The Socius and the Neighbor

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If we define Sociology as the science of human relationships within organized groups, then it would seem that there is no sociology of the neighbor. This study flows from the astonishment engendered by such a statement. It is important for reflection to seize upon this surprise and deepen it into a positive meditation situated between a sociology of human relationships and a theology of charity. If there is no sociology of the neighbor, perhaps a sociology which has recognized its limits, in confrontation with a theology of charity, becomes change in its project, that is to say in its intention and pretension. If there is no sociology of the neighbor, perhaps there is a sociology which starts out from the frontier of the neighbor.

1. The Level of Astonishment

[2] First, let us renew our astonishment by immersing our reflection once more in the freshness of parable and prophecy:

> A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves, who also stripped and wounded him… And it happened that a priest went down the same way … In like manner a Levite also passed by… But a certain Samaritan being on his journey came near him: and seeing him, was moved with compassion.. Which of these three men, in thy opinion, was neighbor to him that fell among the thieves? (Luke 10:30-37)

[3] A unique narrative and a question at the end. Such is the Biblical nutriment of reflection and meditation.

[4] What is at first surprising is that Jesus answers a question with a question, but with a question that has become inverted by means of the corrective virtue of the narrative. The visitor asked: Who is my neighbor? How is my brother related to me? Jesus returns the question in these terms: Which of these men acted like a neighbor?

[5] The visitor was making a sociological inquiry concerning a certain social object, a possible sociological category susceptible of definition, observation and explanation. Jesus answered that the neighbor is not a social object but a behavior in the first person. Being a neighbor lies in the habit of making oneself available. This is why the neighbor is the subject of the story; once upon a time there was a man who became the neighbor of a stranger beaten by thieves. The story relates a series of *events*: a chain of unsuccessful encounters and a successful encounter. And the story of the successful encounter turns into a command; "Go and do likewise." The parable has turned the story into a pattern for action.

[6] Thus there is no sociology of the neighbor. The science of the neighbor thwarted by the praxis of the neighbor. One does not *have* a neighbor: I make myself someone's neighbor.

[7] There still another source for our astonishment: the point of the parable is that the event of the encounter makes one person present to another. It is striking that the two men who do not stop are defined by their social category: the priest and the Levite. They are themselves a living parable : the parable of man as a social function , of man absorbed by his role. They show that the social function *occupies* them to the point of making unavailable for the surprise of an encounter. In them, the institution (the ecclesiastical institution, to be precise) bars their access to the event. In a way the Samaritan is also a category: but here he is a category for the others. For the pious Jew, he is the category of the Stranger; he does not form part of a group. He is the man without past or authentic tradition: impure in race and in piety: less than a Gentile: a relapse. He is the category of the non-category. He is neither occupied: he is traveling and is not encumbered by his social responsibility, ready to change his itinerary and invent an unforeseen behavior, available for encounter and the presence of others. The conducts that he invents is the direct relationship of "man-to-man." His conduct is of the nature of an event, for it takes place without the mediation of an institution. Just as the Samaritan is a person through the capacity for encounter, all his "compassion" is a gesture over and above roles, personages and function. It innovates a hyper-sociological mutuality between one person and another.

[8] Astonishment is born of parable and is reborn of prophecy:

> And the son of man shall come in his glory… And he shall set the sheep on his right and goats on his left. Then the King shall say to them that shall be on his right: *Come, ye blessed of my Father… For I was hungry, and you gave me to eat: I was thirsty, and you gave me to drink…* Then shall the just answer him, saying: *Lord, when did we see thee hungry, and fed thee; thirsty, and gave thee drink?…* And the King,

> answering, shall say to them: *Amen I say to you, as long as you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me*. Then he shall say to them that shall be on his left… (Matthew 25:31-42)

[9] The parable related an encounter in the present, the prophecy relates an event at the end of history which, in retrospect, unfolds the meaning of all the encounters in history. For prophecy bears upon and unveils the meaning of encounters, encounters similar to those of the Samaritan and the stranger overpowered by thieves: to give to eat and to drink, to take in the stranger, to clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit those in prison, these are so many basic and simple gestures that are feebly formulated by the social institution: therein man is shown to be tormented by limiting situations, socially stripped, reduced to the distress of the mere human condition. The object of this primordial behavior is called one of the "least," the man who has no leading role in history. He is merely the supernumerary providing the amount of suffering necessary to the grandeur of the true "historical" events. He is the anonymous bearer of the caravan, without whom the *great* alpinist would fail to achieve fame. He is the private first class without whom the *great* generals would miss their strokes of genius as well as their tragic errors. He is the laborer and repetitive work without which the *great* powers could not construct modern industrial equipment. He is the "displaced person," a pure victim of *great* conflicts and *great* revolutions. The meaning of history, at least such as it is deciphered by the actors themselves, comes through the important events and men. The "least" are all those who are not captured within this meaning of history. But there is another meaning that reassembles all the minute encounters left unaccounted for by the history of the greats: there is another history, a history of acts, events, personal compassions, woven into the history of structures, advents and institutions. But this meaning and this history are *hidden*. That is the point of the prophecy: the "least" were representatives of Christ, and neither the just not the unjust knew it; the last day astonishes them: *Lord, when did we see thee hungry and thirsty?*

[10] Thus the compassion of the Samaritan has a profound, transcendent meaning. The *practical* intention of parable—"Go and do likewise"—is suddenly illuminated by the theological or rather *Christological* intention of the prophecy. The meaning of compassion in the present is inhabited by a transcendent, eschatological meaning.

[11] It may be seen it what sense, indeed, in what twofold sense, a sociology of the neighbor is shut out. First, in the sense that the neighbor is the personal way in which I encounter another, *over and above all social mediation*. Secondly, in the sense that the significance of this encounter does not depend on *any criterion immanent to history* and

cannot be definitely recognized by the actors themselves but will be discovered in the last day, like the manner in which I shall have encountered Christ without knowing it.

2. The Level of Reflection

[12] Having reached this point, where, so it seems, the veracity of biblical theology ought to lead us, we shall turn back and ask ourselves *what this means for us*, here and now, in a world where the differentiation and the organization of social groups constantly increases. It would seem that we do not live in the world of the "neighbor" but in that in the "socius." The *socius* is the person I attain through his social function: the relation to the *socius* is a mediate relation: it attains man in this or that capacity. … Roman law, the evolution of modern political institutions, the administrative experience of the large states, and the social organization of work, not to mention the experience of several world wars, have gradually forged a type of human relationship which is always becoming more extensive, complex and abstract. It is only natural that such be the case: for the essence of man lies in breaking away from nature and entering into the "civil" state, which was propounded in the eighteenth century. From this standpoint there is no question of an essential difference between a so-called natural existence and an artificial social existence, but only questions of a difference in degree. We have merely become more sensitive to the progress of social "mediations" because it has accelerated. Further, the sudden appearance of the masses in history has provoked a demand for goods, comfort, security, and culture which, given the present state of affairs, requires rigid planning and a social technology. Naturally, this may often remind us of the anonymous and inhuman organization of an army out in the field.

[13] Contemporary man also asks: who is my neighbor? Is it not necessary for us to come back from astonishment to critical doubt and to conclude that the immediate encounter of a man, an encounter which would make me the neighbor of this concrete man, is a myth in comparison to life in society? Is it not the dream of a mode of human relationship *other* than the real mode?

[14] Such a myth concerning social relationships is what gives rise to the two contrary attitudes which we are now going to examine and which it will be necessary to set side by side.

[15] On the other hand, the theme of the neighbor may nourish a radically anti-modern attitude: the Gospel would totally condemn the modern world: it would denounce it as a world without the neighbor, the dehumanized world of abstract,

anonymous and distant relationships. According to a certain form of Christian eschatologism, the world of the "*socius*" manifests itself only in the monstrous associations found in factories, military camps, prisons and concentration camps. From this point of view the dream of the neighbor must seek its representation on the fringes of history, fall back on small, non-technical, and "prophetic" communities and await the self-destruction of this world whose own suicide will incur the wrath of God.

[16] One must choose between the neighbor and the *socius*. This choice also pertains, although in an inverse sense, to those men who have chosen the role of the *socius* and who merely see in the parable of the good Samaritan and in the prophecy of the Last Judgment, manifestations of a backward mentality. They regard the category of the neighbor as outdated. The insignificant dramas of the parable would sufficiently show this: it takes its point of departure from a society in disorder, a society full of plundering. The rabbi who relates the fable does not rise to the standard of a socio-economic analysis of the causes of the disorder: he sticks to the particular and the fortuitous: the colorful story has a thought-content which remains at the prescientific stage. Consequently, the moral of the story leads the compassionate action of just men astray and into a disperse order which perpetuates human exploitation. The perpetuation of beggars is not only the effect, but perhaps also the first presupposition of the Gospel morality of individual compassion. For if there were no beggars what would become of charity? But we men of today are marching toward the day when mankind in emerging from its prehistory, will no longer know hunger, thirst, captivity, and perhaps not even the misfortune of death. From this point of view, the parable and the prophecy will have lost all meaning, for the men of the future will no longer understand the *images* upon which parable and prophecy are based.

[17] These two interpretations agree on one essential point: the socius, is the man of history; the neighbor, the man of regret, of dreams and myths.

3. The Level of Meditation

[18] The phenomenon of astonishment was linked to an isolated significance; the encounter, the event of the encountering of the neighbor. By taking hold of this isolated significance, reflection has undertaken an *ideological* work on it wherein the Event has become a theory of the event, and the encounter a warhorse against historical and social factors. And since the analysis of the socius has been carried out in the same systematic spirit, we have arrive at the false alternative between the *socius* and the neighbor. Our meditation must now reconsider in depth the whole interplay of oppositions and interconnections and thereby attempt to comprehend the *socius* and the neighbor

together as the dimensions of the same history, the two faces of the same charity. It is with the same emotion that I love my children and take an active interest in juvenile delinquency. The first love is intimate and subjective albeit exclusive: the second is abstract but has a wider scope I am not discharged of all responsibility to other children by simply loving my own. I cannot escape others, for although I do not love them as my own or as individuals, still I love them in a certain collective and statistical manner.

[19] The principal task of elaborating a "theory of the neighbor," which is the ultimate goal of this preparatory study on the *socius* and the neighbor, lies in attempting from the very beginning to become aware of its full scope. By this problem of scope or range. I understand the concern to rediscover, or at least constantly to seek out the *unity of intention* underlying the diversity of my relations to others. It is the same charity which gives meaning to the social institution and to the event of the encounter. The brutal opposition between community and society, between personal and administrative or institutional relationships, can only be one stage of reflection. Soon we shall have to determine why this stage is necessary, indispensable, and never done away with in our human history. But first we must show to what extent this stage is deceptive when it is privileged and *cut off from the total dialectic of the Kingdom of God*.

[20] When I reduce the theology of the neighbor to a theology of the encounter. I miss the fundamental meaning of the Lordship of God over *history*. It is this theological theme which gives to the theme of charity all the *extension* and *breadth* of which it is capable. We shall presently see that, in return, the theme of charity gives to the theme of the Lordship of God over history its *intensity* and its *intention*. For the moment, however, we must re-achieve this extension that destroys a reflection fascinated by oppositions, dilemmas, and impasses.

[21] The Gospel prepares us in many ways for this recapturing of the scope of the theme of charity. It does this by means of a meditation on history: besides the representation of the Person, embodied in the good Samaritan, it also gives us the representation of the "Nation," that of the "magistrate,' of "Caesar," which refer to the State. The episode involving the coin bearing the image of Caesar: "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's, and the episode of Jesus before Pilate: "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above," allow us to perceive this other form of the love of God in the institution, and by means of this special prestige of the institution that is "authority." For authority, even when it comes from below, as a result of elective processes or otherwise, is in another sense still moved by charity under the form of justice: "For the magistrate is God's ministry for thy Good … ruling justly … when he faithfully fulfills his duty" (*Romans* 13: 1-7). This text does not advocate the spirit of subordination but primarily the recognition that the relation of

"authority" to "fear" is one of the dimensions of charity, the dimension which St. Paul calls *justice*. Justice is the dynamism of order, and order the form of justice. This dialectic of justice and order enters in turn into the great dialectic of history which is moved by the charity of God.

[22] It is of the nature of this great dialectic to appear broken. The figure of the neighbor as person and the figure of the neighbor as magistrate (for Caesar is also my neighbor) are two partial one-sided representations of the government of history by charity.

[23] Hence, the growth of the Kingdom of God develops amid the suffering of contradictions: in our individual and collective lives, there is a perpetual debate between "direct" or person-to-person relationships and "indirect" relationships within the context of institutions. This debate is one aspect of this historical suffering.

[24] This is what is not understood by the "reactionary" interpretation of the relationships between the *socius* and the neighbor. When the theme of the neighbor is cut off from the social context wherein it finds its historical impact, it turns to sterile regret and becomes the victim of some frightful propensity for avenging disaster. It is much more necessary to remain attentive to the historical scope of charity and to discern the whole wealth of the dialectic of the *socius* and the neighbor. At times the personal relationship to the neighbor passes *through* the relationships to the socius; sometimes it is elaborated on the *fringes* of it; and at other times it rises up *against* the relationship to the socius.

[25] Indeed, very often the indirect route via the institution is the normal process of friendship: letters, means of transportation, and all the techniques used in human relationships bring men together. In a broader sense, distributive justice with all its jurisdictional organs and administrative apparatus is the privileged way of charity: the event of the encounter is fleeting and fragile. As soon as it is consolidated into a lasting and stable relationship, it is already institution. There are very few pure events, and they cannot be retained nor even forecast and organized without a minimum degree of institutionalization. We must take our analysis one step further. The object of charity quite often appears only when I attain, in the other man, a common condition which takes on the form of a collective misfortune: wages, colonial exploitation, racial discrimination. Then my neighbor is concrete in the plural and abstract in the singular: charity reaches its object only by embracing a certain suffering body. This is something that the Greek Fathers had often recognized. St. Gregory, in particular, looks upon men as a "we" and humanity as a "pleroma." Therefore it is not necessary to enclose oneself within the letter of the parable of the Good Samaritan, nor to impose

upon it a personalist anarchism. The parable does not relieve me of the responsibility of answering this question: what does the concept of "neighbor" mean in the present situation? This may be to justify an institution, amend an institution, or criticize an institution.

[26] At other times, it is true, the relationship to the neighbor is worked out only marginally, that is to say in the interstices of the relationships to the *socius*. This is largely the meaning of the "private" as opposed to the "public" or the "social," as well as the meaning of "leisure" as opposed to "work." It is also true that in a world where work is divided, and in this sense more abstract, we are forced to look outside of the context of work and social obligations for the warmth and intimacy of authentic personal exchanges and real encounters. Hence, we look to the private realm for what we cannot find in the social realm. This is true. But the connection between the private and the public realms all the better stresses the relationship between the neighbor and the *socius*. Indeed, there is no private life unless it is protected by a public order. The family home has no intimacy unless shielded by legality, a state of peacefulness based on law and force, and in possession of a minimum of social justice, and civic rights. The abstract is what protects the concrete, the social establishes the private. Thus, it is illusory to try to change all human relationships into a kind of communion. Love and friendship are rare relationships which spring up within the context of more abstract and anonymous relationships. These relationships are more extensive than intensive and constitute in some way the social fabric of the more intimate exchanges of private life.

[27] The opposition of the neighbor to the *socius* is therefore only one of the possibilities of the historical dialectic of charity. It may be the most spectacular and dramatic possibility, but it is not the most meaningful one.

[28] It is now possible to speak of the irreplaceable significance of all these *divisive situations* which "eschatologism" isolates and "progressivism" misunderstands.

[29] There is an inherent evil in the institution, taking this word in its most general sense and understanding thereby all the organized social forms which are the proper object of sociology. It is the evil of "objectification" found in all forms of organization. Within the division of labor it takes the subtle form of the sadness and boredom which gradually work their way into the most "fragmented" and monotonous task of industrial labor when it is very specialized. One might say that the arduous labor which in past times was associated with physical conveyance and with dangerous and unhealthy work is now found in a psychic frustration which is more insidious than physical pain. On the other hand, the complex machinery of distributive justice and of social security are

often imbued with an inhumane mentality because of their anonymity, as if the vast administering of things to men were stamped with a foreign and cancerous passion, the passion of an abstract administration. Lastly, every institution tends to develop the passions for power in men who dispose of some form of equipment (material or social). Whenever an oligarchy is established, be it technocratical, political, military, or ecclesiastical, it tends to make this equipment a means of domination and not one of service. We see these passions spring up every day right under our eyes, and there is no need to list the great perversions of powerful oligarchies. Within the center of the most peaceful and harmless institutions lies the beast, obstinacy, the tendency to tyrannize the public, and the abstract justice of bureaucracy.

[30] The theme of the neighbor is primarily an appeal to the awakening of consciousness. It would be absurd to condemn machines, technocracy, administrative apparatus, social security, etc. Technical procedures and, in general, all "technicity," have the innocence of the instrument. The concept of the neighbor is an invitation to situate evil within the specific passions that are connected to the human employment of instruments. It is an invitation to break away from the old philosophies of nature and to initiate a purely internal critique of man's "artificial" existence. The vice of the social existence of modern man does not lie in being against nature: what is lacking is not naturalness, but charity. Consequently, criticism goes completely astray when it attacks the gigantism of industrial, social, or political machinery, as if there were a "human scale" inscribed within man's nature. This was the illusion of the Greeks who attached the stigma of culpability to the rape of nature (Xerxes spanning a bridge across the Bosporus, imposing "a yoke on the sea" and piercing Mount Athos, as is witnessed in Aeschylus' *Persians*). We are in need of a critique other than this idea of Greek "measure" which opposes the great planning researches of modern life. Man's technical, social and political experience cannot be limited in its extension, for the theme of the neighbor does not condemn any horizontal extravagance or growth in these areas. If a particular organization has overextended itself, this is an error and not a fault within the ethical realm. In this instance, what is called for is a purely pragmatic critique of the advantages and disadvantages of gigantism. The optimum dimension of an enterprise, of a complex industry, a sector of state planning, a political entity, etc., has to do with purely "technical" criteria, not "ethical" standards. The theme of the neighbor rather condemns a vertical extravagance, that is, the tendency of social organisms to absorb and exhaust at their particular level the whole problematic of human relationships. The extravagance of the social realm as such lies in what we earlier called "the objectification" of man within the abstract and anonymous relationships of economic, social, and political life. The social realm tends to block access to the personal and to

hide the mystery of interhuman relationships, to dissimulate the movement of charity behind which stands the Son of Man.

[31] Thus the depth of human relationships often appears only through the failures within the social realm: there is a technocratic or an institutional slumber, in the sense in which Kant spoke of a dogmatic slumber, from which man is awakened only when he is socially stripped, be it by war, revolution, or great historical disasters. When these occur, there arises the unsettling presence of man to man. Indeed, the glory of such ruptures lies in their giving rise to new types of institution. Thus, the meditations of the Stoic sage, and those first Christians of man, as a citizen of the world, have been both the effect of a certain incohesiveness of the political consciousness after the failure of the Greek city, and the cause of the broadening of historical perspective: the opposition between the citizen and the slave, between the Hellene and the barbarian, the city and the tribe, is upset by Christian brotherhood and the worldly citizenship of Stoicism. And this upsetting permits a new revolution of the social bond and its stabilization at a new level in medieval Christendom.

[32] The theme of the neighbor therefore effects the permanent critique of the social bond: in comparison to love of neighbor, the social bond is never as profound or as comprehensive. It is never as profound because social mediations will never become the equivalent of encounter or immediate presence. It is never as comprehensive because the group only asserts itself against another group and shuts itself off from others. The neighbor fulfills the twofold requirement of nearness and distance. Such was the Samaritan: near because he approached, distant because he remained the non-Judaean who one day picked up an injured stranger along the highway.

[33] We must never lose sight, however, of the fact that personal relationships are also the victim of passions, perhaps the most fierce, dissimulated, and perfidious of all passions. After all, what have three centuries of bourgeois civilization made of the concept of charity? Charity may be nothing more than an alibi for justice. And so the protest of the "private" has its own peculiar evil when it opposes itself to the "social" and condemns its abstraction and anonymity. True charity is often scoffed at doubly by inhumane "justice" and by hypocritical "charity." The dialectic of the neighbor and the *socius* is all the more perverted in so far as relationships to others, under one form or another, are themselves more corrupted. Thus, all that we really possess are the shattered pieces of true charity.

[34] Has our meditation retained something of our initial state of astonishment? I believe so. The neighbor, we said, is characterized by the personal manner in which he encounters another independently of any *social mediation*. The meaning of the

encounter does not come from *any criterion immanent to history*. This was our starting point and now we shall return to it.

[35] The *ultimate* meaning of institutions is the service which they render to persons. If no one draws profit from them they are useless. But this ultimate meaning remains hidden. No one can evaluate these personal benefits produced by institutions; charity is not necessarily present wherever it is exhibited; it is also hidden in the humble, abstract services performed by post offices and social security officials: quite often it is the hidden meaning of the social realm. It seems to me that the eschatological Judgment means that we "shall be judged" on what we have done to persons, even without knowing it, by acting through the media of the most abstract institutions, and that it is ultimately the impact of our love on individual person which will be judged, that is what remains *astonishing*. For we do not know when we influence persons. We may think we have exercised this immediate love within direct relationships between man and man, whereas our charity was often only a form of exhibitionism. Likewise, we may think we have no influence on persons in the indirect relationships of work, politics, and perhaps here too we are deluded. The criterion of human relationships consists in knowing whether we influence people. But we have neither the right nor the power to apply this criterion. In particular, we do not have the right to employ the eschatological criterion as a process enabling us to privilege direct relationships at the expense of indirect and abstract relationships. For in reality, through them we also exercise a kind of charity with regard to persons. But we are not necessarily aware of this. Thus, so long as the sociological veil has not fallen, we remain within history, that is, within the debate, between the *socius* and the neighbor, without knowing whether charity is here or there.

[36] We must therefore say that history, with its dialectic of the neighbor and the socius, supports the *scope* of charity. But in the last analysis, it is charity which governs the relationship to the *socius* and the relationship to the neighbor, giving them a common *intention*. For the theology of charity could not have less extension than the theology of history. [**END**]