

The Etiquette of Pluralism

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Abstract Peter Berger’s *The Many Altars of Modernity* is considered through the lens of the sociological analysis of race, class, and gender in an effort to show the borderlines between faith and secularity in the modern world. Berger’s theory is praised for its approach to linking macro- and micro-social processes that confirm the mutual existence of faith and secularity, but always in historical contexts that change over time.

Keywords Peter L. Berger · Alfred Schutz · Bertram Doyle · Karl Marx · Faith · Secularity · Modernity · Phenomenology · Race · Class · Gender

In *The Many Altars of Modernity*, Peter Berger refers to Robert and Helen Lynd’s studies of “Middletown” in the 1920s and 1930s to illustrate how unquestioned certainty is both the lowest and deepest level of the taken-for-grantedness of one’s social reality, where, for example, asking a woman who is married if she is married to a man would have struck such a woman at that time as a puzzling, if not, an irritating question. He then provides a contemporary anecdote about the confusion created today when a woman introduces her “partner” to Peter’s wife, Brigitte, who mistakenly assumes that “partner” means something more akin to business or law partner rather than spouse. The foundation for these types of confusion is an important place to begin to understand the new paradigm, and the two pluralisms, that Peter proposes. In these brief remarks I would like to expand upon that foundation – the multiple realities perspective of Alfred Schutz – by

revisiting the now holy trinity of sociology: race, class, and gender. I may say with Schutzian certainty that, of course, this holy trinity, by my referring to it that way, intends to upend the taken-for-grantedness of the ideological force now contained and reckoned in those terms, a far distance from their demographically-derived and empirical meanings.

The title for this essay comes from a source that may not appear immediately relevant to a discussion of pluralism or of the relationships between secularization, religion, and modernity. But these latter macro-phenomena and processes reflect micro-processes of consciousness and behavior, and a sociological approach will assist in making the connection. The title comes from a book published in 1937 entitled *The Etiquette of Race Relations in the South: A Study in Social Control*, by Bertram Wilbur Doyle, an African-American sociologist and a student and colleague of Robert Park at the University of Chicago and who taught at Fisk University. He was also presiding bishop, Seventh Episcopal District, C.M.E. Church, Nashville, Tennessee.

Doyle attributes the importance of the study of etiquette in the history of sociology to Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner, both lesser, but no less significant, figures in that history than Marx, Weber, or Durkheim. Spencer, Doyle tells us, remarked on “the importance of etiquette and social ritual as a form of government or social control, and, indeed, as a subject for sociological investigation” (p. xvii). And Doyle observes, “The failure of reconstruction legislation to effect any fundamental change in the South’s caste system is less an illustration of the recalcitrance of the Anglo-Saxon than of Sumner’s dictum that it is not possible to reform the mores by law” (p. xvi).¹ “Etiquette,” Doyle argues, “is

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¹ See Jonathan B. Imber, “Certain Folkways and Uncertain Mores.” In Philip D. Manning, ed., *On Folkways and Mores: William Graham Sumner Then and Now* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2015), pp. 51–58.

concerned primarily with personal relations. It grows up in the first instance, perhaps, as the spontaneous expression of one person in the presence of another, of a sentiment of deference” (p. xvii). Etiquette accomplishes a great deal in social relations: it conceals more than reveals emotions; it defines and maintains social distances; and Doyle concludes, “Thus etiquette turns out to be, at the same time, a principle of social order and an index of the stability of the society in which it exists” (pp. xviii–xix).

The etiquette of race relations reveals a fascinating convergence of a racial code at the same time competing with evidence of its historical demise, as much an example of multiple realities as a prioritizing of those realities. The Schutzian claims about these realities are at once consciousness claims and historical claims. Doyle illustrates this well with an account he gives about Booker T. Washington:

One of the methods adopted by Washington to spread his gospel of education was to organize from time to time statewide educational campaigns. On such occasions he and his party traveled sometimes for a week in a special car visiting and speaking in every city and center of Negro population. On these occasions he was frequently visited by delegations of white folk from remote villages along the way who, attracted by the legendary reputation he had achieved, wanted to see this extraordinary man. Southern white people have always been interested in Negro prodigies.

On one of these occasions a delegation, headed by a lanky and rustic but enterprising member of the village intelligentsia, waited upon Mr. Washington at the station and introduced himself and his fellow-villagers in good-natured, backwoods fashion:

“Y’u know, Booker, I been hear’n about you, I been hear’n for a long time now, and I sure did want to see you. I been a tellin’ my friends about y’u. I been tellin’ them you was one of the biggest men in this country today. Yes, sir, one of the biggest men in the whole country.”

At this time Theodore Roosevelt was at the height of his reputation, and Mr. Washington, somewhat at a loss for a reply, but thinking it well to discount the exuberance of his visitor replied, “Well, what do you think about President Roosevelt?”

“Oh! Hell, Roosevelt! Well, I used to be all for him until he let you eat dinner with him. That finished him far as I’m concerned.”

This retort was not perhaps as naive as it may at first appear, but it illustrates, at any rate, the curious and incongruous association of ideas and attitudes that arise out of the necessity of maintaining the customary caste distinctions in a world which is gradually outgrowing them. (p.xxiii)

The account from which I have just quoted at length moves us beyond George Herbert Mead’s formulation of the “generalized other”. Mead’s concept, as Silke Steets ably recounts in her important essay on “Multiple Realities and Religion: A Sociological Approach”,² approaches a way of envisioning primary socialization from what we might call now an evolutionary psychology perspective, another way of making claims about particular enduring, if not universal forms of human nature. Mead’s theory elides historical circumstances as the constant joining of consciousness with the larger social reality in which all consciousness resides. As I will try to address with other examples, what Doyle recognized was the developing recognition of the “color line” as a particular way of understanding the nature of the established social order of the United States in particular. The intervention of history suggests to me a similar challenge to the phenomenological notion of paramount reality. The historical circumstances in which we all find ourselves in everyday life do not undermine that reality so much as they reveal a fascinating tension between Schutz’s idea of the natural attitude and, in Doyle’s account, the surrounding mixture of custom, deference, and caste, or, in other words, Sumner’s mores. For Doyle, the slow dissolution of the racial caste mores was achieved by a simultaneous acknowledgment of the etiquette and a doubt about its continued efficacy in maintaining the customs it was designed to reinforce. The magic, as it were, of this simultaneous process, appears in what W.E.B. Du Bois called the “double consciousness,” a way of linking his historical critique of America’s “dusty desert of dollars and smartness” with, for example, Max Weber’s “iron cage”, which Weber invoked at the close of *The Protestant Ethic*, departing as some critics have observed from his otherwise paramount methodology of disinterest. Du Bois’s “double consciousness,” which he refers to in *The Souls of Black Folk*, is the generalized other saturated and marinated in history, and we may temporize about its significance, or dismiss or glorify it, but these are all judgments that emanate from the power of the mores to determine beyond law, and often beyond reason, the attitudes and judgments of men and women.

Modernization and its antecedents are social forces that link consciousness with both clarities and confusions. Because modernization is so closely tied to both secularization and scientific and technological advance, the social phenomenon of religion, that is, what people call religion and religiosity, looks something akin to “caste” when viewed by those who equate religion with false consciousness. Let me illustrate the psychological problem: we owe much to Karl Marx – in particular, to *On the Jewish Question* – for the denial of a pluralistic view of religion and modernity. In place of what I consider a natural ambiguity that arises whenever religious practice encounters the paramount reality of everyday life,

² *Society*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (March/April) 2014:140–144.

Marx and Engels famously concluded that “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” And, thinking of Doyle, it is no coincidence that the first adversarial pairing referred to in those struggles is freeman and slave. I have been taught to read this first great line of the first chapter of the *Communist Manifesto* as either the most profound historical generalization ever written or the most paranoid. In strictly secular terms, Marxist theory represents a complete rejection of pluralism both in history and in consciousness. But in the case of consciousness, the etiquette of class relations prevents most of us from even harboring the wish for a wholesale elimination of the one percent (the Marxist historical legacy of the bourgeoisie), despite the wailings of sociologists who long ago transubstantiated “stratification” into “inequality” turning a commitment to maintain disinterest into a commitment to expose injustice.

Doyle’s etiquette of race relations did not claim that a certain etiquette was fixed for all time between the races, that, in fact, precisely because freeman and slaves interacted personally, in many cases over a long period of time, the emergence of an awareness of their common humanity was unavoidable. The emancipation of the slaves, as Doyle recounts, was most common among slaveholders who knew their slaves personally. These personal relations were not enough to forestall a civil war anymore than religious belief today can be so defined or contained to prevent the advocacy of violence in its name. A question that pertains to the changing etiquette of race relations is whether such an etiquette exhibits newer expressions of social control, say, in the claims made about racial profiling.

Yet in the case of the etiquette of class relations, a shared humanity is promised in the franchise, in democratic participation. The further left one goes, the greater the criticism of the effectiveness and reality of such participation. The further right one goes, the more the defense of meritocracy has come to stand in for a justification of the perceived inevitability of social stratification.³ These differences seem inscribed in what we call politics, but most people live well below the threshold of holding their political opinions in ways that are premonitions of civil war. Unlike contemporary uses of race and gender to promote social conflict, class conflict, say in the form of the mostly deceased “Occupy Wall Street” movement was part carnival and part anarchist-driven display of a theatre of remissive protest that sought the only currency available to it short of premeditated violence: that is, the media’s willingness to pay attention to it by reporting its otherwise peaceful activities nationally. Apart from that attention, social stratification is part of the pluralism of class relations, not only between different social classes but within them as well. American pluralism in its religious traditions and denominations, as Peter Berger points out, displays an especially vigorous

character of toleration. I would argue that a powerful etiquette of class relations endures precisely because of an already underlying foundation of religious toleration. Berger’s argument goes further, though, requiring that we acknowledge certain processes of modernization that render faith commitments as voluntary commitments, changing the nature of the authority of religious institutions. At the same time, those in authority in many domains other than strictly religious ones, including the academic domain, are faced with consumers whose voluntary participation or as economists say, their willingness to pay, play a vital role in the destiny of all institutions in the modern world.

Before I address more directly the concept of pluralism and the etiquette that shapes it, I want to explore the last in the holy trinity of sociology, gender and its vicissitudes. The biological categories of sex have social expressions that have long been the staple of gender studies. Like race and class, gender is analyzed from already well-established ideological frames that define identity in very specific ways. The emergence of transgender identity works first to challenge the way language about such identity is used, but so far as I know, being a woman and wanting to identify as a man, or being a man and wanting to identify as a woman, has not led to those born as male or as female to wish to be other than one or the other, a third sex, as it were. There is no real third sex (other than androgyny, the combination of masculine and feminine characteristics). That is to say, nature has with miniscule exception determined us to be chromosomally designed under two categories that transgenderism works back and forth between. It is true that the color line historically created situations in which “passing as white” followed a similar dynamic at work in transgenderism. The taken-for-grantedness of race as a social, if not genetic, category remains. What is referred to as “identity politics” has one of its sources in how identity in any of its primary forms interacts with a now global stock of knowledge about the multiple but clearly not infinite forms of identity expressed. In another sense, the etiquette of gender relations does not open upon unlimited forms of expressions of identity. In fact, boundaries have been lately powerfully reinforced by affirmations of one social institution in particular, the institution of marriage, that in its conservative and conserving nature now incorporates same-sex couples equal in the marriage status to heterosexual couples.

I am of the conviction that “identity politics,” which encompasses both race and gender politics especially, is an artifact of modernity – it has become deeply entrenched in the secular worldview of higher education elites because it promises to expose both the constraints and broader possibilities of modernity itself. This takes me to an account and assessment of Peter Berger’s two pluralisms. I quote from *The Many Altars of Modernity*:

³ See Jonathan B. Imber, “The Far Side of Meritocracy.” In *The American Interest*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (November/December) 2012: 91–95.

If one is to understand the place of religion in the pluralist phenomenon, one must note that there are two pluralisms in evidence here. The first is the pluralism of different religious options co-existing in the same society ... The second is the pluralism of the secular discourse and various religious discourses, also co-existing in the same society. For the faith of individuals the implication of this is simple and exceedingly important. For most religious believers faith and secularity are not mutually exclusive modes of attending to reality; it is not a matter of either/or, but rather both/and. The ability to handle different discourses (to use Alfred Schutz's term, different relevance structures) is an essential trait of a modern person. (p. 53)

My laboratory, if I may call it that, is the institutional system of higher education, in my specific case a decidedly post-Protestant place, which is to say, a school whose "chaplain" is instead called the "Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life." This latter title does not sound secular at all, and its mandate evolved from its original form of Protestant chaplain to a pluralist and less religiously specific designation of dean, a term once infused with religious meaning, from medieval monasteries to its uses in universities entirely run by clerics. "Dean" is now a secular-bureaucratic category. The Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life is charged with overseeing what Berger defines as the first of the two pluralisms, that is, different religious options existing in this case at the same college. In fact, the etiquette of pluralism in this case is reinforced precisely by a secular mandate that there cannot be in this kind of liberal arts college only one faith represented, and further that it is essential that no student of any faith tradition be precluded from being represented in the multi-faith model itself. Some years, even Wicca has a voice. Paganism is part

of the multicultural dispensation, dovetailing, I would argue, with identity politics.

The etiquette of pluralism exemplifies a form of social control that seeks to honor multiple revelations while privileging none. The second pluralism is sociologically more complicated because the historical reality that flows through the evolution from "chaplain" to "dean" cannot be immediately explained by a process of secularization. On the contrary, my institution acknowledges clearly the importance of the faith traditions to the life of the college. There is no mandatory chapel or Bible requirement (as once was the case until the late 1960s), but the faculty have argued for decades about a multicultural requirement, which insists that students know something about a culture other than their own. This by now rather quaint argument does implicate a certain kind of faith that the more liberal churches and synagogues have embraced. I wonder if it confirms the co-existing nature of the pluralism Berger describes as the "both/and" type. Faith and secularity now mutually and powerfully reinforce each other. Yet, the so-called culture wars have created the impression that when it comes to religion, *only* fundamentalists represent religion, and when it comes to the secular, *only* atheists represent secularity. What Peter Berger has faithfully enabled us to see is that the new paradigm calls for a sustained empirical effort to understand how modernity, despite the radical poles within it, is pushing all of us in the direction of making peace with the enduring presence of both religion and secularity in human life.

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