LIVING WITH AN HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Kenneth Westhues

University of Waterloo

In respectful memory of

Dorothy Dohen

1923-1984

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the

Canadian Association for Sociology and Anthropology

University of Guelph

June 1984

In Hartford last October, I was honoured to give the keynote address at the eighth annual meeting of the Association for Humanist Sociology. The present paper is a postscript to that address, prompted by reactions I received from three valued colleagues. Before I begin the postscript, however, I had best summarize the initial paper.

Its purpose was to trace the intellectual ancestry or lineage of the perspective by which humanism is defined. That perspective, in brief, is the awareness that by joint activity upon ourselves and nature we human beings have pretty much made the world the way it is. History is the name for this process over time of remaking the world, of confronting status quos and overhauling them. Thus humanism is the awareness or consciousness of history, the knowledge that the shape of life here or anywhere is the product of people coming creatively up against one another, generation by generation, since time immemorial.

Humanist sociology, so I argued in Hartford, is that which is informed by such a consciousness of history. Like all sociology, the humanist variety consists of portrayals of social order, regularities, the structure of human life in various contexts. But in this case the regularities are never portrayed as fixed or given, but always as moments of the historical process, outcomes of conflictual, cooperative, innovative human interaction, and points of departure into futures of human design. Humanist sociologists are self-conscious, moreover, of their own place in history, recognizing that the only good analysis is at once a critical analysis, one that points a way toward improvement of the social order at hand. They know that data never speak for

themselves, but only through the mouths and pens of purposeful scholars. They therefore accept the burden of personal responsibility for the analyses they make and findings they report, even in the face of uncertainty as to which directions of change ought to be preferred. All this was said by way of distinguishing the humanist kind of sociology from positivist, determinist, naturalist or simply thoughtless kinds, those which take existing structures for granted, portray present order as just the way life is, and thus reify the status quo, inhibit change, retard the historical process, and allow sociologists to stand carefree outside of historical uncertainties.

This conception of humanist sociology drew little dissent in Hartford, and for good reason. It mirrors more or less conceptions already set down by numerous authors, among them Martin Buber, C. Wright Mills, Herbert Marcuse, Alvin Gouldner, Werner Stark, Luiz Costa-Pinto, George Ritzer, Gregory Baum, John Seeley and Glenn Goodwin. Further, there was but minor quibbling and quite a lot of satisfaction with my reckoning of the humanist lineage. I proposed Hegel in the role of granddaddy, and discerned four main groupings of his descendants: Marx, Engels and their progeny; the Frankfurt school; Scheler, Mannheim and the sociologists of knowledge; and finally the American pragmatists, especially Schiller, Dewey, James and Mead.

The most provocative reaction to the Hartford paper, the reaction to which I respond here, was a concern apparent in three letters that came afterwards. "You ask people to be braver than they are," one colleague wrote. Another expressed similar doubt about the bearableness of the humanist outlook in these words: "The reason for the defensive posture or absence of Marxists at your talk is that a truly dialectic

posture or outlook requires a great deal of psychological strength and tolerance for ambiguity. Not very many of us can achieve that tolerance and keep our mental equilibrium at the same time." This correspondent went on to offer an Old-Testament quote, "For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow." A third colleague used the New Testament to make much the same point. Recalling my having applied to the humanist outlook the line from John's gospel, "That you may know the truth, and the truth shall make you free," he responded with this paraphrase, "That ye may know the truth, and the truth shall make ye nervous." He directed me, moreover, to Crane Brinton's somber assessment of the prospect of putting into practice a democratic society wherein the bulk of citizens are aware of history. "In such a democracy," Brinton wrote, "a very large number of people indeed would have to forgo the delights of certitude, the assurance that comes from knowing in advance that certain absolutes are true, that there is something that never changes, something not part of history but still part of ourselves" (1950: 243).

The problem, the worry that living with an historical consciousness is too much for most humans to bear, deserves our attention especially because many scholars who know the problem well offer religion as the chief or sole solution. Franklin Baumer, for instance, concludes his masterful exposition, Modern European Thought, by asserting that the balance has tipped too far from being to becoming, and "that intellectual creativity of the highest sort depends on a healthy mixture, or tension, between being and becoming, between the permanent (permanent ideals, even if one does not yet know what they are in any final or complete sense)

and the impermanent" (1977: 517). Similarly, Robert Nisbet ends his History of the Idea of Progress by fretting about the "mere anarchy" of our time, and arguing that only "in the context of a true culture in which the core is a deep and wide sense of the *sacred* are we likely to regain the vital conditions of progress and of faith in progress. . ." (1980: 357). Nisbet's colleague among neoconservative American intellectuals, Peter Berger, has also described with rare insight the problems of the "homeless mind," the difficulties of "facing up to modernity." And Berger has analyzed the problem specifically as it applies to humanist sociologists. But his solution is a "dual citizenship" that allows the sociologist to retreat from the unsettling, debunking, relativizing, disintegrative domain of historically aware sociology into the security of transcendent religion (see 1981: 168).

The by now common recourse to a religious palliative for the anxiety and uncertainty humanism brings is explicit and poignant in a letter of Dorothy Dohen, a Fordham sociologist who died last January. She was writing to her colleague and friend, Joe Fitzpatrick, who has long espoused as she did an activist, socially transformative vision of Christianity. "I wonder if the Leftist oriented pastors and theologians," she wrote, "realize what they are doing if they take away the hope of the poor in a world to come. When I heard the Black Gospel singers recently, they sang of heaven and Jesus. I hope you know me well enough that you realize I am not saying we should not hunger and thirst and work for justice and a just social order here. But taking away what they call the "Pie in the sky approach" and substituting the hope of a successful social movement, is not the answer either. As O'Dea [that's Tom O'Dea, the late sociologist of religion] realized so well, the good are going to continue

to die young; and the poor especially are going to continue to suffer from material (and nonmaterial) scarcity. And what have we done if we no longer affirm the Cross and Resurrection?" (quoted in Fitzpatrick 1984)

As between Dohen, Baumer, Nisbet and Berger on the one hand, and on the other hand those sociologists who sneer at religion on principle, the former are admittedly to be preferred. They at least have faced up to modernity. Those by contrast who continue to believe in timeless social laws, and even imagine themselves to be uncovering such laws, have not yet felt the full brunt of the Englightenment. Their laws, their lifeless social facts, blind them to history, are almost as much a pie in the sky as heaven was in medieval times. Similarly, those who know in advance that socialism is true, those for whom the Marxist utopia is the unquestioned permanent ideal—they, too, still languish in the determinism of prehistory. An historical mind trying to find room for belief in Christianity must be admired far more than a mind fixed on some worldly, empirical dogma. The former at least, as Brinton pointed out, knows how to forgive. To put the point differently: we might better trust a homeless mind looking for a rich religious home than a mind already at home in some barren materialist faith. Besides, as I have argued elsewhere (1982: 312-318), religion is not in itself false consciousness. There are limits on history. Death comes to each of us. None of us lives up to his or her responsibility. As a means of celebrating, surrendering to the being beyond us, worship is proper to man.

Still, religious solutions to the predicament of historical awareness are at best partial and at worst treacherous. There is legitimate relief in accepting the fact of death and all the real constraints upon

our species' power. But the limits of human capability remain frightfully broad, the realm of freedom alarmingly immense. Religion cannot truly heal the humanist anxiety except by artificially narrowing those limits and shrinking that autonomous realm. But religion ought not do that, lest it become false consciousness. The Cross and Resurrection ought not be allowed to substitute for movements of change, even if those movements allow participants to die wondering why God has forsaken them. Religion must not be used to lighten the burden of human responsibility. Death must not be asked to give meaning to life. In any case, a religion contrived to solve the problem of historical uncertainty is unlikely to work. Religions work for this purpose only in so far as they are not known to have been contrived. You can't make something truly sacred except by forgetting that you made it so. Our problem is we know too much. Our choice is either to learn to live with what we know and teach our children thus, or to let future generations slip back into ignorance.

The remedy proposed here for humanist Angst is no deus ex machina. Neither is it some attribute of personality like bravery, psychological strength, tolerance for ambiguity, stoicism or resistance to nervousness. There is no reason in principle why an historical consciousness, with all the uncertainty and responsibility it entails, cannot become as widespread in a society of our time as naive Christian faith once was in Europe. What is required is simply a social condition that allows people to make history themselves. This is the thesis of this paper, that personal participation in transformative action is the key condition for cultivation of the humanist outlook, and for avoidance of the personal malaise to which this outlook otherwise leads.

But how does one make history? Clearly, <u>one</u> doesn't. History is a joint activity. The transformation of earth is a long-term project, thousands of time longer than any individual's life. It stretches around the globe and now into space, unspeakably farther than any individual's reach. Thus to call individual creativity the stuff of history is to miss the mark. The stuff of history is reciprocal relationships wherein individuals respond creatively to one another. An artist does not join the collective effort by expressing his or her self on canvas, however honestly, but by using canvas to make a compelling new response to some intended audience. A professor once told me he had given an excellent course, though the students seemed not to have gotten much from it. He was wrong. A course is excellent, it makes history, only when the professor and students involved have a creative meeting of minds. Publishing journal articles is good for merit pay but not in itself for history. That is why our joy is reserved until requests for reprints come in, citations appear, and rejoinders are made. There is no history in writing a good book, but only in touching readers with it. History is not building a better mousetrap, but finding some market for the one you've built. Only by brushing actively, innovatively, freshly up against other people does anyone partake of our species' mission of overhauling this world.

To state the present thesis in different terms: the burden of a humanist mentality can be borne only by people in relationships of countervailing power, that is, by people who are at once making a difference in other people and having a difference made by those other people in them. Powerlessness is the most common obstacle to sustaining an historical consciousness. It is hard to admit that history is the

only game in town when one is not allowed to play, or when one enters the game only as a tool of other players. The housewife utterly beneath her husband's thumb, the employee treated as a machine, the retired person entertained and fed but not allowed to make a difference, the unemployed youth willing to do anything to get a job, the aspirant professional spending years to become qualified to do what textbooks say to do: human pawns can hardly be expected to face up to modernity. They cannot admit the process of history without admitting at the same time their own unimportance. They are more likely to insist that life is in the cards, the stars, the laws of nature, the hands of the devil or of God. By contrast, those humans whose life is productive dialogue, who are engaged to others in the give and take of working to achieve shared goals, who are able to risk and to respond to others' risk-taking, people in relationships of mutual power and dependency—they can more easily comprehend that life is movement and that the human burden is responsibility. Uncertainty, indeterminacy will not be for them an unbearable cross.

The kind of relationship on which I place such stress necessarily brims with change. To the extent that one's life is an experience of sameness, constancy, business as usual, a philosophy of becoming is unbelievable. Or if believed, it boggles the mind. That is why the Enlightenment took so long to dawn—change happened only over centuries and was scarcely perceptible in individual lifetimes. But the experience of change is not enough. Lots of new things can happen <u>to</u> a person, even at the hands of other people, and that person still attribute the changes to natural evolutionary forces or God's will. Change can induce future shock as well as an historical consciousness. The latter requires that

one had a hand in bringing the change about. When the shape of life is in some way transformed—textbooks revised, laws reformed, products redesigned, or whatever—in consequence of work in which one had creative part, the awareness begins to dawn that the humanly authored transformative process is in fact reality. This lesson lies in personal transformation above all. An historical consciousness gains rich nourishment from the sight of oneself becoming a new person in the course of getting along with other people. The humanist outlook is most likely among those who cannot preface their comments with the phrase, "As I have always said. . . ." If the course of a changing biography has left a person isolated and alone, of course, the awareness of mutability will be unbearable. But if one has changed in company with others who have also changed, that is, if relationships are still alive, then personal change is recognized as growth, and its anomic effects are minimized.

Let me note briefly five contexts for the kind of relationships upon which the humanist outlook depends. These apply to sociologists, and thus set the conditions for humanist sociology, but no less to people in other occupations, and thus describe the kind of social structure that sustains modern or humanist culture in general.

The workplace rightfully tops the list, since the jobs in a society's economy define its place in history. What makes today's unemployment rate such an abomination is not so much the lower standard of living to which the unemployed are reduced as the denial to them of a lifeline of history-making relationships. But of anyone who has a job one asks questions like these. Is there opportunity to join in deciding the quality and quantity of goods produced? Can this worker take responsibility for the work being done, take pride in it? Are this

worker, fellow-workers and the boss getting along, pulling one another up or putting one another down? Need the worker worry that change will eliminate his or her job? In sum, is the workplace a setting of pooled energy, mutual respect, productive reciprocity, countervailing power, a setting in which participants are personally engaged? If it is, no matter that the pace of change is dizzying or that nothing seems certain. The final goal of existence need not be visible. Enough that colleagues are groping their way together, arguing, debating, applying themselves jointly to a task they count worthwhile. People don't need to feel they've arrived, so long as they seem to be headed together toward something worthy of their time. A sociologist in a department of this character need not seek comfort in positivist, Marxist, Christian or any other absolutes. A work environment where challenge has displaced threat encourages the openness that is central to the humanist outlook.

Second only to the workplace is domestic life. Few experiences break down rigidity, nourish tolerance, and sustain mental equilibrium as much as engagement to a lover, a mate, in dynamic marital give and take. For here is another human to whom you make a big difference, and who makes a big difference in you. If those big differences can in fact be made and the relationship endure, this is a resource par excellence. Daily thousands of couples wed and unwed struggle to decide, "Is this relationship going anywhere? Is there a future in it?" Their questions are well-put. So long as partners are going somewhere—toward the creation of new historical persons, toward shared career goals, even toward the renovation of a house or cultivation of a garden—their love sustains an historical consciousness. It is when they settle down together in a rut or retreat into private solitudes, when they quit

getting freshly under one another's skin, that debilitating nervousness is felt and dogmas of some kind begin to be embraced. Dogmatism, after all, is but a surrogate for dynamic love.

A third context for the relationships that both humanize and make humanism believable is the larger network of family and kin. Jay Turner and his colleagues at the University of Western Ontario have documented in lots of studies the centrality of what they call social support to psychological well-being. Their research deserves applause, even if the rather static formulation of their variables does not. What is required is not a gallery of supporters but intense, deep, reciprocal involvement in the lives of other people, one's kin not least. The humanist outlook requires a high estimation of oneself, a confidence that one can do something new and good. Some families bequeath that confidence, those whose members, as trendy psychologists insist, have bonded to one another. In other families everyone seems ever out of step with one another, and their mutual touches tend only to give pain. No wonder people in such families, especially children who grow up in them, tend to protect themselves with the armour of certainties. The humanist outlook implies personal exposure and vulnerability, hard attitudes for a bruised psyche to sustain.

The foregoing applies also to such other micro-level contexts as friendship, neighbourhood, and leisure association. These, too, if they consist of creative, productive, renewing encounters of one with others, are infrastructure for an historically aware, humanist mentality. But two macro-level contexts must also be mentioned, first the national society. The making of history in our time is divided geographically into about 150 experiments, each identified by a more or less sovereign

state. The population of each is a distinct web of relationships, bolstered by commonalities of culture, remembrance of a common past, and boundaries of many kinds. Each such web, each national society is an economic and political project. Hence of every human in today's world must be asked how he or she stands in relation to the national society to which he or she perforce belongs. Is the citizen proud of the direction in which it moves? Can the citizen see a connection between his or her own efforts and some promising national history being made? Almost nothing so devastates a humanist as evidence that the national ship of state on whose crew that person by citizenship serves is not going anywhere but down. Such evidence promotes depression and despair, also receptivity to tidy packages of truth. By contrast, a national experiment that yields favourable results strengthens faith in the human experiment at large.

There is finally what Weber called the context of ultimate concern. Although we know not how or why, we humans are able to form reciprocal relationships not only with colleagues, mates, kin and compatriots, but with figments of our imagination. Are they gods? Are they destiny? Are they idealizations of ourselves? For present purposes it matters not. What is required is only time to reflect and to contrive in one's own mind the destiny to which one then feels called. Deprive a person of the chance to formulate personal ideals, keep a person bouncing back and forth from one external expectation to the next, and that person will have no destiny to relate to, no criteria of ultimate failure or success, and no foundation to carry the weight of an historical consciousness. I do not mean here religion properly so called. Luiz Costa-Pinto, a colleague whom I know to be wary of belief in God,

published decades ago a strong and contentious statement of humanist sociology. Immediately following it, on a page of the book otherwise blank, he caused these words to be printed: "Dixi, et salvavi animam meam"—"I have said it, and I have saved my soul." Vital to sustenance of a humanist outlook is time to journey toward a meeting with one's personal destiny, decide what uncertain leap into novelty it calls for, and then make that leap, so that in retrospect one can answer destiny with confidence, "Dixi, et salvavi animam mean."

A common term for the problem that has occupied us here is relativity: once you admit history, the mutability of truth, the priority of becoming over being, where do you find security? What keeps you from coming undone? What keeps everything from going up for grabs? The answer I have proposed is first-hand involvement in dynamic, reciprocal, history-making relationships with other people and oneself. Religion also is an answer. So is systematic education in humanist social thought. But I've offered the single best answer I know, best in the sense of most effective, most empirically workable, with fewest undesirable side effects.

From this point of view it is not hard to understand why historically aware scholars raise this problem so often in our time, why it was raised for instance in response to my Hartford speech. The reason is that the conditions that sustain humanist thought are disappearing from our world. What has occurred and accelerates today is a process of concentration of power in private corporations and state bureaucracies, so that individuals are left with steadily fewer resources with which to form history-making relationships in their everyday lives. Deprived of

capital, prostrate on a tight labour market, bombarded by mass media, citizens lose confidence to make even what difference they could make. Cast in the roles of applicant, hireling, spectator, pensioner, object of decisions that come down from on high, citizens steadily lose their ability for reciprocity and dialogue, instead become manipulative whiners for satisfaction of selfish wants. What we need, so the present thesis implies, is decentralization of power and property ownership, changes in public policy that will enable and force more people to take more complete charge of their lives, to enter into history-making relationships, thus to improve the human condition and to bear without anxiety the burden of an historical consciousness.

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