously, the doubling times of human populations grow ever shorter, and related problems of food supply, disease, and resource wars intensify. These come with increasing poverty, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and signal an uncertain, yet more dangerous future. One in which the economic leaders of industrial nations feel a diminished loyalty to their countries, and an increasingly commitment to each other. All these changes have contributed to life becoming more anonymous and rationalized. Humans are reduced to categories and numbers, and treated as items of data rather than Divinely created beings existing in a unique space between angels and ancestral apes.

While current conditions may indicate to some a need for Divine connection and inspiration, others limit their faith to rationality, science, and politics. This is particularly true for sociologists who are faithful to a value free, empirically driven science of humanity and society. For them God and sin are value laden and problematic ideas having little or no relationship to what they do or how they understand the world.

Sin and Society

Interestingly this has not always been nor is it now exclusively the case. One of the earliest references to sin as an explicitly analytical concept in sociology is found in Edward Allsworth Ross' 1907 book, Sin and Society: An Analysis of Latter-Day Iniquity. There Ross, ever the sociologist, observed that sin changes in character as society grows in complexity. Increasing interdependence expands individual vulnerability to unprincipled others, and every new financial and political arrangement makes new breaches in trust possible. To these institutional injustices are added increasing numbers of personal ones. So, as we progress from agrarian to industrial, and then to globalized societies we add to sins of passion, sins of calculation, exploitation, and oppression.

Such sins fill the news of our times and Ross's. The sins of our eras are indirect and refined. The "new sinners" then and now wear designer suits, have talented lawyers and accountants, are intensely involved with politics and politicians, and separated from their victims by great social distances. They rarely know the people from whom they take work, hope and savings. For Ross these new criminals came in many forms, but the Robber Baron, an equivalent to some of today's billionaires, was central to his cast of characters. Between 1870-1900 the United States emerged as the world's leading industrial nation. As wealth became more concentrated the share held by the richest one percent of households is said to have reached 45% around 1900. The early men of power and wealth, like their modern day counterparts, often manipulated the economic and political systems to their advantage. The great fortunes of Ross's time were largely railroad fortunes (nine of the twenty two billionaires) including those of Leland Stanford, Colis Huntington, Jay Gould (arguably the most vicious of the bunch) and James H. Hill. Today's equivalents have been systematically tracked by Ralph Nader from 1980 to the present in his monthly magazine the Multinational Monitor. There he has regularly published a yearly list of the worst behaved corporations. The list for 2002 include Arthur Andersen, British American Tobacco, Caterpillar, Citicorp, Dyncorp, MM/Mars, Proctor & Gamble, Scherling Plough, Shell Oil, and Wyeth Corporation (Mokhiber and Weismann, 2002).

Though separated by a century, certain features of the sins described by Ross have expanded and deepened our sense of wrongdoing in more contemporary cases. But, as noted above, much has changed for sin and sinners. The new sins are not those of passion, but sins of calculation, exploitation, and oppression. These sins are committed not by the wickedest of men, because the traditional criminal now has fewer opportunities to harm, and their offenses are typically one on one. The traditional villain had neither the public trust nor responsibility for the public good. By comparison the modern villain is the "...exemplary, respectable, trusted person who is traditionally placed at the focus of a spider's web of fiduciary relations and is able ... to pick a thousand pockets, poison a thousand sick, pollute a thousand minds or imperil a thousand lives. It is this high voltage sinner that needs the shackle today." (Ross, 1907: 29-30).

In modern society the greatest harm, is inflicted by those with virtue enough to occupy positions of advantage. Some of the biggest frauds have long records of propriety, which puts them into positions from which they may do more harm. The big and formidable sinners are gray of soul, but not black, so chastisement according to their character rather than their deeds lets them off too easily. The real weakness in the moral position of American's is not in their attitudes toward the common criminal, but in their attitudes and assessments of these new "quasi criminals."

The prosperous evildoer shuns contemporary vices, and explores new avenues for profit and self-fulfillment. He creates new sins, and forms in Ross's phrase a Criminaloid class. Their crimes are not yet banned by public opinion and they work at the cutting edge of sin. They are not

criminals because they have gone beyond what is known and codified into law. Hence, law lags behind sin as a means of describing evil in the world.

Ross asserts that this new criminal is not driven by evil impulses, but by moral underdevelopment and insensitivity. They are driven not by sex but by success, and are not particular about how they attain it. They keep a distance from their victims and are usually separated from them by social structure, prestige, social class, education, political influence, and a large number of intermediaries who help them keep their hands clean. These villains occupy visible and important positions in their churches and synagogues. They take a conservative or orthodox approach to their religions, and are adamant that their churches focus on the soul and not society. In the process they seek to separate social practices from spiritual assessment and censure. They are the cornerstones in maintaining the disassociation between sin and crime, sin and deviance, and sin and society. This same process works in sociology where one finds little room for ethical or moral evaluations.

Sin Disappears?

What happened to sin and how it came to be separated from civic discourse and scholarly scrutiny is also explored in Karl Menniger's (1973) aptly titled book *Whatever Became of Sin?*. Menniger, as physician and psychiatrist, asserts that all humans develop and carry a lifelong burden of guilt. But, guilt before whom: someone they wronged, their family, community or society? Is it guilt before God? This sense of guilt underlies the uneasiness one often feels when confronting the tensions and dissonance inherent in social life. Why can't we solve the ongoing problems of our societies? Have we lost our moral direction? Have the desires for expediency and success replaced the drive for moral integrity? If so, then is God dead?

Who is to blame for everything we sense is wrong? Who started the wars, polluted the air, corrupted business and politics, exploited powerless others, divided the world into zones of affluence and poverty? The answer is we did, and for most without an awareness and/or concern for the consequences of the decisions. How could this happen? How did we lose our moral reckoning of life, decision making, and social justice? What happened when sin disappeared and how did this come to be so?

First, what constitutes sin? According to Webster "Sin is a transgression of the law of God; disobedience to the divine will; moral failure. It is the failure to realize in conduct and character the moral ideal..." But, why are these transgressions bad? Sin is more than inappropriate behavior, it is a breaking away from God and humanity. It is an act of rebellion against the sacred, and willful disregard of the good of others. Sin undermines humankind's relationship to God and with each other. Sin is an act of isolation, a mistake in judgment and the missing of the mark and the mark is God. Sins are a defiant withdrawal from God, and self-absorption.

Along with a love of God the human conscience also functions to approve and accept or disapprove and reject that which instincts, culture or occasion might compel one to do. There is a line exchanged between Humphrey Bogart and Katherine Hepburn in the movie *The African Queen* that grasps an essential quality of this traditional definition. The pious Hepburn is scolding the derelict Bogart about his fondness for whiskey, while she empties his stashed and prized bottles overboard. Bogart asserts that a man's drinking is "just part of his human nature." Hepburn retorts with the line "Human nature Mr. Allnott is what God put us on earth to overcome." The line is delivered so convincingly that Hepburn becomes the incarnation of Freud's Superego doing combat with the Id and the poor Mr. Allnott is the tortured Ego caught between the forces of morality and the difficult to budge desires of his human nature.

Menninger next focuses on the events that led to the rapid disappearance of the word and concept of sin. He notes that it has not entirely disappeared, but has become situationally specific to church, certain seasons of the year, and in common usage can be either humorous, self serving or pretentiously pious (1973:24). Regardless, people are not prone to use it much, or to seriously disclose the content of it in their lives. Lack of conversational acknowledgement need not indicate that one is unaware of or insensitive to sin's presence in their lives, or society in general.

So what has happened to sin? The gist of the argument is that it has been transformed into a variety of psychological and sociological facts. In some cases sin became a strictly personal matter, an intimate issue of conscience, and a wrongful choice of action. Managing its consequences is left to the sinner, with or without the help of a confessor or church. Sin also became a violation of civil and criminal codes. These laws institutionalized important mores, and in their codified forms sins are interpreted and punished by experts through the machinery of a state. In still other cases there was a major liberalization of the mores. Here Menninger, no doubt in his role as psychiatrist, uses masturbation as an example,

...this ancient taboo, for the violation of which millions had been punished, threatened, condemned and intimidated...a taboo thousands of years old vanished almost overnight. Masturbation, the solitary vice, became not so sinful, ... in fact not so dangerous at all; less a vice than a form of pleasurable experience, and a normal and healthy one! (36).

Clearly, while masturbation has been normalized not everything became permissible. Menninger maintains that changes such as these signaled a shift in which many formerly sinful acts became less sinful, more open to personal interpretation, and more acceptable. Therefore, it is in the processes of codification and reinterpretation that what constitutes sin became more ambiguous personally, and more legalistically determined socially. This may augment, and need not necessarily diminish the religious element.

Sin began to lose its distinctive place when it became as much a concern and business of policemen, lawyers, judges, and jailers, as priest, minister and rabbis. The process of transformation intensified when sin was identified with symptoms of mental illness, psychiatric disorders, and their treatments. Fundamental in this approach is the separation of many previously sinful behaviors from existing feelings, emotions and responses connected with their control. In the process these behaviors became clinical conditions viewed as existing independent of the will, desires or control of their hosts. Treatment for these conditions originated from scientific understanding and associated drug, hypnotic, psychoanalytic, and behavioral modification techniques. In the process the original sense of sin, as alienating one's self from God, was not translatable into the language of psychiatric and psychological theories nor their attendant treatment modalities. In the defense of the craft then and now, God and prayer were not completely ignored, but were rarely the preferred therapeutic alternative.

Deviant Behavior and Sin

In distinction to crime, but not entirely separate from it, sin has often been studied by social scientists as deviant behavior. Most of the studies focus on the somber dynamics and grim consequences of the deviant acts. Indeed, this is a proper focus, but overlooks the fact that the motivation for deviance as it may relate to alcoholism, hedonism, drug use, and other deviant actions is often fun. Indeed some of the classical thinkers like Jeremy Bentham and Cesare Baccaria who were working from an early rational choice model saw deviance as they did other human actions: a freely calculated choice to maximize pleasure and minimize pain (Gallmier: 1998: 91; Baccaria: 1963; Pfohl: 1994; Jeremy Riemer: 1994). Clearly, the distinction between rational and moral is substantively important, but rationality and pleasure are often the motives that drive one to miss the mark.

Stephen Pfohl has an excellent analysis of the consequences of the disassociation of sin from deviance in his discussion of the transformation and decline of "the demonic perspective" in the study of deviance (Pfohl: 1985:17-45). Early on, before secularization came to dominate society, deviance was equated with sin. (Berger; 1969: 107-108) As society became more secular the two separated and sin remained within the boundaries of the "Sacred Canopy", while deviance (the same act in different clothing) moved to the secular world of the sociologist. Stanford Lyman (1989:1) has argued that a major sociological shortcoming is its failure to develop a barometer by which to discern evil in the modern world. He asserts:

Evil is a term rarely found in a modern sociological text....To the extent that sociological thought embraces the study of evil today, it does so under the embarrassing, neutered morality of deviance. Adopting for the most part an uncritical stance towards the normative structure of any given society, the...sociologist of

deviance takes his cue from whatever the sources of law and restriction define as evil. Hence, the concerns of the vocal and powerful elements of a society become the resources for sociological investigations of evil.

Recovering Sin?

Lyman (1989) challenges sociologists to move beyond the thin analysis of evil contained in the study of deviant behavior, and reduced in its literature according to Alex Liazos (1972: 103-120) to simply the study of “nuts, sluts and preverts.” Lyman demands sociologists go beyond superficiality to a deeper level. For him as well as E. A. Ross, the most important evils of today’s world are entrenched in the corporate structure and culture of bureaucratized society, and in the value system that they sustain. The detachment of sociology from judgment coincides with the intensification of social evils such as: new manifestation of genocide reminiscent of the Holocaust, the continued and deepening poverty of third world nations, the failure of the American minority group movements to produce social and economic justice, and increasing deviance and/or criminality in major social institutions such as the economy, politics, education etc. Sociology must shed light on the mechanism by which evil has become entrenched in the bedrock of society, and now manifests itself as a morally gelded form of action in major social institutions.

Basically Lyman, Ross and Menninger suggest in different ways that contemporary sociologists have lost or are in the processes of sacrificing an important element of their disciplinary identity. To understand this Robert W. Friedrichs’ ideas (1970:57-110) are particularly helpful. Friedrichs envisions the sociological tradition as divided into periods of prophetic and priestly sociology. These terms describe key orientations of sociologists through time. The priestly practitioner preferred the methods of natural sciences for doing sociological work, and are skeptical of all but empirical forms of knowing. They are dedicated to prediction of social phenomenon and use mathematical-statistical models to better describe and control social forces. In the process any evidence of a trans-empirical world is ignored. This community of scientist often takes a paternalistic mediator’s role between laymen and leaders of society.

The prophetic sociologist has different goals. They are value committed not value neutral, and human truths come in many forms. Prophetic sociologists are critics, activists and polemicists who see real objective of science and sociology as service to humankind. They have had a long history, and a continual presence in the discipline.

Integral Sociology

Sociology originated from the works of Auguste Comte and the “Prophets of Paris”. Their tradition crossed the Atlantic and became institutionalized in American sociology through the

works of Robert Maclver, Robert Lynn, Louis Wirth and Pitirim Sorokin. In Sorokin's Integralism and theory of social change one finds a system that combines the truths of science, reason, and faith. Hence the priestly and prophetic traditions intertwine. Integralism allows its practitioner to see the complementarity among the three forms of truth. It is a satisfying sociological model for dealing with the complexities of humanity in their biological, sociological and spiritual manifestations. This theoretical orientation opens a solid segue to the study of evil and virtue as subjects for sociological analysis. Through it, sin and the concerns expressed by Lyman and others become and remain legitimate objects for sociological study.

Sorokin's Integralism is crafted in his commanding four volumes of *Social and Cultural Dynamics* (1937-41). In this 2500 year study of social order and change Sorokin's analysis builds around three ideal types of human culture. These are embodied in societies so different in form and content as ancient Greco-Roman and Western civilizations along with those of Japan, China, India, and the Middle East. In these societies he explored the similarities and differences of their epistemological and ethical systems, types of art, legal codes, concepts of good and evil, patterns of scientific discoveries, forms of political and economic institutions, experiences in wars, their systems of philosophy, and how they reckoned causality, space and time. This list is illustrative, not exhaustive of the phenomena he studied.

In Dynamics Sorokin followed the flow of historical events and social organization as they intertwined into three ideal types of culture. The most fundamental and defining elements of these cultures are found in the methods by which they reckon ultimate truths and construct reality. Each of these cultural forms has:

...its own mentality; its own system of truth and knowledge; its own philosophy and *Weltanschauung*; its own type of religion and standards of holiness, its own system of right and wrong, its own forms of art and literature; its own mores, laws and codes of ethics...and finally its own form of *human personality*, with a peculiar (distinctive) mentality and conduct (Sorokin, 1957:24).

As noted, the most important and fundamental characteristic of each cultural type is the principle by which it reckons ultimate reality and truth. This principle pervades its institutions, and shapes the character and personality of citizens. Reality in the Ideational culture flows from nonmaterial Everlasting Being. The core values and goals are spiritual, and attained by developing one's supersensory capacity. In the Ascetic form, participants discipline the body and lose self in their search for unity with the Deity or Ultimate Reality (e.g., Tibet under the Dali Lama). Cultures grounded in Active Ideationalism seek, through various means, to convert others to their vision of ultimate reality and God (missionaries in Colonial South or North America).

In a Sensate culture, like ours, reality is revealed through and limited by the senses. Thus the existence of the Ideational element cannot be proven and denial or indifference to God or

gods is characteristic. The important needs of individuals are physical and satisfied by their technological, political and economic abilities to master and exploit the material environment. Sensate cultures are the opposite of Ideational ones and take three different forms. The Active Sensate culture which satisfies needs by altering the physical and cultural worlds through science, technology, economic reorganization, politics, and power. More dangerous and exploitive are the Passive and Cynical Sensate forms. The former, shortsightedly satisfies its needs by parasitically exploiting the physical and cultural worlds. People are indifferent to the conditions of others and mindlessly take what they want and can. Even more dangerous is the conscienceless Cynical Sensate that uses *any* device or means to attain what it desires.

Deception and Sociology

The presence of an increasingly cynical Senate culture is becoming more detectable in all of our major institutions. Early on in this paper a list of the ten worst corporations was presented for the year 2002. A reading of the entire document is worthwhile. To this, one might add the Harris Poll data on patterns of trust and distrust reported by Americans. The table below specifies which professional groups Americans trust the most and the least for 1998 thru 2002.

<u>Would Trust:</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>1998</u>	<u>2001</u>	<u>2002</u>	<u>CHG</u>
Clergymen or Priests	%	85	90	64	-26
Teachers	%	86	88	80	-08
Doctors	%	83	84	77	-07
The President	%	54	79	66	-13
Police Officers	%	75	78	69	-09
Professors	%	77	77	75	-02
Scientists	%	79	76	68	-08
Judges	%	79	75	65	-10
The Ordinary Man or Woman	%	71	74	65	-09
Civil Servants	%	70	71	65	-06
TV Newscaster	%	44	54	46	-08
Pollsters	%	55	51	43	-08
Journalists	%	43	49	39	-10
Business Leaders	%	49	43	NA	---
Members of Congress	%	46	42	52	+10
Trade Union Leaders	%	37	37	56	+19

(The Harris Poll, 2001, 2002) http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=273
Clearly there has been a serious erosion of public confidence and much of this is tied to widespread deception and lying in public life. Some notable cases of deception in selected categories are briefly discussed below.

Among clergy the Catholic Church is at the peak of attention for its recently disclosed cases of sex abuses by priests. Research however shows that sex scandals are widespread throughout the religious community. Cases were reported for Jews by (Bonavoglia, 1992), and studies of the Presbyterian Church (Sieber, 1993) showed that 10-23 percent of their clergy had sexual contact with or harassed congregants or employees. United Methodists disclosed that 20% of laywomen and 31% of female clergy reported harassment by male clergy (Shupe, 1995). Not so long ago, we also had the very scandalous cases of the Televangelists: Jimmy Swaggart, Jim and Tammy Baker are among the more prominent examples.

Presidential lying is also more common than expected. Eisenhower lied about the U-2; John Kennedy denied that the U.S. would use force to oust Castro, and Richard Nixon lied about Watergate. Ronald Reagan lied about covert operations in Nicaragua. George H.W. Bush about the invasion of Panama; Bill Clinton lied about approving the armed attack on the Branch Dividians, and killing 81 people. He also lied about Somalia and Monica. (Zinn: 1998)

In the corporate world Enron and WorldCom were the most widely discussed cases. Additionally Ralph Nader's list of the Ten Worst Corporations of 2001 included Coca Cola, Philip Morris, and Wal-Mart, among prominent others (Mokiber R., and R. Weisman; 2001).

Educational cases at the university level are highlighted by the controversy over plagiarism by Mary Zey and others at Texas A&M (Leatherman:1999). Cheating appears widespread. There are other cases including purchasing term papers and attempting to cheat on the MCAT, LSAT, SAT, GRE, and other major gateway tests (Whitley: 1998). Educational testing service has become quite proficient at detection, but the process is not yet perfect.

Lying in intimate relationships takes many forms. People lie in their personal ads and when seeking dates (Pawlowski and Dunbar 1999:53-69). They send pictures of other people or ones taken before certain body changes, e.g., weight gain and hair loss. They lie about their income, education and previous relationships (Rowatt, Cunningham and Druem 1999:209-223). Dating and courtship as well as marriage often provide grist for the innovator or liar seeking companionship.

How do those who engage in public and private deceptions come to do what they do? Lying and other forms of sinning have a common root in self-deception. At the foundation of self-deception is anxiety, and it is pandemic in today's world. When one fears big losses they often find relief in avoidance, and self-deception. These are among the mechanism that allow people to manage difficult or impossible levels of stress and anxiety.

Beyond Deception to Integralism

Just as self-deception makes coping possible for individuals, it has also made disciplinary deception possible in sociology and social science. Robert K. Merton (1973: 267-78) described science as guided by a set of rules that are internalized by scientists and come to constitute the

scientific conscience. There are the universally accepted values that guide behavior in scientific communities. The first norm is universalism, which directs practitioners to judge truth claims according to pre-established, impersonal, and universal criteria of methods and logic consistent with established practices. Next, communalism mandates that research findings are not personal property but belong to the scientific community as a whole. The norm of disinterestedness requires researchers to remain emotionally detached from the findings of their investigations. The results are what they are, regardless of whether they support or falsify one's theoretical position. Finally, organized skepticism demands that scientists constantly maintain a critical attitude toward what is taken to be true, and continually reexamines it through objective analysis. These norms function to maintain value neutrality, integrity and objectivity in research and professional work. Sociologists have long struggled to incorporate them into their research. To do so, they have taken a two dimensional view of humanness as constituted by mind and body. This is clearly consistent with the conception of reality found in Sensate cultural science.

As we move deeper into a cynical Sensate culture, one can expect a growing awareness of its limitations and a more persistent search for alternatives. In the process Ideational countertrends will increase, and moral issues will move to center stage. This signals a shift toward an Integral culture in which sin and virtue are more salient (Jeffries, 2001; 1999; 1998). With Integralism comes a sociological reengagement with the moral dimensions of humanness. In the process good and evil, virtue and sin become meaningful forms of social action. Sorokin's Integralism engages sociologists with a culture, and manifestation of humanness that is grounded in the symbiotic synthesis of mind, body and soul. In the process the concepts of virtue and sin can move to center stage in sociological discourse. It allows one to see with new eyes, methods, and concepts Durkheim's moral order and Sorokin's Integral society as viable and potent constructs for the description and analysis of social organization. In the process sin and virtue become explicit sociological concepts that guide the actions of humanity and become embedded in the conceptual content and theories of sociologists.

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