



David Martin and the Sociology of Hope

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Abstract

David Martin's work has always bridged many worlds: the sacred and the secular, the world of power politics and of religious visions, of individual and society, and of poetry and rational analysis. His trenchant and uncompromising analyses of human social formations and their ideational concomitants have nevertheless provided many with a vision of that hope which must sustain scholarly analysis if it is not to become tedious and moribund. His sensitivity to tradition, to ritual, to received knowledge and the debt we owe to the past – even while appreciating the frisson of the radically new (as in his studies of Pentecostalism) – have made him one of only a small handful of scholars who could address the broad range of human religious expression and its implications for life in the world. This paper explores some of these themes in terms of what we understand as the overwhelming sense of hope that is a permanent feature of David's scholarly contributions.

Keywords Ritual · Transcendence · Power · Individual · Religious sociology · Sociology of hope

In Jerusalem, in the 1940s and 50s, within the circle of German Jewish intellectuals among whom Martin Buber's name was prominent, it was said that Buber was less interested in a sociology of religion and more in a religious sociology. This at least was the opinion of Akiva Ernst Simon, who, with Buber, was one of the founders of *Brit Shalom*, the small movement which, before Israeli statehood, advocated for a bi-national state in Mandatory Palestine.¹

Though born more than a generation after Buber, no one exemplifies this idea of a religious sociology more than David Martin. He focused not on sociology as a redemptive vision (as so many do today), but rather on social science as a site of possibility as it must strive to encompass not only “the rule”

but the many exceptions to the rule (or standard, or norm, or statistical mean) that so often seem to govern the workings of social life.² In his person as in his writings David tried and (more often than not) succeeded in bringing together both the rule and what lies beyond the rule. It was perhaps this quality more than simply his intellectual brilliance and rigor that left a lasting impression on all who knew him.

The *Brit Shalom* (literally *Covenant of Peace*) aspect of Buber's life and work also resonates, not surprisingly, in David's own. David began life as a pacifist and spent his working life engaged with the conflict between power and religion (or as he frames it in the subtitle to one of his books, *logos* and *mythos*). David was as sensitive as anyone to the workings and importance of power in social life, to the compromises involved in accepting any modicum of responsibility for and in the lives of men and women. He was finely attuned to the workings of corruption and of bureaucracy, as well as to the simple brute force of collective belonging and the raging power of mass illusions. He knew idolatry for what it was, whether in the warrior band or the modern state.

But David also knew something else. He knew and was keenly sensitive, as a sociologist (and not just as a cleric, for he was that as well), to a very different striving, to the role of

¹ Paul Mendes-Flohr, “Prophetic Politics and Meta-Sociology: Martin Buber and German Social Thought,” *Archives de Sciences Sociales Des Religions* 30, no. 60.1 (1985): 78.

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² For an example of a redemptive vision of sociology, see Michael Burawoy, <http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/PS/ASA%20Presidential%20Address.pdf>. For David's clearest explication of this tension see David Martin, *Reflections on Sociology and Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

what Max Weber termed “ideal interests” - including the interest in salvation - in directing the affairs of the world, including the political and economic world. He knew the Church for what it was (a social hierarchy as prone to corruption and bureaucratic failure as any other human institution), but also for what it could be – the promise of a different future. David’s sociology was thus a sociology of hope, precisely because it was a sociology of possibility. The possibility was religion’s continual potential for transcendence to mediate power. In his words, “the Christian code or system of signs in cross and meal [as] propagated by catechism and canonical scripture, and dramatized in liturgy” can mediate and at times even overcome the demands of blood loyalty, family bonds, traditional allegiances and political machinations; it can even overcome the Church itself as a human institution.³

That is, he recognized that hope was just as perennial as power. It always exists and always in the face of power. In David’s words: “The image of the heavenly city can guide the hope of mankind as men seek to leave the city of destruction. It makes men aliens in their earthly habitations and calls them to set off for an unknown stored in the future.”⁴ And just as power has its own institutional dynamics, so does hope. This too David explored, most significantly in recognizing the over-riding violence embedded in any confrontation of grace with nature, the Church and the World, of faith with what David termed natural (that is to say, not transcendent) religion and of Christian unity with the partitions and divisions of the natural world.⁵

The church’s compromise with the world – the very existence of Church and world – led David to see the the key to Christianity’s institutional dynamics in a defining paradox: the very “hope of equality” rested on the “discipline of hierarchy” as the “warfare of the natural man is taken over by the Church Militant.”⁶ Or, in other terms, Christianity’s dream of unity gave rise to its greatest divisions: “between Church and world, spirit and flesh, body of Christ – body of this death.”⁷ For David these divisions were the very concomitants of hope. Without them there would be only “inertia, particularity and hierarchy.”⁸

The whole edifice of David’s well known later corpus of work on secularization and on Pentecostalism in fact traces the institutional dynamics of hope, of church and world, and ultimately of how the push to abolish partitions was always, at the end of the day, “through blood and suffering.”⁹ All perhaps can be understood as the unintended consequences of

institutionalizing a vision of hope predicated on a vision of Christian unity. In the following we shall explore both of these themes: the dynamic of hope and power and what we might call the tragedy of the secular as one consequence of this institutional dynamic.

While David did not really deal with non-Axial or pre-Axial civilizations and indeed had restricted most of his writings to a particular Christian dynamic, we know that like Karl Jaspers, Benjamin Schwartz, Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt and others, he saw the Axial break and the emergence of transcendence as a critical moment in the dynamics of civilizations – and hence in the way power could be wielded and restrained.¹⁰ It is the Axial moment which allows the prophet Nathan to confront King David in the matter of Bathsheva with his famous parable of the rich man with many flocks of sheep, who nevertheless takes the poor man’s ewe to serve as a meal to a guest. When King David grew angry at the rich man and Nathan proclaimed “You are that man” he was resting his claim on a morality higher than the simple law of Kings. Transcendence allows a wholly new and alternative frame for collective identities, for the legitimation of rulers, for the emergence and embedment of new elites – and of course for new forms of conflict as well.¹¹ Whether the Axial break is indeed the break that the thinkers above claimed it to be or if something similar also existed in other social forms is not a dispute we need enter into here. Nor can we know David’s own view of this debate. But what is clear in his thought is the role of transcendence in giving hope a new ontological status. Hope, that is, not solely as a wish for positive outcomes (in fighting a war, playing a sport, overcoming illness, hunting, or other activities). Instead, hope becomes an alternative to the world as it is. Hope is a path of being. Hope, that is, becomes a perennial “social comment” (as David claimed Christianity to be).¹² David saw the Church as a continual challenge to existing, traditional social alignments. That the Church did not always rise to this challenge is a given. That it sometimes did, was for David a subject both for sociological analysis and earthly hope.

In theorizing the possibility of the Church to represent not only power and the political, but also to provide its perennial critique, David moved well beyond sociological orthodoxies. Of all possible juxtapositions perhaps one of the most fruitful would be to contrast David’s understanding of the social role of transcendence to that developed by Eisenstadt and Gissen in their influential typologies of three ideal types of collective identity: primordial, civil and sacred.¹³ For Eisenstadt and

³ Ibid. pg. 157.

⁴ David Martin, *The Breaking of the Image* (N.Y.: St. Martin’s Press, 1979) pg. 45.

⁵ Ibid. pg. 24, 25.

⁶ Ibid. pg. 26, 27.

⁷ Ibid., pg. 176.

⁸ Ibid. pg. 175.

⁹ Ibid. pg. 27.

¹⁰ Benjamin Schwartz, *Wisdom, Revelation and Doubt: Perspectives on the First Millennium* (*Daedalus*, vol. 104, #2 Spring 1975); Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953); S.N. Eisenstadt, “The Axial Age: The Emergence of Transcendental Visions and the Rise of Clerics” *European Journal of Sociology* (no. 23, 1982), pp. 294–314.

¹¹ S. N. Eisenstadt, *ibid.*

¹² Martin, 1997, *op cit.*, pg. 162.

¹³ S.N. Eisenstadt and Berhard Gissen “The Construction of Collective Identity” *European Journal of Sociology* (vol. 3, no. 1, 1995).

Gissen these three ideal types define not only different models of collective identity, but different orientations to equality and hierarchy, to the stranger or other, and to access to resources, including symbolic resources of meaning and legitimation. For them, the “sacred” mode of identity occurs with the Axial Age civilizations, even in their secularized form where they posit a “cultural” construction to the sacred. Indeed Eisenstadt and Gissen define the sacred very broadly in such collectivities as potentially encompassing “God, Reason, Progress or Rationality.”¹⁴ Note, however, the irony here. Axial civilizations, defined by the discovery (or invention, we are agnostic on this) of transcendence, come to include secular societies, perhaps preeminently, that is, ones whose sacred is defined in immanent terms. And this is exactly the point where David would take issue with them. For him transcendent meant transcendent, for which neither Whiggish ideas of progress nor Kantian transcendental reason could be equivalents or stand-ins.

It is precisely the transcendent aspect of the sacred, not the sacred per se, that allows for critique, for a challenge to traditional forms, existing allegiances and power politics. Nathan’s authority rests precisely on a transcendent God, not on Kantian reason. Indeed, David’s unique contribution to social thought is to point out, *sociologically*, how this critique continued to re-structure the “tracks of interest” (to use Weber’s famous locution) throughout Western and Eastern Christian civilization.¹⁵

David’s work focuses to no small extent on the degree to which different societal forms adhere to all three type of identity, in spite of the varied forms of power accruing in each (big men and emperors, kings and Marxist revolutionaries, Popes and sectarian elites, bureaucrats and populist leaders, as the case may be). He also trains our attention on the role of the transcendent (in its always flawed, this-worldly embodiments) in challenging such power, calling it to account and even, at times, albeit always only temporarily, reforming it. This was the genius of Protestantism, both in sixteenth century Europe and in twentieth century Africa and Latin America. Protestant reform cut across and challenged primordial, civil and sacred forms of social organization equally. This was just what Christianity did two thousand years ago, and (as one might hear David affirm) what it will continue to do.

Nevertheless, David was no sentimentalist and, while not above giving a roof-raising sermon, his scientific analysis was always guided by the tools of a cold and pure reason (with a small ‘r’). And while his work on the secularization thesis, including his critique of it, is too well known for us to rehearse here, we will explore a related but less remarked upon theme

in David’s writing: how secularization may tie to the loss of ritual and of ritual embodiments of the sacred.¹⁶ We think it is not solely a matter of personal biography that David migrated from a revivalist Methodist family to be deacon and then priest in the Anglican communion (and in fact Honorary Assistant Priest at the Guildford Cathedral).

For David, human freedom depended very much on what he termed “hierarchies of predictable habit.” In other words, freedom can only be achieved from within the constraints of society. This insight is akin to Shmuel Eisenstadt’s idea that human creativity was always only within society, never outside it.¹⁷ David goes further, however, by tying freedom not only to society, but to ritual seen as iterated, taken-for-granted, not necessarily indicative words or actions that, in Roy Rappaport’s famous locution, are “not entirely encoded by the performer.”¹⁸

David was finely attuned to the importance of ritual’s rhythms in providing the underlying structure upon which, and only upon which, human creativity and fulfillment could be attained. He understood how ritual binds time, delineates space and how the repetition of such liturgical moments as the Lord’s Prayer provide a “summons to complete attention.”¹⁹ Usefully comparing the priest working through the Eucharist to a musician working through his score, he notes how “without that boring, stereotypical practice no illumination is possible. Boredom is the infrastructure of illumination.”²⁰ Sacred usage for David is the key to our attention to, and hence only possible apprehension of, such core human experiences as “suffering and hope, forgiveness and judgement, birth and rebirth, death and resurrection.”²¹ Such usage, accessed through ritual, provides for us, in David’s view, the only way to “connect memory with expectation” and so to link our “personal experience to a universal context.” That is, the constraints of ritual make the transcendent possible, and ritual’s constant repetition is a fount for hope.

Not surprisingly then, for David, personhood depended on the acceptance of roles (and ritual roles were critical), on “playing a part.” As he said: “To have an identity, to identify with, to be identified, all imply the existence of a role.”²² Even more strongly, he identifies ecstasy itself with order, the one dependent on the other, as when he enjoins us to recognize that “to obey the rule of one’s order is to discover the possibility of a

¹⁶ David Martin, *A General Theory of Secularization* (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1978); David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (London: Routledge, 2005).

¹⁷ S.N. Eisenstadt, *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

¹⁸ Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pg. 24.

¹⁹ Martin, op. cit, 1979, pg. 86.

²⁰ Ibid. pg. 88.

²¹ Ibid. pg. 89.

²² David Martin, *Tracts Against the Times* (London: Luterworth Press, 1973) pp. 161, 162.

¹⁴ Ibid. pg. 82.

¹⁵ Max Weber, “The Social Psychology of World Religions” in G.H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (eds.) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (N.Y.: The Free Press, 1958).

new order,” and so, consequently, only in this limited and confined condition can we be “present at a miraculous birth... before which even the angels cover their faces.”²³

Hope is a promise predicated on the limitations posed by society rather than on their undoing. Both culture and selves are made from countless repetitions. Only in the restrictive contexts of society can genuine hope emerge, and only through the discipline of the achieved form can any creative act emerge. This led David to be ever so critical of the cult of spontaneity and authenticity, of the desire to “find oneself” and to “do one’s own thing” that he encountered when Head of Department at the London School of Economics in the 1970s.²⁴ David liked to tell a story about his tutorial with a student at that time, who wanted to study Zen practitioners in Britain. For his first essay, David assigned the student to write about how he would define Zen. At the next session, the student turned in a blank sheet of paper and explained that any definition of Zen was impossible. There was another blank sheet for the following class, when David had asked him more concretely how practitioners in England would define Zen. At the next class, David gave a blank sheet of paper to the student. “What’s this?” the student asked in confusion. And an exasperated David answered, “It’s your diploma.”

From this distance and age, perhaps it is easy to sympathize with David’s position. Still, there is a much deeper issue at play. After all, the call to reject external forms for an inner grace, or to achieve a true, sincere self rather than adhere to social roles and abide by their rules, did not originate with the protest movements of the 1960s and 70s. Such calls are inherent to Protestant thought per se and even perhaps, as David himself intuitively, to one of the deepest dynamics of Christianity as a civilizational project. The search for “plain preaching,” for sincerity in act and intention, for an embodiment of the “good will,” and for being true to one’s self are all the heritage, in one way or another, of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century.²⁵ And of course, right from that point of origin, they went together with a rejection of ritual, of rote, and of hierarchy. The Reformation was a breaking of sacraments and much else – with no end of violence thus entailed.

The ever-so-sincere quest for the true self, articulated in the seventeenth century for knowing if one was saved, became the quest for a totally self-referential self by the time David was teaching at the LSE. It was a quest for “social beings [who] live in their own universe, created and recreated solely by themselves.”²⁶ Such actors, as David pointed out so acerbically “approximate to the traditional definition of God as *actus purus*, the great I AM.”²⁷

With this move, the transcendent becomes immanent and so is lost. For David, however, the loss of the transcendent quite clearly also meant loss of the self, the individual, the agentic person – who at the end of the day could be the only vector of hope. “Unfortunately, a person who is self-made is no person at all. He is not even a zombie: he is just vacuum. A self-made man is really a hole in the heart. Pure self-expression finds itself with no self to express.”²⁸ With no individual we are left only with what Hannah Arendt termed “the social” and what her student, the philosopher Hannah Pitkin, called “the blob.”²⁹ In such a world, people are, in David’s terms, just a set of “sleep-walkers” amongst whom no relationships are possible and so no freedom either.³⁰ A properly social individual, an individual capable of hope, was thus never an autonomous isolate.

This was hardly an issue that affected only the seventeenth century or youth culture in London during the 1970s. It has been a trend that spread powerfully around the world along with other sets of post-Reformation and post-Enlightenment ideas like the nation-state and the scientific method. In China, for example, this began with the dismantling of the state cult at the beginning of the twentieth century, and continued with campaigns to turn temples into schools and government offices. After the Communist victory in 1949, the state retained a space for religion and promised freedom of belief, but never freedom of practice. That is, people’s ritual lives were severely curtailed and finally ended completely in the Cultural Revolution.

We can see this clearly in the history of funeral ritual, which China’s various governments had tried to tone down for the entire century. By the 1950s, China was trying to ban traditional mourning dress, the use of incense and paper spirit money, *fengshui*, and kowtowing at funerals – all things that framed the deceased either as a specific social being in relation to a family, or as a spirit in relation to a larger world of cosmic forces.³¹ This reached its extreme in the early years of the Cultural Revolution, when all ritual ended. As one funeral professional reported, mourners just “took a look and had a cry... There was no coffin... You put bodies in bags and then burned them.”³² This was a conscious attempt to downplay family ties and any concept of a life after death. For the bereft mourners, there was nothing left but their loneliness. The destruction of ritual, and of the world of social and spiritual roles which it shaped, left people as individual isolates with “holes in their hearts,” and also as indistinguishable bits of the

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), Hannah Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000).

³⁰ Martin, 1973, op. cit., 161, 171.

³¹ Huwy-min Lucia Liu, “Market Economy Lives, Socialist Death: Contemporary Commemorations in Urban China,” *Modern China*, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0097700419879121>.

³² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., pp. 179, 155.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Seligman, Weller, et al. *Ritual and its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2008).

²⁶ Martin, 1973, op. cit., pg. 161.

²⁷ Martin, 1973, op. cit. pg. 161.

socialist blob. Like all radical anti-ritualisms, this one did not last long, but it (and many similar efforts) were part of what made a cataclysm like the Cultural Revolution possible.

Both in China and elsewhere, without roles, rules, rote, and ritual we are no longer differentiated parts of a whole, but simply a mass. At times subject to power and at other times wielders of it, such people no longer have the means to mediate it. Without the frames, rules and roles of creation there can be no re-creation and the angels no longer need hide their eyes. As individuals we cannot be wholes, if only because, as Georg Simmel pointed out so long ago, wholes are not made up of wholes but of parts.³³ Unity is achieved among parts, not among already constituted wholes. The unique, particular, differentiated person, the individual enmeshed in society and in ritual, is the only unit through which a new creation, even perhaps a new heaven and a new earth are possible.

Recognizing the value of the differentiated part, of the individual as opposed to simply part of a blob, means also accepting the otherness of the other. It requires us to go beyond and outside simple and reductionist unitary visions of society. Indeed, only the positing of boundaries allows us to go beyond them. Only in recognizing the boundaries of a

socially delineated self can we make the later step of going beyond the boundaries of self. And hope lies in what is beyond.

David taught us the value of this perspective. He gave us a language, that we are calling a religious sociology, in which to appreciate it, to analyze it, to intuit both its distances and proximities. We may all remain in our own particular languages of hope, even as David gave us a shared language in which to discuss its nature.

This was no mean achievement.

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³³ Georg Simmel, "Individual and Society in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Views of Life," pp. 58–84 in Kurt H. Wolff (ed.) *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (N.Y.: The Free Press, 1950), pg. 59.