THE [illegible] GY?

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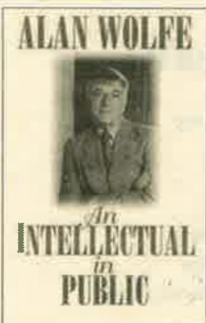
About a decade ago university administrators began closing sociology departments and reducing funding for the survivors. For a brief time sociology seemed to face wholesale elimination. A rash of eulogies appeared in the journals, followed by recriminations, and before long the field degenerated into the kind of academic narcissism that accompanies plummeting prestige. In this way, the end-of-sociology literature supplied evidence for the main allegation against the field, that it had retreated into parochialism.

In his very good reply to these developments, *Whose Keeper? Social Science and Moral Obligation* (1989), Alan Wolfe traced the ironic emergence of a "sociology without society." Rather than endlessly elaborating theories of state and economy, he said, professional sociologists could recover their vitality by helping citizens understand the moral conflicts generated by these institutions. Civil society served as the natural location for sociological inquiry.

An Intellectual in Public (University of Michigan Press, $29.95, cloth), Wolfe's new book, provides a splendid example of the sort of civic work sociologists might pursue. The collection consists of book review essays previously published in magazines such as the *New Republic*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Read straight through, the collection advances two propositions.

First, it suggests the book review as a vehicle for popular education. For many years newspapers and magazines have justified themselves as such agents of public awareness. In practice, their review sections often collapse under the weight of political, financial, and status pressures that accompany the publication of new books. Wolfe resists these pressures as effectively as any critic now writing. His essay "Anti-American Studies" excoriates recent developments in the academic field of American studies, charging its leftist leaders with a hatred of their subject. Wolfe also eviscerates conservatives in their institutional home, the policy institute. In "The Revolution That Never Was" he explains why "conservatives in America have been unable to come up with any sustained and significant ideas capable of giving substance to their complaints against the modern world. I say ideas, not slogans." That Wolfe's book instructs so judiciously and skillfully in the leading issues of our time, much more so than the sociology journals, seems to me a genuine achievement. Wolfe says he began writing reviews out of curiosity and only later came to understand the task as a contribution to democracy. *An Intellectual in Public* gives every reason to believe him.

But the collection's second proposition miscarries. The main fault of our books, according to Wolfe, lies with their dependence on ideology. He never says what he means by "ideology." Sometimes it signifies a set of ideas wrapped too tightly around an author's political views. Other times, Wolfe makes ideology take the blame for sloppy research. The proposition becomes a shibboleth. Wolfe believes that Americans hate politics, desire consensus, and observe moderate taste and opinion. If we have learned anything from the neoliberalism of the 1990s, it is that such a complex of beliefs raises an ideology all its own, replete with hidden political imperatives. In any case, the soft form of ideology simply provides some discipline to thought. Given the omnipresence of slogans, scandals, and images in our public life, maybe we need more ideology, not less.



We surely need to improve our collective imagination. This idea guides Steven P. Dandaneau's **Taking It Big: Developing Sociological Consciousness in Postmodern Times** (Pine Forge Press, $32.95, paper), another book that tries to inject a note of vitality into academic sociology by finding a public purpose for it. Dandaneau, professor of sociology at the University of Dayton, has none of Wolfe's suspicion of reform. Thinking sociologically, Dandaneau says, entails a radical form of awareness, an imagination capable of reflecting on experience by grasping connections between self and world. This heightened awareness throws up dilemmas the solving of which become its main task. What is the role of individual action in environmental degradation? What is the role of environmental degradation in the health of individuals? "This book is, therefore, ultimately about politics."

Well, yes and no. Like Peter Berger's *Invitation to Sociology*, for many years the best brief introduction to the field, *Taking It Big* argues that the sociological perspective is, by definition, a critical form of consciousness. That something lurks behind reality is axiomatic to social reflection. Received political truths get no exemption. Dandaneau accordingly has many sharp words for contemporary society. On the other hand, when he discusses disabled children, Generation X, and contemporary religion—themes on which the book pivots—he betrays no prefabricated "ideology." Judged against the crop of new books trying to make sociology compelling to students, *Taking It Big* is especially inviting, even charming. How many books take the time to instruct in the proper pronunciation of Max Weber (Vey-ber)?

In spite of the disappointment that carries the mood of these books, Wolfe and Dandaneau conclude with a feeling of qualified hope about the future of social study. Why? In part, it's because they are sensitive, as most of their peers are not, to a tradition of nonspecialized sociology that has persisted alongside the professional ethos they deplore. Unlike the radical sociologists of the 1960s, who faced a comparable crisis, Dandaneau and Wolfe do not call for a "New Sociology." Instead, they see the task as one of renewal.

Even this more modest aspiration meets overwhelming obstacles. In the first place, persuading sociologists to pay attention to alternative traditions means confronting the methodological fetishism and scientific pretension that have dominated the field for a half century. It implies, moreover, a challenge to the very organization of academic life. Professional specialities have so completely fragmented our collective cultural resources that academic intellectuals of each new generation must struggle against their chosen field if they hope, with Wolfe and Dandaneau, to apply their ideas to public problems. This struggle has its own history, but now it may present the most severe challenge.

Nonetheless, the tradition by which public intellectuals hope to resurrect sociology asks compelling questions. What is the American character? No professional sociologist yet has answered this question with as much verve and ingenuity as Alexis de Tocqueville in **Democracy in America** (University of Chicago Press, $35, cloth), a study that repays rereading. Tocqueville believed the rise of equality enacted one of the great dramas in the history of humankind. "This whole book has been written under the impulse of a kind of religious dread inspired by contemplation of this irresistible revolution advancing century by century over every obstacle and even now going forward amid the ruins it has itself created."

Equality, Tocqueville said, worked paradoxical effects on American character. For example, equality overturned the languid psychology of fixed classes common to aristocracies, and sent a superabundance of energy coursing through democratic social life. Lacking a stable foundation for their opinions, Americans gained a keen feeling for the power of individual reason to win the world. This confidence in turn generated an astonishing level of experimentation and innovation.

At the same time, Tocqueville continued, equality granted that virtue was equally distributed throughout society. And this predisposed each individual to surrender moral and intellectual authority to the majority. Thus, public opinion, rooted in the power of individual reason, continually poisoned its source. Tocqueville concluded that public opinion imposed itself "on men's very souls." The American character was simultaneously the most innovative and the most conservative in the world.

Tocqueville sounded a call for a new class of intellectuals to educate the populace in such ironies. He could not have anticipated that irony would accompany even this cry. As the social studies developed in the United States on the model of natural science, they proved less and less able to recognize the sort of broad inquiry Tocqueville practiced. Had *Democracy in America* appeared in the 1950s it might have been dismissed by sociologists as the work of a talented amateur. This was nearly the fate of the decade's most brilliant inquiry into the national character, 1950's **The Lonely Crowd** (Yale University Press, $17.95, paper), another book that commends our attention.

David Riesman, its chief author, did not have a doctorate in sociology. He took a law degree at Harvard, then worked as assistant to the treasurer at the Sperry Gyroscope Company in New York. The interviews that form the heart of the book bucked a trend within sociology to standardize and quantify the relationship between investigator and interviewee. Riesman instead treated the interviews as an aspect of the art of conversation. For these reasons sociologists treated the book coolly, at least until a reading public made it a bestseller and put Riesman on the cover of *Time*. *The Lonely Crowd* went on to sell more than 1.4 million copies.

The book's inquiry into "the Changing American Character," as the subtitle read, addressed a generation demoralized by war, over-organized by bureaucracy, and over-socialized by the routines of family and friendship. Riesman noticed that older forms of character were rapidly disappearing in the face of these developments. Neither the "tradition-directed" nor the "inner-directed" type, he argued, could long withstand the centripetal forces set in motion by the corporate economy, which encouraged a new, "other- directed" type.

The inner-directed American followed an internal "gyroscope," immune to external pressure. The tradition-directed American obeyed archaic customs and rules. The new American, by contrast, was more malleable, more passive. Other-direction came to signify mindless conformity, although Riesman's insights into the connections between conduct, inner life, and social organization bore a more complicated analysis. The distinction of the book lay in a paradox worthy of Tocqueville. In the midst of their abundance, middle-class Americans felt weak, isolated, as anxious as ever.

Successors to *Democracy in America* and *The Lonely Crowd*, books such as Christopher Lasch's 1979 **The Culture of Narcissism** (W.W. Norton, $14.95, paper) and Robert Bellah's 1985 **Habits of the Heart** (University of California Press, $17.95, paper) have in common with them not only the attempt to grasp the traits of the American character. At its best this attempt can make only partial, time-bound judgments. These books commend themselves to us today because they solicit our attention as members of the commonwealth. They make us part of something bigger than ourselves. What sort of people are Americans? No question could be more romantic to a "sociology without society." In these days of worldwide confusion and distress, however, no question could possibly be more urgent. ◆