Phil. Soc. Sci. 1 (1971), 309–344 *Printed in Great Britain*

That's Interesting!

Towards a Phenomenology of Sociology and a Sociology of Phenomenology

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SUMMARY

QUESTION: How do theories which are generally considered *interesting* differ from theories which are generally considered *non-interesting*? ANSWER: Interesting theories are those which *deny* certain assumptions of their audience, while non-interesting theories are those which *affirm* certain assumptions of their audience. This answer was arrived at through the examination of a number of famous social, and especially sociological, theories. That examination also generated a systematic index of the variety of propositional forms which interesting and non-interesting theories may take. The fertility of this approach suggested a new field be established called the *Sociology of the Interesting*, which is intended to supplement the Sociology of Knowledge. This new field will be *phenomenologically* oriented in so far as it will focus on the movement of the audience's mind from one accepted theory to another. It will be *sociologically* oriented in so far as it will focus on the dissimilar base-line theories of the various sociological categories which compose the audience. In addition to its value in interpreting the social impact of theories, the Sociology of the Interesting can contribute to our understanding of both the common sense and scientific perspectives on reality.

PART I: INTRODUCTION

It has long been thought that a theorist is considered great because his theories are true, but this is false. A theorist is considered great, not because his theories are true, but because they are *interesting*. Those who carefully and exhaustively verify trivial theories are soon forgotten; whereas those who cursorily and expediently verify interesting theories are long remembered. In fact, the truth of a theory has very little to do with its impact, for a theory can continue to be found interesting even though its truth is disputed—even refuted!

Since this capacity to stimulate interest is a necessary if not sufficient characteristic of greatness, then any study of theorists who are considered great must begin by examining why their theories are considered interesting—why, in other words, the theorist is worth studying at all. But before we can attempt even this preliminary task we must understand clearly why some theories are considered interesting while others are not. In this essay, I will try to determine what it means for a theory to be considered 'interesting' (or, in the extreme, 'fascinating').

Students who follow to the letter all of the injunctions of current text-books on 'theory-construction', but take into account no other criterion in the construction of their theories, will turn out work which will be found dull indeed. Their impeccably constructed theories will go unnoted—or, more precisely, unfootnoted—by others. But should these students also take into account that criterion, to be detailed below, which distinguishes 'interesting theories' from 'uninteresting theories', they will find that their theories will make their readers literally 'sit up and take notice'. Their theories will then be discussed among colleagues, examined in journals, confirmed or denied in dissertations, and taught to students as the most recent instances of 'progress' in their profession.

I will confine my inquiry to *social theories* which have been considered interesting, giving special attention to famous *sociological theories*. I suggest, however, that the level of abstraction of the analysis presented here is high enough for it to be applicable equally well to theories in all areas of social science and even to theories in natural science. But this generalization of the following discussion will have to await further investigation.

1. *Interesting non-propositions*

I will further restrict this paper to analysing the 'interesting' component of those theories which Kant has called 'synthetic *a posteriori* propositions'—assertions which refer to the empirical world and are not merely matters of definition. But these propositions, of course, are not the only ingredients of the scientific enterprise that may be found interesting, though they are the most important. Space, however, forbids consideration here of the various types of non-propositions that are also capable of evoking interest. Thus I will not be dealing with (1) 'Findings' which confirm or disconfirm hypotheses, (2) 'Clues' which indicate the way a problem can be solved, (3) 'Aesthetic Descriptions' which refine perception, (4) 'Analogies' which render the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar, and (5) 'Models' which simplify the integration of complex relationships.

2. *The interesting and the routine*

The interesting is something which affects the attention. *Websters Third* defines 'interesting' as 'engaging the attention'. The question naturally arises: 'Where was the attention before it was engaged by the interesting?'

It is hard to answer this question because, by definition, one is usually not attentive to what one is usually not attentive to. But, for those who wish to understand human behaviour, it is very important to answer this question because most people spend most of their lives in this state they are not attentive to. Harold Garfinkel (1967) has called this state of low attention or low consciousness 'the routinized taken-for-granted world of everyday life'. Since the interesting, by definition, is that which engages the attention more than the non-interesting, perhaps the former can be used to make manifest the latter. I will attempt to use what is found interesting to disclose what is routinely taken-for-granted.

If the defining characteristic of anything which some audience considers interesting is that it stands out in their attention in contrast to the routinized taken-for-granted world of their everyday life, then the defining characteristic of a theory which some audience considers interesting is that it stands out in their attention in contrast to the web of routinely taken-for-granted propositions which make up the theoretical structure of their everyday life. In other words, a new theory will be noticed only when it denies an old truth (proverb, platitude, maxim, adage, saying, common-place, etc.). (The actual process by which a theory comes to be considered interesting today is, of course, much more complicated because of the present fragmentation of the audience who does the considering into lay and professional groups. This important complication will be taken up in a later section.)

3. *The interesting in theory and in practice*

All *interesting* theories, at least all *interesting* social theories, then, constitute an attack on the taken-for-granted world of their audience. This audience will consider any particular proposition to be 'worth saying' only if it denies the truth of some part of their routinely held assumption-ground. If it does not challenge but merely confirms one of their taken-for-granted beliefs, they will respond to it by rejecting its value while affirming its truth. They will declare that the proposition need not be stated because it is already part of their theoretical scheme: 'Of course'. 'That's obvious'. 'Everybody knows that'. 'It goes without saying'.

The 'taken-for-granted world' includes not only this theoretical dimension but also a practical dimension as well. A theory will be considered truly interesting only if it has repercussions on both levels. On the latter level, an audience will find a theory to be interesting only when it denies the significance of some part of their present 'on-going practical activity' (Garfinkel, 1967) and insists that they should be engaged in some new on-going practical activity instead. If this practical consequence of a theory is not immediately apparent to its audience, they will respond to it by rejecting its value until someone can concretely demonstrate its utility: 'So what?' 'Who cares?' 'Why bother?' 'What good is it?'

An analysis of the rhetorical structure of social research reveals how it is made to seem 'interesting' on both theoretical and practical levels. The 'standard form' of the books and articles in which this research is presented is the following: (1) The author articulates the taken-for-granted assumptions of his imagined audience by reviewing the literature of the particular sub-tradition in question ('It has long been thought . . .'), (2) he adduces one or more propositions which deny what has been traditionally assumed ('But this is false . . .'), (3) he spends the body of the work 'proving' by various methodological devices that the old routinely assumed propositions are wrong while the new ones he has asserted are right ('We have seen instead that . . .'), and finally (4) in conclusion, he suggests the practical consequences of these new propositions for his imagined audience's on-going social research, specifically how they ought to deflect it onto new paths ('Further investigation is necessary to . . .').

An analysis of the cognitive content of social research reveals much more about the nature of that which is interesting and, equally important, that which is not. Theoretically, it is worth investigating those social theories that have been considered interesting because of what they reveal about the common-sense every-day layman's view of the world, which they are attacking. Practically, it is worth investigating those social theories that have been considered interesting so that we can learn to assert interesting theories ourselves. If we come to understand the process by which interesting theories are generated, we will not have to continue to do what has been done up till now—leave the 'interesting' to the 'inspired'.

4. *Procedure*

In order to discover what it was that made a social theory 'interesting' I examined a large number of social and especially sociological propositions which have been considered interesting in the hope of isolating the common element of 'interest' in all of them and of accounting for their differences. Since my purpose was primarily heuristic, I did not feel it was necessary or feasible to establish the precise degree of 'interestability' of each proposition. In a later section, I will offer some suggestions about how the study of interesting propositions can be put on a more rigorous footing. For the purposes of this investigation, I considered a social theory to be interesting if it has been in 'wide circulation'. Wide circulation here is meant to encompass both those social theories that have been considered interesting in times past and those which have been considered interesting recently—that is, those that were and those that are 'in the air'. (The former are now usually taught to students in 'Introductory Courses'; the latter in 'Substantive Courses' beyond the introductory level.) I also examined for this investigation some well-turned propositions of popular sociology which have caught the public's

Davis, Murray S., ***That's Interesting: Towards a Phenomenology of Sociology and a Sociology of Phenomenology***, Philosophy of the Social Sciences, 1:4 (1971:Dec.) p.309

fancy and have achieved a wide circulation outside the strict limits of the discipline's domain.

5. *The common element of all interesting propositions*

All of the *interesting* propositions I examined were found to involve the radical distinction between seeming and being, between the subject of phenomenology and the subject of ontology. An *interesting* proposition was one which first articulated a phenomenological presumption about the way a particular part of the world had looked, and then denied this phenomenological presumption in the name of 'truth', that is, in the name of a more profound, more real, more ontological criterion. Put more precisely, an *interesting* proposition was one which attempted first to expose the ontological claim of its accredited counterpart as merely phenomenological pretence, and then to deny this phenomenological pretence with its own claim to ontological priority. In brief, an *interesting* proposition was always the negation of an accepted one. All of the *interesting* propositions I examined were easily translatable into the form: 'What seems to be X is in reality non-X', or 'What is accepted as X is actually non-X'.

6. *The species of interesting propositions*

While all interesting propositions were found to have in common the same dialectical relation between the phenomenological and the ontological, they were found to be distinguished on the logical level. The variety of interesting propositions fell into twelve logical categories which involved either the characterization of a single phenomenon or the relations among multiple phenomena. These twelve logical categories constitute an 'Index of the Interesting'.

PART II: THE INDEX OF THE INTERESTING

A—THE CHARACTERIZATION OF A SINGLE PHENOMENON

(*i*) *Organization*

a. What seems to be a disorganized (unstructured) phenomenon
is in reality an organized (structured) phenomenon.

EXAMPLE: Ferdinand Tonnies' assertion in *Community and Society* that the relations among people within all societies were considered at the time he wrote to be manifold and indeterminate, can in fact be organized around two main types (*Gemeinschaft* and *Gessellschaft*).

b. What seems to be an organized (structured) phenomenon
is in reality a disorganized (unstructured) phenomenon.

EXAMPLE: Karl Marx's assertion in *Capital* that the economic processes of bourgeois society, which were considered at the time he wrote to be organized in one way, are in fact not organized in that way (but rather organized in another way).

Comment

The thrust of a younger ripening discipline is to develop Organizing Propositions of Type (*i*)*a*. Perhaps the most fundamental example in sociology is Auguste Compte's assertion that social phenomena in themselves, which were considered at the time he wrote to be unstructured (unlike natural phenomena), do in fact possess a coherent structure which can be grasped by science. The major sub-fields of a discipline also begin with the assertion of an organization for a particular social phenomenon which was thought to be unorganized. Thus Gustave LeBon started the field of Collective Behaviour when he managed to structure something so seemingly chaotic as crowds. Organizing Propositions often appear abbreviated as concepts. Cooley, for example, managed to organize the apparently amorphous middle distance between the individual and the society with his notion of the 'primary group'.

Talcott Parsons, certainly the most famous living organizer of both social theories and social processes, acquired his renown mostly for propositions of Type (*i*)*a*. In his early work (*The Structure of Social Action*), he asserts that four early twentieth-century social theorists (Marshall, Durkheim, Pareto, and Weber), who were considered at the time he wrote to be dealing with completely different social phenomena in completely different ways, are in fact all saying essentially the same thing about the same general social phenomenon. And in his later work (*Economy and Society*), he asserts that four major social institutions (familial, cultural, political, and economic), which were considered at the time he wrote to be relatively uncoordinated with one another, are in fact all strictly integrated into a coherent social system.

The thrust of an older stagnating discipline in need of rejuvenation is to develop Disorganizing or Critical Propositions of Type (*i*)*b*. Each Disorganizing Proposition criticizes the adequacy of the previously accepted Organizing Proposition (though nearly always calling for the substitution of a new Organizing Proposition rather than merely claiming the phenomenon is completely incapable of being structured). Classic examples of successful attempts to disorganize accepted organizations include Ward's critique of Social Darwinism and Mead's critique of Watsonian Behaviourism. Recent critiques of accepted organizations in modern sociology entailing Type (*i*)*b* Propositions include Denis Wrong's attack on its models, Harold Garfinkel's attack on its methods, and Alvin Gouldner's attack on its politics.

Note that not just any Organizing Proposition is interesting: only those that organize phenomena which had seemed too complex or chaotic to be ordered. And not just any Critical Proposition is interesting: only those that criticize previous organizations of phenomena which had become generally accepted.

(ii) Composition

a. What seem to be assorted heterogeneous phenomena
are in reality composed of a single element.

EXAMPLE: Sigmund Freud's assertion throughout his *Collected Works* that the behaviour of children, primitives, neurotics, and adults in crowds, as well as dreams, jokes, and slips of the tongue and pen, which were considered at the time he wrote to be unassociated in any way with one another, are in fact all various manifestations of the same instinctual drives.

b. What seems to be a single phenomenon
is in reality composed of assorted heterogeneous elements.

EXAMPLE: Max Weber's assertion in *Economy and Society* that the stratification system, which was considered at the time he wrote to be monolithic, is in fact composed of the three independent variables of economic class, status prestige, and political power.

Comment

Many natural and social scientists have made their reputations by pointing out that the appearance of a natural or social phenomenon is an illusion and that what the phenomenon really consists of lies 'below' its surface. Their 'profound' insight is considered especially interesting when these theorists also assert that the 'fundamental' nature ('depth structure') of the phenomenon contradicts the surface impression, as, for example, the seemingly continuous appearance of a table is contradicted by the discrete molecules of which it is actually composed. Usually, these scientists have pointed out a single factor which underlies what had heretofore seemed heterogeneous phenomena. In the social sciences, such 'monofactoral' theorists as Marx, Nietzsche, and McLuhan have reduced a large number of seemingly diverse social phenomena down to their economic, power, or communicative components. Less ambitious, but nonetheless interesting, reductions have been achieved by other social theorists who have observed that a few seemingly diverse social phenomena have at least one component in common. Thus Simmel in his *Sociology* showed that the 'triadic form', and the interaction processes associated with it, underlay both the three-person family and the three-class society.

Interesting propositions of the opposite type, *(ii)b*, occur when a theorist manages to distinguish several factors which compose a phenomenon previously throught to be unitary. Talcott Parsons, who has tried his hand at analysis as well as synthesis, constructed a Type *(ii)b* Proposition in *The Social System* when he asserted that *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesselschaft*, each of which was considered at the time he wrote to be an indivisible phenomenon, are in fact composed of several independent ('Pattern') variables.

Paul Lazarsfeld, and his co-worker Allan Barton (1955), have distinguished both types of Composition Propositions in empirical sociological research. Those research methods which produce Type (*ii*)*a* Propositions they call 'Reduction'. Reduction consists of methods to simplify complex classifications (indices). Those research methods which produce Type (*ii*)*b* Propositions they call 'Substruction'. Substruction consists of methods to elaborate simple classifications (typologies).

In each of the social sciences today, the major schools of thought are often modelled after either Continental Structuralism or English Analytic Philosophy. Those schools derived from Continental Structuralism have tried to make their output interesting by developing methodological procedures designed to turn out propositions of Type (*ii*)*a*. Those schools derived from English Analytic Philosophy have tried to make their output interesting by developing methodological procedures designed to turn out propositions of Type (*ii*)*b*.

More generally, we may say that those who assert Type (*ii*)*a* Propositions are disciples of the Platonic Tradition in which interesting propositions are generated by finding simplicity in the apparently complex; whereas those who assert Type (*ii*)*b* Propositions are disciples of the Aristotelian Tradition in which interesting propositions are generated by finding complexity in the apparently simple.

(*iii*) *Abstraction*

a. What seems to be an individual phenomenon
is in reality a holistic phenomenon.

EXAMPLE: Emile Durkheim's assertion in *Suicide* that suicide, which was considered at the time he wrote to be a behaviour characteristic of an individual, is in fact (more crucially) a process characteristic of a society.

b. What seems to be a holistic phenomenon
is in reality an individual phenomenon.

EXAMPLE: Sigmund Freud's assertion in 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death' that war, which was considered at the time he wrote to be a social phenomenon, is in fact (more crucially) a psychological phenomenon.

Comment

Holistic Propositions of Type (*iii*)*a* assert that what appears to be the property of an individual is actually the property of some whole of which the individual is a part. In the social sciences, using Type (*iii*)*a* Propositions as a technique for getting audience attention is usually called 'Sociologizing' or 'Sociological Imperialism'. Along with 'suicide', two other seemingly individual phenomena which have been fruitfully subject to sociologizing are 'embarrassment' (Goffman) and 'sleep' (Aubert and White).

Particularistic Propositions of Type *(iii)b* assert that what appears to be the property of a whole is actually the property of the individuals which make up this whole. In the social sciences, using Type *(iii)b* Propositions as a technique for getting audience attention is usually called 'Psychologizing' or 'Psychological Reductionism'. Freud, of course, is the classic psychologizer of social phenomena, finding instinctual roots for such seemingly social phenomena as totems and taboos, among numerous other examples. Recently, the seemingly social fact that nations wage war over land has been explained by the newly discovered individual instinct for 'territoriality' (Lorenz, Ardrey).

(It is instructive to note that Vilfredo Pareto's reduction of various social phenomena to their psychological roots—'residues'—attracted much less interest in America than Freud's. Though Pareto wrote on these topics first, his work crossed the ocean last, after Freud and others had already succeeded in transforming the American assumption-ground and accustoming Americans to expect that many social phenomena would have a psychological basis. Other areas of Pareto's thought, however, which he considered more minor, succeeded in attracting more interest.)

A third type of Abstraction Proposition had recently appeared in the social sciences. It attempts to interest its audience by denying the assumptions of both Type *(iii)a* and Type *(iii)b* Propositions. This type of proposition asserts that the real locus of human phenomena is neither the individual level nor the social level, but rather some intermediate 'Social-Psychological' level. A social-psychological explanation of a phenomenon will be found interesting, however, only when the phenomenon has already been explained both psychologically and sociologically, and the dispute between those who uphold each of these explanations has grown heated.

(iv) Generalization

a. What seems to be a local phenomenon
is in reality a general phenomenon.

EXAMPLE: Karl Mannheim's assertion in *Ideology and Utopia* that the ideological limitation and distortion of thought processes, which was considered at the time he wrote to effect only the bourgeois class, in fact effects all social classes.

b. What seems to be a general phenomenon
is in reality a local phenomenon.

EXAMPLE: Bronislaw Malinowski's assertion in *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* that the Oedipus Complex, which was considered at the time he wrote to be a human universal, in fact does not occur in all societies.

Comment

Generalizing Propositions and Localizing Propositions are two of the most common types of propositions in modern social science research. In fact, the main objective of methodology in the social sciences today seems to be to establish rigorous procedures that will determine the exact degree to which some assertion about social life can be generalized.

Although the tendency of the great social theorists of the past was to assert some truth about human life which held universally, the common tendency today of such divergent sociological schools as ethnomethodology and survey research, as well as Anglo-American anthropology, is to localize assertions and emphasize sub-group variation. In the past, attempts would be made to show that some behavioural characterization holds for all humanity; in the present, attempts are made to show that some behavioural characterization holds for some groups and tribes, but not for others.

A theorist makes an *interesting* generalization when he asserts that some property, which everyone knows to characterize one social category, also characterizes another social category where its existence was not suspected. Freud, for example, tried to show that the sexual impulse was a major influence not only on the behaviour of adults (which was fairly obvious), but also on the behaviour of children (which was not so obvious).

A theorist makes an *interesting* localization when he asserts that some property, which is thought to characterize everybody—to be part of 'human nature'—belongs merely to one social category and not others. Edward Hall, for example, tried to show that many problems in inter-cultural contact stem from those in one society believing those in all other societies attach the same meaning to spatial features as they do; whereas in fact the interpretation of crucial aspects of the spatial dimension varied considerably in different societies.

(*v*) *Stabilization*

a. What seems to be a stable and unchanging phenomenon
is in reality an unstable and changing phenomenon.

EXAMPLE: Karl Marx's assertion in *Capital* that the social organization of bourgeois society, which was considered at the time he wrote to be permanent, is in fact about to be suddenly and dramatically transformed.

b. What seems to be an unstable and changing phenomenon
is in reality a stable and unchanging phenomenon.

EXAMPLE: Georg Simmel's assertion in 'Conflict' that any conflict-ridden socia organization, which was considered at the time he wrote to be on the verge of transformation, may in fact be capable of continuing indefinitely as it is (in a steady-state of conflict).

Comment

Just as some propositions are interesting because they assert an unexpected generalization or lack of generalization of the characteristics of a social phenomenon across some social category space, so other propositions are interesting because they assert an unexpected stabilization or lack of stabilization of the characteristics of a social phenomenon across time. Propositions of Type (*v*) fall within the range of historical sociology which is concerned with demonstrating the temporal continuity or change of social phenomena.

One wing of historical sociology tries to construct interesting propositions of Type (*v*)*a* by demonstrating the surprising instability and even change of seemingly stable social phenomena. The 'New Left' historical sociologists, for instance, assert that American society, which was considered at the time they wrote to have been held together in the past by a basic value consensus, has in fact had a long history of disruption, conflict, violence, and incipient disintegration. On a smaller scale, Berger and Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality* have pointed out that all enduring social institutions do not continue to exist 'naturally' as had been thought, but must develop elaborate 'maintenance mechanisms' to ward off the constant threats to their stability.

The other wing of historical sociology tries to construct interesting propositions of Type (*v*)*b* by demonstrating the surprising stability and even permanence of seemingly unstable social phenomena. Besides Simmel and the 'function of social conflict' theorists like Lewis Coser who attempt to show how those processes of a social phenomenon which appear self-destructive are actually those processes which are helping the social phenomenon to maintain itself, this wing also includes those 'archetypal' theorists like the New-Freudian Lewis Feuer in *The Conflict of Generations* and the New-Jungian Phillip Slater in *Microcosm* who interpret social phenomena which appear violent and disruptive, such as student riots against college administrators and group revolts against their leaders, as merely the most recent repetition and manifestation of an original and ongoing paradigmatic pattern of human behaviour.

(*vi*) *Function*

a. What seems to be a phenomenon that functions ineffectively as a means for the attainment of an end
is in reality a phenomenon that functions effectively.

EXAMPLE: Robert Merton's assertion in *Social Theory and Social Structure* that the political machine, which was considered at the time he wrote to be an inefficient institution for obtaining community goals, is in fact an efficient institution for obtaining community goals.

b. What seems to be a phenomenon that functions effectively as a means for the attainment of an end
is in reality a phenomenon that functions ineffectively.

EXAMPLE: Herbert Marcuse's assertion in 'Repressive Tolerance' that the tradition of tolerance in America, which was considered at the time he wrote to be a value that fostered the goal of a liberated society, is in fact a value that hindered the goal of a liberated society.

Comment

Merton's discussion of manifest and latent functions (1957) is the classic statement of a methodological technique specifically designed to generate interesting propositions. His approach is similar to the one presented here, though confined only to one type of interesting proposition (Type (*vi*)).

Merton tells the social theorist to proceed in the following way. In the light of the social theorist's 'deeper' insight into the actual workings of some social phenomenon, he has first to deny what Merton calls its *manifest* (i.e. generally apparent) function or dysfunction, and then to reveal what Merton calls its *latent* (i.e. not generally apparent) function or dysfunction. Though Merton does not say so specifically, he strongly implies that the latent function or dysfunction of the social phenomenon must be the opposite of its manifest dysfunction or function.

Type (*vi*)*a* Propositions have conservative political implications: one should not try to change an obviously defective social institution which in reality has useful consequences. In other words, the social theorist claims that a certain social institution, of which his audience is known to disapprove, actually has consequences, of which his audience is known to approve. Some popular examples of Type (*vi*)*a* Propositions would be 'Witch doctors really are effective at curing their patients', and 'Folk remedies for illness turn out to be really effective'.

Type (*vi*)*b* Propositions have radical political implications: one should try to change a seemingly successful social institution which in reality has destructive consequences. In other words, the social theorist claims that a certain social institution, of which his audience is known to approve, actually has consequences, of which his audience is known to disapprove. Some popular examples of Type (*vi*)*b* Propositions would be 'Jails really turn out Criminals', 'Schools really make children stupid', and 'Mental hospitals really make people mentally ill'.

Though there is no necessary theoretical reason why these two types of propositions should not arise with equal frequency, Merton and his followers have come up with more Type (*vi*)*a* Propositions, while Radical Sociologists have come up with more Type (*vi*)*b* Propositions.

(*vii*) *Evaluation*

a. What seems to be a bad phenomenon
is in reality a good phenomenon.

EXAMPLE: R. D. Laing's assertion in *The Politics of Experience* that schizophrenia, which was considered at the time he wrote to be a bad thing, is in fact a good thing.

b. What seems to be a good phenomenon
is in reality a bad phenomenon.

EXAMPLE: Friedrich Nietzsche's assertion in *On the Genealogy of Morals* that Christian morality, which was considered at the time he wrote to be a good thing, is in fact a bad thing.

Comment

Evaluative propositions are found interesting only when the theorist's evaluation of a phenomenon differs from his audience's evaluation of this phenomenon. There are two ways in which the theorist can come up with such a re-evaluation of accepted values.

First, he can change the rating of a phenomenon by changing the indicator (operational definition) of the phenomenon to be rated. Depending on his audience's appraisal, he can select either the best or the worst particular aspects of the phenomenon to stand for the phenomenon as a whole. Should his audience customarily view the phenomenon in its best light, he can then view it in its worst, and vice versa. Thus, if a social theorist wishes to counter his audience's appraisal of American Society as great or as awful, he need merely select, to serve as his indicators of the moral worth of American Society as a whole, those of its aspects which are generally considered bad (like pollution, pockets of poverty, materialism, etc.) or those of its aspects which are generally considered good (like technology, average income, abundant consumer goods, etc.).

Second, he can change the rating of a phenomenon by changing the moral measure to which it is being compared. Something is judged good or bad relative to some standard of good or bad. Change the standard of comparison and the evaluation of the phenomenon is also likely to change. Should his audience customarily evaluate a phenomenon positively relative to one comparison baseline, he can then evaluate it negatively relative to another comparison baseline, and vice versa. Comparison baselines for a social phenomenon include (1) other social phenomena of the same logical type, (2) the same social phenomenon in the past (recent or distant), (3) future projections of the social phenomenon (short run or long run), and (4) some positive or negative ideal version of the social phenomenon. Thus if a social theorist wishes to counter his audience's appraisal of American Society as great or as awful, he need merely compare it to (1) other societies (Sweden, Nazi Germany, etc.), (2) its past history (the 'gay' nineties, the depression, etc.), (3) its potential futures (2001, 1984, etc.) or (4) some utopian or distopian society (Marx's pure communism, Hobbes' state of nature, etc.).

(Notice that *all* disputes about the moral worth of American Society as a whole are actually disputes about what aspects of American Society are to be used as indicators for this evaluation and what comparison baselines are to be used to evaluate them. In fact, disputes about the moral worth of all social phenomena can be reduced to disputes involving these same two factors.)

Evaluative Propositions are common in social research, but, because of the norm of 'ethical neutrality', some theorists prefer to make their value judgements more latent than blatant. Without ever explicitly stating their appraisal of a social phenomenon, they can communicate their appraisal implicitly by demonstrating the ways in which this social phenomenon is similar to another social phenomenon whose moral status is generally accepted. By means of this strategy, Goffman, in *Asylums*, subtly passes judgement on the moral status of mental hospitals by showing how remarkably many features they have in common with concentration camps.

B—THE RELATIONS AMONG MULTIPLE PHENOMENA

(*viii*) *Co-relation*

a. What seem to be unrelated (independent) phenomena
are in reality correlated (interdependent) phenomena.

EXAMPLE: August Hollingshead's assertion in *Social Class and Mental Illness* that social class and mental illness, which were considered at the time he wrote to be uncorrelated, are in fact correlated.

b. What seem to be related (interdependent) phenomena
are in reality uncorrelated (independent) phenomena.

EXAMPLE: Emile Durkeim's assertion in *Suicide* that suicide and such other phenomena as psychopathological states, race, heredity, and climate, which were considered at the time he wrote to be correlated, are in fact uncorrelated.

Comment

Modern computer technology in the social sciences both allows and fosters the prolific production of an enormous number of propositions involving correlations among phenomena (Type (*viii*)) which are uninteresting. These Correlative Propositions are uninteresting because they are obvious, because everyone already knew the phenomena in question were related. It is the rare computer correlation which draws attention to a surprising relation among phenomena which everyone did not already expect. Qualitative correlations

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are more likely to be interesting than quantitative correlations because the human mind, unlike the computer, is programmed (in various degrees of clarity) with the additional rule for the construction of interesting propositions described in this paper. This additional step in one's mental programme between conception and assertion serves as a filter to screen out (censor) those Correlative Propositions which are not worth saying.

Social theorists have pointed out many interesting correlations among phenomena which previously had been thought to be uncorrelated. Using Type (*viii*)*a* Propositions, they have asserted connections between such seemingly unconnected phenomena as social organization and culture (Marx, Durkheim), society and self (Cooley, Mead), group pressure and individual perception (Asch), living standard and population growth (Malthus), birth order and personality traits.

Social theorists have pointed out the absence of correlation among phenomena thought to be correlated less often than the presence of correlation among phenomena thought to be uncorrelated. Interesting propositions of Type (*viii*)*b* are rarer than interesting propositions of Type (*viii*)*a* because the social theorist's audience assume social phenomena to be uncorrelated more often than they assume social phenomena to be correlated. Nevertheless, social theorists have asserted a few intriguing disassociations among phenomena whose associations have been assumed, such as the disconnection between the self and the body (Mead, Goffman) and the disconnection between power and authority (Tocqueville).

In the popular press, perhaps the best examples of both Type (*viii*)*a* Propositions and Type (*viii*)*b* Propositions can be found in attempts to link various forms of smoking and various forms of illness. The public's interest was aroused with the first publication of studies which found statistical correlations between cigarette smoking and illness because the public had previously thought there was no connection between these two phenomena (Type (*viii*)*a* Proposition). The public's interest was also aroused with the first publication of studies which found little or no statistical correlation between marijuana smoking and illness because the public had previously thought there was a strong connection between these two phenomena (Type (*viii*)*b* Proposition).

(*ix*) *Co-existence*

a. What seem to be phenomena which can exist together
are in reality phenomena which cannot exist together.

EXAMPLE: Denis de Rougemont's assertion in *Love in the Western World* that love and marriage, which were considered at the time he wrote to be compatible, are in fact incompatible.

Davis, Murray S., ***That's Interesting: Towards a Phenomenology of Sociology and a Sociology of Phenomenology***, Philosophy of the Social Sciences, 1:4 (1971:Dec.) p.309

b. What seem to be phenomena which cannot exist together are in reality phenomena which can exist together.

EXAMPLE: Sigmund Freud's assertion in 'Notes on a Case of Obsessional Neurosis' that love and hate, which were considered at the time he wrote to be incompatible, are in fact compatible (in the psychological state of 'ambivalence').

Comment

This type of interesting proposition is relatively rare in the social sciences since few pairs or sets of social phenomena are conceived as being so incompatible with one another that they negate one another's very existence. Type (*ix*)*b* Propositions, however, are more common that Type (*ix*)*a* Propositions: when two or more social phenomena are assumed to be incompatible, they are usually assumed to be strongly incompatible, and therefore the jolt of the interesting is likely to occur whenever they are asserted to coexist; whereas when two or more social phenomena are assumed to be compatible, they are usually assumed to be weakly compatible, and therefore the jolt of the interesting is not likely to occur whenever they are asserted to be incapable of coexistence.

The intensive interest generated by the dynamic ambiguity of Type (*ix*)*b* Propositions encourages their use as inspired titles and catch phrases. 'The Lonely Crowd', 'The Cold War' (i.e. 'The Peaceful War'), and 'Poverty in the Midst of Plenty' are all actually Type (*ix*)*b* Propositions in elliptical form.

(*x*) *Co-variation*

a. What seems to be a positive co-variation between phenomena is in reality a negative co-variation between phenomena.

EXAMPLE: David Caplovitz's assertion in *The Poor Pay More* that expenditures for many goods and services, which were considered at the time he wrote to decrease at the lower income levels, in fact increase at the lower income levels.

b. What seems to be a negative co-variation between phenomena is in reality a positive co-variation between phenomena.

EXAMPLE: Alexis de Tocqueville's assertion in *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* that a social group's desire for revolution, which was considered at the time he wrote to decrease as their standard of living goes up, in fact increases as their standard of living goes up.

Comment

There are two other types of Co-variance Propositions which attract interest: (1) What seems to be a continuous (incremental) co-variation between phenomena is in reality a discontinuous (discrete) co-variation. The Marxist notion of the point at which a quantitative change suddenly turns into a qualitative change involves this type of proposition. (2) What seems to be a linear co-variation between phenomena is in reality a curvilinear co-variation. This type of proposition occurs whenever 'extremes' are said to 'come together', i.e. to be more similar to each other than they are to the 'mean'. This pattern is often found in (a) Stratification Correlates—when the upper class and the lower class are asserted to be more similar on some trait than either is to the middle class—(b) Hierarchical Organization Correlates—when the top management and the workers are asserted to be more similar on some trait then either is to the middle management—and (c) Historical-Demographic Correlates—when primitive society and modern society are asserted to be more similar on some trait than either is to historically intervening societies.

(*xi*) *Opposition*

a. What seem to be similar (nearly identical) phenomena
are in reality opposite phenomena.

EXAMPLE: Marshall McLuhan's assertion in *Understanding Media* that radio and television, which were considered at the time he wrote to be similar media, are in fact opposite media (one being a 'hot' medium; the other being a 'cool' medium).

b. What seem to be opposite phenomena
are in reality similar (nearly identical) phenomena.

EXAMPLE: Eric Hoffer's assertion in *The True Believer* that the psychological motivations of those who join opposing social movements, which were considered at the time he wrote to be opposite, are in fact similar.

Comment

When Opposition Propositions, especially of Type (*xi*)*b*, are combined with Evaluation Propositions, especially of Type (*vii*)*b*, we have the relatively formalized technique of generating interesting propositions known as 'Dialectical Thinking'. A social theorist uses this technique of dialectical thinking whenever he tries to elicit his audience's interest by asserting that a seemingly positive social phenomenon actually has the negative characteristics of the opposite social phenomenon, or occasionally vice versa. Perhaps the most famous example of dialectical thinking is the Marxian (actually Proudhonian) assertion that 'Ownership is theft'.

Sometimes a transformational process must be added to bring about the identification of the apparent opposites—as in 'disgust is repressed desire' and 'marriage is legalized prostitution'. This transformational process, however, merely makes the proposition possible and contributes little to its impact. The intensity of the proposition's impact is due not to its adjectival and unstressed transformational process, but to the one-two punch of its sudden logical *and* evaluational reversal.

Though this double negation of accepted concepts and values appeals to Continental social theorists, it is often too extreme for the Anglo-American mind which consequently tends to consider Dialectical Propositions more bizarre than interesting. Hence their applause when the Englishman Orwell satirized these Dialectical Propositions in *1984* with such hyperbolic examples as 'Freedom is Slavery', 'War is Peace', and 'Ignorance is Strength'.

(*xii*) *Causation*

a. What seems to be the independent phenomenon (variable) in a causal relation is in reality the dependent phenomenon (variable).

EXAMPLE: Howard Becker's assertion in *Outsiders* that the peculiar behaviour of some individuals, which was considered at the time he wrote to cause other people to label them 'deviants', is in fact caused by other people labelling them deviants.

b. What seems to be the dependent phenomenon (variable) in a causal relation is in reality the independent phenomenon (variable).

EXAMPLE: Max Weber's assertion in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that the religion of a society, which was considered at the time he wrote to be determined by the economy of the society, in fact determines the economy of the society.

Comment

Type (*xii*) Propositions, which evoke interest by reversing the causal relationship usually assumed between phenomena, are especially common in popular sociology. Such journalistic subjects are 'How the American Judicial System was actually on Trial during the Chicago Seven Conspiracy Case', 'How Victims actually cause Crimes', and 'How Schools are Disruptive of Childhood' are all ultimately based on Type (*xii*) Propositions.

There is a third variety of Causal Proposition which stimulates interest against the ground assumption of the first two: What seems to be a simple one way causal relation between phenomena is actually a complex mutual interaction between phenomena. Scholars who have read Max Weber's entire *Sociology of Religion* continually point out that he does *not* exclusively define either religion or economy as the independent or the dependent phenomenon, as dilettantes who have read only his *Protestant Ethic* assume; rather he actually shows how both the religion *and* the economy of a society reciprocally influence each other's development.

Davis, Murray S., *That's Interesting: Towards a Phenomenology of Sociology and a Sociology of Phenomenology* , Philosophy of the Social Sciences, 1:4 (1971:Dec.) p.309

PART III: DISCUSSION

1. *Non-interesting propositions*

We have seen that an audience finds a proposition 'interesting' not because it tells them some truth they did not already know, but instead because it tells them some truth they thought they already knew was wrong. In other words, an interesting proposition is one which denies some aspect of the assumption-ground of its audience, and in *The Index of the Interesting* we have categorized the various aspects of this assumption-ground which can be denied. Since this is the defining characteristic of an 'interesting proposition', it can also be used as a criterion to determine whether or not a particular proposition is interesting.

If the criterion by which an audience judges a particular proposition to be interesting is that it denies some aspect of their assumption-ground, then the criterion by which they will judge a particular proposition to be non-interesting is that it does *not* deny some aspect of their assumption-ground. There are three ways in which a proposition can fail to deny some aspect of the assumption-ground of its audience and therefore there are three general types of propositions which will be found non-interesting by their audience.

First, an audience will consider a proposition to be non-interesting if, instead of denying some aspect of their assumption-ground, the proposition affirms some aspect of their assumption-ground.[1] (e.g.: 'Husbands often influence their wives' political behaviour'.) In effect, the proposition is saying to its audience: 'What seems to be the case is in fact the case'. 'What you always thought was true is really true'. Phenomenology is Ontology. The audience's response to propositions of this type will be: 'That's obvious!'

Second, an audience will consider a proposition to be non-interesting if, instead of denying or affirming some aspect of their assumption-ground, the proposition does not speak to any aspect of this assumption-ground at all. (e.g.: 'Eskimos are more likely than Jews to . . .') In effect, the proposition is saying to its audience: 'What is really true has no connection with what you always thought was true'. Phenomenology is unrelated to Ontology. The audience's response to propositions of this type will be: 'That's irrelevant!'

Third, an audience will consider a proposition to be non-interesting if, instead of denying some aspect of their assumption-ground, the proposition denies the whole assumption-ground. (e.g.: 'Social factors have no effect on a person's behaviour'.) In effect, the proposition is saying to its audience: 'Everything that seems to be the case is not the case at all'. 'Everything you always thought was true is really false'. Phenomenology is completely contrary to Ontology. The audience's response to propositions of this type will be: 'That's absurd!'

Why would anyone bother to assert a non-interesting proposition? Non-interesting social theories are often asserted on purpose by those who think that the business of social scientists is merely to assert any theory that can be derived and confirmed according to the text-book rules of theory construction and verification. Actually, the 'Mediocre' in the social sciences (and probably the natural sciences too) can be defined as those who take the text-book rules of scientific procedures too literally and too exclusively. It should be clear from the above discussion that those who lack what is called 'the creative spark' are in fact those who fail to take into account the assumption-ground of their audience.[2]

But even the 'Stars' of social science sometimes assert propositions found to be non-interesting. Why should this ever be the case? Besides the occasional fall of the Stars themselves into mediocrity, the fault may lie not in the Stars, but in their audience. Propositions are interesting or un-interesting only in relation to the assumption-ground of some audience. If an audience finds a proposition asserted by a reputable social scientist to be obvious or irrelevant or absurd, it may be because the proposition has come to the attention of an audience other than the one to whom it was originally intended. A proposition which merely affirms a particular assumption, is irrelevant to any assumption, or annihilates the whole assumption-ground, of one audience may have been formulated to deny a particular assumption, be relevant to some assumption, or harmonize with the whole assumption-ground, of another audience. It is a common occurrence today for an out-group audience to monitor accidentally propositions originally directed towards an in-group audience. The academic world today is composed of specialized sub-worlds (disciplines) which are growing increasingly distinct both from each other and from the common-sense world (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), but which are also attempting to translate their internally generated propositions both to other disciplines and to the common-sense world. An audience which encounters one of these interdisciplinized or popularized propositions is likely to find it non-interesting because this proposition had not been specifically designed to take the assumptions of this new audience into account.

2. *Complicating social factors*

If an audience will find interesting any proposition which attacks the assumption they hold about its topic, then presumably all one would have to do to assert an interesting proposition is, first, to specify what the audience assumption about any topic is, and, second, to come up with a proposition which refutes it. Unfortunately, whereas it is usually easy to come up with a proposition which refutes an audience assumption (one need simply refer to the foregoing index of interesting propositions); it is usually difficult to specify precisely what this potentially deniable audience assumption is.

Specifying an audience assumption about a topic is usually difficult because this assumption is not necessarily a unitary thing. Since Marx, we have been aware that any division within the social base of theoretical assumption-ground may cause a division within the theoretical assumption-ground itself. As an audience is often segmented along various social lines, the assumption about a topic held by one audience segment is likely to be at variance with the assumption about that topic held by another audience segment. In order to clarify the difficulties involved in specifying an audience assumption, let us consider a few of the most important audience segments whose assumptions must be taken into account by anyone who wants to assert a proposition which all members of his intended audience will find interesting.

The fundamental division in the social structure of an audience is between those who hold the common-sense assumption about a particular topic and those whose assumption about the topic is conditioned by their intellectual speciality or discipline (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). This is the division between the 'Laymen' who have 'Conventional Wisdom' about the topic on the one side and the 'Experts' who have 'Esoteric Knowledge' about the topic on the other. Within each of these two realms, further sub-divisions may occur, making it still more difficult to specify all of the audience assumptions, and consequently to create propositions that will be found universally interesting.

The assumptions about a topic held by both laymen and experts may be too diverse or too amorphous for any proposition about this topic to be found universally interesting. Variations in laymen's assumptions about the topic may be along the lines of the usual sociological categories—age, sex, class, etc.—or some more subtle sociological categories. Variations in experts' assumptions about the topic are usually along the lines of their membership in a particular discipline or in one of the schools of thought which are contending for power within that discipline. It will not be found easy to say something interesting about a topic on which there is no lay or expert consensus of assumptions. It is hard to deny what seems to be the case if there is no consensus about what seems to be the case.

Lay and expert assumptions about a topic may not only vary over social space, but also change over time. Since the consensus of assumptions in the past is usually considered to be greater than the consensus of assumptions in the present, those who wish to assert interesting propositions often try to refute what they call the 'Traditional View' of the topic. But in practice the

'Traditional Assumption' of the past usually proves to be as hard to specify as the 'Contemporary Assumption' of the present.

Furthermore, what laymen and experts assume to be true about a topic has not only changed from the past, but is in the process of changing for the future. It is especially the younger generation who begin to take for granted a new assumption about a topic which differs from the taken-for-granted assumption of the older generation. This new assumption which is becoming increasingly accepted by the young may be called the 'Vanguard Assumption'.[3]

If the main problems of asserting propositions that will be found interesting to either all laymen or all experts involve the fact that their baseline assumptions are often 'formless' or 'floating', the main problem of asserting propositions that will be found interesting to both laymen and experts involves the fact that their separate baseline assumptions are often 'incommensurate'.

Although it has now become generally recognized that the realms of the various intellectual specialities have split off from the common-sense world (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), the implication of this fact for the generation of propositions has not been made explicit. On the phenomenological level, this split between Conventional Wisdom and Esoteric Knowledge occurred when propositions were asserted which denied the assumptions of the common-sense world. Intellectual specialities were formed when various groups of self-styled experts began to accept those propositions which had refuted the assumptions of laymen. As an intellectual speciality developed, what began merely as a proposition which refuted a taken-for-granted assumption of the common-sense world now became a taken-for-granted assumption in its own right. When an intellectual speciality reached maturity —and this is the important point—all propositions generated within it are referred back not to the old baseline of the taken-for-granted assumption of the common-sense world, but to the new baseline of the taken-for-granted assumption of the intellectual speciality itself. In other words, an intellectual speciality, which began in a *dialectical* relationship with an assumption of the common-sense world, evolves and progresses by means of an internal *dialectic* with its own basic assumption.

Anyone who wishes to assert a proposition that will be found interesting by laymen as well as experts must deal with the dilemma of this double dialectic. On the one hand, his proposition will interest experts only if it denies the ground-assumption of their discipline. On the other hand, his proposition will interest laymen only if it denies a ground-assumption of the common-sense world. But since the ground-assumption of experts is already a denial of a ground-assumption of laymen, he will find that any proposition which interests experts (because it denies their ground-assumption) will not interest laymen (because it affirms their ground-assumption), and vice versa. What will be interesting to the one will be obvious to the other.

In the academic world, a person usually resolves this dilemma by grasping for one horn while ignoring the other, by restricting the potential audience who will consider his proposition to his fellow experts while not worrying about the opinion of laymen. He will usually publish his proposition in a specialized journal or technical text where it will be scrutinized only by his colleagues who hold the very ground-assumption he wishes to attack. But note that the propositions of these specialized journals and technical texts that are found interesting by their professional readers are actually of the form: 'What everybody, except experts on the subject, think is true is in fact true'.

No one will recognize that the proposition is of this form until the proposition is brought to the attention of non-experts. However, the more a person's proposition is found interesting by the experts of his field, the more he will be tempted to bring it to the attention of these non-experts. Should he be foolish enough to reveal the proposition which interested his colleagues to his non-professional friends, he will usually find that they are not impressed. Should he be even more foolish enough to disseminate this proposition to a wider public through popularizing it in newspapers and magazines, he will succeed only in convincing more people of the poverty of his discipline.

In sum, the fact that the baseline assumptions of intellectual specialities and the baseline assumptions of the common-sense world are incommensurate is responsible for the fact that propositions, which had had good receptions in the former, usually get poor receptions in the latter. Those who attempt to popularize propositions which experts had found interesting often must resort to jargon in order to obscure the fundamental lack of intertranslatability between the universe of discourse of the intellectual speciality and the universe of discourse of the common-sense world. They are aware, intuitively if not consciously, that the 'interestingness' of an expert's proposition, like the 'poetry' of a foreign author, is what gets lost in translation.[4]

3. *Uncomplicating social factors*

Considering all of the assumptions of all of the various audience segments which a proposition must react against in order to be considered interesting, it is a wonder that anyone has ever asserted a proposition which attracted widespread interest. But the fact that some social theorists do occasionally utter propositions that are generally found interesting should alert us to the possibility that the problem of generating interesting propositions is not so complex as it first appears.

Although there is a diversity of audience segments, on a certain level of abstraction there is only a duality of audience assumptions. Therefore, one technique a person can use to simplify the assumptions of his audience is to raise the level of abstraction at which he considers them. The higher the level of abstraction at which his proposition attacks the assumptions of his audience, the more the assumptions of his audience will run together. Eventually, as in *The Index of the Interesting*, he will be able to reach that level of abstraction at which there are only two audience assumptions about a topic possible. There may be many segments to his audience, but, at a certain level of abstraction, each segment must assume either '*X*' or 'non-*X*' about a particular topic, and therefore each segment will find interesting either a proposition which asserts 'non-*X*' against its assumption of '*X*' or a proposition which asserts '*X*' against its assumption of 'non-*X*'. For example, although audience segments may differ as to the degree each thinks a certain phenomenon is generalizable, the social theorist who raises the level of abstraction at which the phenomenon is defined can divide all his audience segments into two groups: those who think this abstractly defined phenomenon is generalizable at all, and those who think this abstractly defined phenomenon is merely local. Having categorized his audience segments in this way, he can now interest the former group of audience segments by asserting the phenomenon is actually local or he can interest the latter group of audience segments by asserting the phenomenon is actually generalizable. By directing his proposition towards the assumption of those audience segments who form the majority, or at least the majority of those whose opinion is significant to him, the social theorist will find that his proposition will elicit wide, if not universal, interest.

If he still wants to try for universal, rather than merely majority, interest, the social theorist has another means at his disposal. Having narrowed the number of assumptions of the segments of his audience down to two, he may wish to reduce this duality of assumptions still further. He may wish to cohere the assumption-ground of all his audience segments into a unity, to bring together his many adversaries into a single opponent—'the Enemy'. The rhetorical technique of integrating all of the assumptions which are to be refuted into the single (wrong) assumption of the 'other side' may be called 'Consensus Creation'.

Consensus creation is an artful task which involves three steps. First, the social theorist articulates lack of consensus into dissensus either generally ('Half think "*X*" and half think "non-*X*"') or along the lines of specific sociological categories ('The lower classes think "*X*", whereas the upper classes think "non-*X*" ') or of categories appropriate to an intellectual speciality ('The Structural-Functionalists think "*X*"; the Symbolic-Interactionists think "non-*X*" '.) Second, he claims this apparent dissensus is actually a consensus at a higher level. ('But both these groups are actually saying the same thing: "*Y*" '.) Finally, having created this higher consensus of assumptions, he is now ready to deny it. ('However, they are both wrong. What really is the case is "non-*Y*" '.)

All segments of the social theorists' audience will now find his proposition interesting because it refutes the basic assumption shared by all of them (which basic assumption they themselves may not have known they all *fundamentally* assumed until he pointed out to them that they did). Convincing one's audience that they fundamentally hold a particular assumption about a topic, however, takes somewhat more than rhetorical skill. It also takes some knowledge of what assumptions about the topic the audience do actually hold. Should the assumption which a social theorist tries to convince his audience that they actually hold be too discrepant from the assumption they do actually hold, his audience will accuse him of setting up a 'straw man'—an assumption which is easily blown over because no flesh and blood person ever actually held it—certainly no member of his audience.

In either the common-sense world or the world of his intellectual speciality, a social theorist may attempt to create a potentially refutable assumption arround the Traditional Assumption, the Contemporary Assumption, or the Vanguard Assumption. For all three, this temporally-specific form of consensus creation involves selecting as targets a few representative writers—past, present, or prophetic—showing them all to be saying essentially the same thing about a particular topic, and claiming that their mutual position on this topic embodies the 'Refutandum'—the basic assumption of the time in all its various manifestations which the social theorist is going to attempt to refute. In the case of sociology, for instance, a few sociologists must be shown to represent not merely 'a sociological tradition', but '*the* sociological tradition'; not merely 'a position of some sociologists today', but '*the* present position of sociologists'; not merely 'a possible trend in sociology', but '*the* coming trend in sociology'. If a social theorist can also convince his audience that what these representative writers assume about a topic is in fact what his audience themselves assume about the topic—only less articulately—then he has set the stage on which the battle for his audience's attention will take place. He is now ready to launch an attack against his audience's assumption in order to capture and to hold their interest. His probability of success in this endeavour is augmented by the fact that he well knows the weakness in the rampart of his audience's assumption, for—being the one who articulated this assumption for his audience—he himself has had a hand at its construction.

Whereas the logical steps which create conviction end with *Q.E.D.* (*Quod Erat Demonstrandum!*), the rhetorical steps which incubate interest end with *Q.E.R.* (*Quod Erat Refutandum!*).

It is much harder for a social theorist to generate a proposition which will be found interesting in both the common-sense world *and* the world of his intellectual speciality, and therefore such a task is usually not attempted. However, there are a few occasions in which it will be worth his while to attempt to make a proposition evoke this ecumenical interest.

Laymen and experts will find the same proposition interesting when their assumptions about its topic happen to line up; but, for reasons which we have seen, their assumptions about topics are usually out-of-phase. Nevertheless, the assumptions of laymen and experts do occasionally get into phase, for, while the assumptions of both are evolving in the dialectical manner described above, the assumptions of the former are changing more slowly than the assumptions of the latter and sometimes fall two stages behind. When this occurs, a proposition of general interest becomes possible.

Another reason it is difficult for a social theorist to assert a proposition which will interest laymen as well as experts is that the topics on which experts have assumptions are often so obscure that laymen have no assumptions about these topics at all. (This is even more the case in the natural sciences.) The social theorist, however, can make laymen interested in expert propositions about these esoteric topics if he can first make them feel the necessity and value of having an assumption—any assumption—about these topics. He can make a topic thus 'significant' to laymen—i.e. make it a subject of their on-going theoretical activity—by first demonstrating its concrete effect on their on-going practical activity. *Importance* is the mother of Interest even if *Refutation* is the father.

4. *Further research into the implications of interesting propositions*

I wish to re-emphasize the fact that I did not intend for *The Index of the Interesting* to be definitive. Both the collection and the categorization of interesting propositions need further refinement.

A more sophisticated method of identifying interesting propositions should be developed. In the case of sociology, it might be fruitful to take a survey of sociologists in which they would be asked to 'name your five favourite sociological propositions'. Or one might analyse those sociological propositions chosen for highlighting in the *American Sociologist* in order to see what the staff of the official organ of the profession considers interesting. Sociological propositions which aroused general interest may also be found in those articles chosen for reprinting either in the *Bobbs-Merrill Reprint Series* or in various popular texts of 'selected readings'.

A more formal category system of interesting propositions should also be developed. It could be modelled along the lines of those category systems of all possible propositions (judgements) developed by Aristotle in his *Organon*, Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Hegel in his *Logic*, or some more recent system. Furthermore, the usefulness of the category system would be increased by specifying its sub-categories on lower levels of abstraction.

The reader may wish to adapt the category system of interesting propositions for personal use. He may do this informally by attempting to locate in *The Index of the Interesting* those social theories which he himself has always found appealing. Those that are easily located in the category system will provide him with subjectively relevant knowledge of the general types of social theories which he himself finds interesting. Those that are not easily located in the category system will provide him with objectively relevant knowledge of how, in order to include them, *The Index of the Interesting* ought to be revised or extended.

Stimulating an audience's interest in a particular proposition is, as we have seen, in part a matter of rhetoric. Consequently, we might obtain additional insight into the rhetorical strategies which are used to arouse an audience's interest by studying both classical and modern treatises on the art and practice of rhetoric.

It would also be useful to discover the psychological basis of the fact that some theories attract interest whereas others do not. Gestalt Psychology is likely to be the most fruitful approach to the psychological explanation of interesting theories. Its highly developed analysis of how objects which arouse perceptive interest involve figures that stand out against their backgrounds provides an intriguing parallel with the foregoing analysis of how propositions which arouse cognitive interest involve assertions that run counter to their assumption-grounds.

There are other things besides propositions which can attract interest, like paintings and people. Perhaps we could come to understand their drawing power as well if we also looked at them in terms of anticipation and surprise. We might then find that paintings are interesting insofar as their form or content contravenes accepted aesthetic rules, while people are interesting insofar as their character or behaviour contradicts status and role expectations. Before any conclusions can be drawn, however, the extent and manner of these deviations from the norm must be made more explicit.

Finally, further research on interesting propositions in the social (and natural) sciences can help us to learn more about the theoretical structure of the common-sense world. If it is true that those propositions which are found interesting are those which deny various aspects of this conventional structure, then we can gain understanding of the nature of this conventional structure indirectly by studying those interesting propositions which deny it. Moreover, we can gain understanding of the variations in this conventional structure also indirectly by studying those propositions which interest individuals at some social locations but do not interest individuals at other social locations. Regardless of the truth of a proposition, then, the mere fact that someone finds it interesting indicates that there is much we can learn from it.

5. *Implications of interesting propositions for further research*

The common critique of most contemporary social and especially sociological research is that it is *dull*, that it says what everybody knows or what nobody cares about. It is this defect in the way the social sciences are generally practised today—perhaps more than any other single reason—which is responsible for the relatively low status of their disciplines, for the relatively low ability they have to attract superior students, for the relatively low enthusiasm they arouse in the public and even in their own practitioners. In order to discover the cause of their present lethargy and to propose a cure I will try to bring out the implications for social and especially sociological research of the foregoing discussion of what makes a theoretical proposition interesting. Hopefully, once social scientists become more aware of the deficiency of their disciplines, they will be inspired to transform old procedures which have made them vapid into new procedures which will make them vital.

We have seen that the criterion which distinguishes an interesting proposition from a non-interesting proposition is that the former, unlike the latter, denies a specific assumption of its audience. Analysis of *all* books and articles which have left their mark on the social sciences will show, I believe, that they satisfy this criterion in the various ways enumerated in *The Index of the Interesting*. If this is the case, then, the present languor of the social sciences is due directly to the fact that social scientists do not attempt to satisfy this criterion in their own research *consistently*. What success their own research has in interesting others comes only from the fact that they satisfy this criterion *inadvertently*. Those social scientists who are considered the most interesting today are those who actually apply this criterion to their own research *intuitively*. The point of this paper, however, is to show that the social sciences as a whole could be much improved if *all* students of social life were taught to evaluate their own research according to this criterion *consciously*.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) have astutely observed that the anaemic state of modern sociology in particular stems largely from the fact that most courses and textbooks on 'Sociological Methods' pay too much attention to the confirmation of theories and not enough attention to the generation of theories. But Glaser and Strauss have not specified the remedy for this deficiency precisely enough. What is needed is not more social theories, but more *interesting* social theories. The student of social life needs to know not merely how to generate a theory from a body of data, he needs to know how to generate a theory from a body of data which will be found interesting.

Glaser and Strauss feel that the prerequisite for generating a theory is an intense familiarity with the data. But I would add that the prerequisite for generating an *interesting* theory is an intense familiarity with previous audience assumptions about the data as well. To be found interesting, a theory must be played off against what was previously assumed about the phenomenon in question. An audience will not find interesting just any theory about mental hospitals, they will find interesting only those theories about mental hospitals which clash with their previous stereotypes of mental hospitals. Therefore, the social researcher who wants to be certain that he will produce an *interesting* theory about his subject must first familiarize himself with what his audience already assumes to be true about his subject, before he can even begin to generate a proposition which, in denying their assumption, will attract their attention.[5]

More generally, courses and texts on methods in the social sciences should teach their students to see that the construction of influential social theories does not take place in an intellectual vacuum. The present 'logical' approach to theory construction should be supplemented by an approach to theory construction that is not only 'phenomenological' as we have seen, but also 'ecological', for it is not the inner development of a theory which makes it interesting, but its outer relation to the assumption of its audience. It will not do merely to inform the student of the ways in which his theory must be induced from the data or deduced from more abstract principles. The student must also be made to recognize that his own theory about a topic comes into being in an environment in which it will have to compete for the scarce resources of his audience's attention and allegiance with at least one other theory. This other theory—which got there first—consists of what the audience thinks it already 'knows' (i.e. assumes to be true) about a given body of data.[6] Theory construction, in other words, should not be treated as an independent logical or empirical enterprise separate from, and unrelated to, what the audience already 'knows' about a given body of data, for they will consider a new theory interesting—pay attention to what it proposes—only if it reacts against the baseline of what they previously presumed.

In short, the student should learn that he must *always* take into account the assumption of his audience about a topic before asserting his own theory about this topic. The more clearly he can specify his audience's assumption, the more strikingly he will be able to attack it. This denial of a clearly understood audience assumption is the essence of the interesting. It is what separates enduring research from ephemeral research. Those disciplines which make this conscious awareness of audience assumptions a standard part of their methodological procedures will raise the proportion of interesting propositions relative to non-interesting propositions in circulation within their discipline, will consequently increase the Interesting Quotient (I.Q.) of their discipline relative to the Interesting Quotient of other disciplines, and will therefore reap the benefits which accrue to a high status intellectual enterprise which is capable of enthusing both the public and its own practitioners.

6. *The interesting and the academic*

The analysis of the interesting elaborated here also has repercussions on the non-research activities of social (and other) scientists, particularly in the areas of course presentation and curriculum development.

Courses are usually laid out on a model of increasing structured differentiation. First, a general theory regarding some subject matter is presented in the introductory lectures. Then, this general theoretical framework is applied to specific categories or instances of the subject matter in the rest of the course. Finally, in the concluding lectures, this general theory is summarized with its limitations and potentials pointed out. But this structural approach to course presentation often fails to grasp the student's interest because it does not specifically concern itself with what the student finds interesting. As in the case of theory construction, too much concern with the inner processes of the subject matter and too little concern with the audience's evolving view of the subject matter will alienate the one from the other.

A phenomenological-ontological approach to course presentation, however, would overcome this deficiency of the structural approach, for it would be concerned at all times with the evolution of the student's assumptions about the subject matter. With this approach, a course would begin by articulating the student's common-sense assumptions about the subject matter, would continue by refuting these lay assumptions and replacing them with expert propositions, and would conclude by rapidly recapitulating, and thus manifesting for the student, the process by which his original naive view of the subject matter was transformed into a new sophisticated view of the subject matter. Such a course demands from the teacher not merely a knowledge of the goal to which he wants to draw his students, but also a knowledge of their starting point—where his students were originally 'at'. Any course whose on-going development parallels the natural progression of the student's mind from start to finish should have no difficulty in eliciting and sustaining their interest.

The curriculum as a whole should also be synchronized with the mental development of the student. The fact that little attention is paid to the evolving assumptions of students in most curricula today is responsible for the fact that students often feel their education lacks 'relevance'. Since naive student assumptions about a subject matter are most ignored at the introductory level, beginning students are particularly prone to finding Introductory Courses (and Texts) dull. If a person's interest is aroused only when he encounters something unexpected, then he will necessarily find an Introductory Course to be dull insofar as it does not deny his expectations. Perhaps the only unexpected feature of most Introductory Courses, their only redeeming feature which arouses what little interest the student has, is their denial of his assumption that some complex subject matter, like social life, is unordered. Unfortunately, the particular kind of order which most Introductory Courses impose on their subject matter consists merely of the 'Classic Statements' of the field. Although these Classic Statements had interested previous generations of experts because they had denied *their* assumptions, these Classic Statements will fail to arouse present student interest insofar as students today do not hold the same assumptions about the subject matter as did the experts of the previous generations.

Nevertheless, Introductory Courses (and Texts) do perform an indispensable function in the curriculum of the discipline as a whole, for they set up the pre-conditions necessary for students to find Advanced Courses (and Texts) interesting. Introductory Courses engender those expectations about the subject matter which the propositions put forth in Advanced Courses are specifically designed to deny. Since the dialectical process of the interesting can occur only after specific assumptions about a subject have been formed, students usually find Advanced Courses to be more interesting than Introductory Courses. This is not to say that Introductory Courses—even if they must be less interesting than Advanced Courses—must be as uninteresting as they often are. They could be made more interesting to the beginning student if they attempted to show him in detail how the Classic Statements of the discipline actually do refute many of the assumptions about the subject matter which he has acquired merely by being socialized into the common-sense world of the outside society in which he grew up.

Very recently, in some parts of the academy, there has been a reaction against excessive concentration on the sophisticated propositions of experts. But this reaction seems to be turning into an excessive concentration on the naive assumptions of students. Both extremes are to be avoided if student interest is to be maintained. In the past, student interest in a subject was often inhibited by too much attention to the latest conclusions of experts and too little attention to the original assumptions of students. In the future, it looks as though student interest in a subject may be inhibited by too much attention to the original assumptions of students and too little attention to the latest conclusions of experts. Students will then be as bored with having their naive views left undisturbed as they were with having their naive views ignored. In either case, that *transcendence* of original assumptions which is intrinsic to the interesting does not occur. What is needed is a pedagogical approach which takes into account both the student's naive view of the subject matter as its beginning and the expert's sophisticated view of the subject matter as its end, and methodically leads the student from one to the other. Only in this way will the term 'academic' cease to be synonymous with 'irrelevant'.

7. *The systematization of the interesting?*

In trying to construct *The Index of the Interesting*, I had hoped to make it as systematic as possible. However, as I proceeded in this attempt, I discovered —to my dismay—that the more systematic I tried to make it, the less interesting it became. Rather than continue to spin out my system at the increasing cost of decreasing interest, I decided that my dilemma itself might serve as the basis for some reflections on the relation between the *interesting* and the *systematic*.

At this critical point, I was proceeding in the following way. From my file of interesting propositions, I had taken one which I had not previously classified: 'Robert Merton's assertion in "Puritanism, Pietism, and Science" that fundamentalist Protestantism and Science, which were considered at the time he wrote to have developed from two completely different psycho-value complexes, in fact developed from the same psycho-value complex'. From this, I induced its logical category—(*xiii*). Evolution—and its general type—(*xiii*)*a* 'What seem to be phenomena that evolved out of completely different sources are in reality phenomena that evolved out of the same source'. According to my procedure for systematically elaborating my thesis—which had worked well enough in previous cases—the logical opposite of a general type of interesting proposition should also be a general type of interesting proposition. But here the trouble started. I could find no concrete example of supposedly interesting Type (*xiii*)*b* Propositions: 'What seem to be phenomena that evolved out of the same source are in reality phenomena that evolved out of completely different sources'. I found myself attempting to 'force' several recalcitrant social theories into this mould. Noting that the results were uninspired and plainly artificial, I eventually gave up and decided not to extend my thesis into this new category at all, even though I was certain there was a good example of Type (*xiii*)*b* Propositions somewhere and even though I hated to lose my Merton example of Type (*xiii*)*a* Propositions which was such an excellent illustration of the hermeneutical power of my thesis.

Let me try to abstract from my particular difficulty the general difficulty which all theorists must confront when they try to be both interesting and systematic. I will take the simplest case. A theorist makes an interesting assertion about phenomenon (*a*). His assertion is interesting because it counters his audience's previous belief about phenomenon (*a*). He discovers his assertion is also interesting in regard to phenomenon (*b*) because it also counters his audience's previous belief about phenomenon (*b*). But then he finds that the two phenomena with which he has been concerned—phenomenon (*a*) and phenomenon (*b*)—have a logical relationship which, through its own internal process, engenders a third phenomenon (*c*) and a fourth phenomenon (*d*).

	a	*b*
a	*a*	*c*
b	*d*	*b*

Now, if the theorist wishes to be systematic, he must further apply his assertion to phenomenon (*c*) and phenomenon (*d*). But he has no guarantee that this systematic application of his assertion to phenomenon (*c*) and phenomenon (*d*) will still be interesting because his assertion may not counter his audience's previous beliefs about phenomenon (*c*) and phenomenon (*d*).

The great theorist, therefore, intuitively recognizing the potential decline of interest in his assertion as this assertion is applied to more and more phenomena, usually only implies these extensions, leaving it to his epigone to articulate his system and systematically fill in the vacant boxes. These less perceptive followers will apply their mentor's originally provocative assertion 'mechanically' in the sense that they will not be attentive—as their mentor was—to the presuppositions about these new topics which their audience already holds.

Systems begin interestingly enough, but there is much logical and sociological necessity for them not to end that way. One must usually choose between being interesting and being systematic. One cannot easily be both.

8. *Conclusion*

Phenomenology, as the term is generally used and as I have used it here, is the study of (mere) appearances on the sensory level and, more importantly for my purpose, (mere) assumptions on the cognitive level. The emphasis is on the 'mere', for to call a phenomenon 'phenomenological' implies that beyond what people see or assume there is something more real. But the term 'phenomenology' has another, larger, meaning—developed by Hegel and Husserl—which includes not merely the seductively false appearances and assumptions, but the whole *movement of the mind* away from them towards the ontologically true. It is in this larger sense of the entire process that what I have tried to lay out in these pages is a Phenomenology of Sociology.

I have asserted that *all* social theories which are found interesting involve a certain movement of the mind of the audience who finds them so. These theories implicitly articulate the routinely taken-for-granted assumptions of the audience who finds them interesting, and then deny these presumptions in the name of some higher—or more fundamental—truth. Yet not only is sociology founded upon this phenomenological process, this phenomenological process is equally founded upon sociology, for the original assumptions of each segment of the audience—the starting points of this process—are differentially distributed over social space. Therefore, in order to develop fully a field of inquiry which may be called *The Sociology of the Interesting*, the 'Phenomenology of Sociology', which studies the movement of the audience's mind from one accepted social theory to another, must be combined with the 'Sociology of Phenomenology', which studies the dissimilar baseline theories of diverse lay and professional audience segments from which this phenomenological process begins.

It is important to distinguish the Sociology of Knowledge from the Sociology of the Interesting. The former is essentially a study of beliefs and assumptions; the latter is essentially a study of the breakdown and build up of beliefs and the transformation of assumptions. To be sure, the Sociology of Knowledge has studied the historical succession of ideologies, but, in its classic form at least (Mannheim, 1936), it has studied belief-systems as though they were static phenomena; it has considered the historical succession of belief-systems as the relatively sudden replacement of one static ideology by another static ideology. The Sociology of the Interesting, on the other hand, has a much less static, much more dynamic orientation. It focuses on the exact point at which one belief-system is being transformed into another belief-system. It focuses on the exact point at which the hold of an old theoretical assumption on some individuals or groups has weakened enough for them to begin to find a new—contradictory—theoretical proposition interesting. And it is concerned with discovering the precise sociological and phenomenological mechanisms of change. All this, however, does not mean that the Sociology of Knowledge should be replaced by the Sociology of the Interesting. It does mean that the Sociology of Knowledge should be supplemented by the Sociology of the Interesting, for crucial aspects of our changing theoretical structures which are necessarily obscured from the perspective of the former will be more clearly revealed from the perspective of the latter.

The foregoing discussion of the interesting gives us a model of scientific revolutions quite different from the one given by Thomas Kuhn (1962). Kuhn maintains, roughly, that a concrete experience which is anomalous to a previous set of scientific assumptions and interpretative procedures ('paradigms') motivates scientists to look for a new set of scientific assumptions and interpretative procedures ('paradigms') which explains the anomalous experience better than the old. But to view most scientists as unwilling to make a major change in the accepted conceptual scheme until some concrete anomaly forces them to is to attribute to most scientists a conservatism and lack of personal ambition which surely cannot be that common a personality characteristic even among natural scientists let alone social scientists. In opposition to Kuhn, I would contend that sheer boredom with the old routinely accepted paradigm and desire to make a name for themselves would motivate many scientists to *look for* anomalies unexplainable by the old paradigm but explainable by a new one (preferably of their own devising), rather than merely wait for the anomalies to crop up by themselves. One can acquire more professional status by attaching one's reputation to a rising new paradigm than by being the handmaiden of a declining old paradigm. The best way to make a name for oneself in an intellectual discipline is to be interesting—denying the assumed while affirming the unanticipated.

Yet one must be careful not to go too far. There is a fine but definite line between asserting the surprising and asserting the shocking, between the interesting and the absurd. An interesting proposition, we saw, was one which denied the *weakly held* assumptions of its audience. But those who attempt to deny the *strongly held* assumptions of their audience will have their very sanity called into question.[7] They will be accused of being lunatics; if scientists, they will be called 'crackpots'. If the difference between the inspired and the insane is only in the degree of tenacity of the particular audience assumptions they choose to attack, it is perhaps for this reason that genius has always been considered close to madness.

In this essay, I have tried to put forward a new way of analysing theoretical propositions. I believe it is as important to learn why a theory is found interesting by some audience as it is to ascertain the truth of its content or the logic of its form.

This essay, then, has been both a description and an exhortation. It has been a description insofar as I have tried to designate those factors that have made the writings of great theorists so interesting. It has been an exhortation insofar as I have urged my readers to become more aware of these factors in order to make their own writings more interesting. I contend that the 'generation' of *interesting* theories ought to be the object of as much attention as the 'verification' of *insipid* ones. This report should be regarded as an introductory investigation of that residual category of 'genius' which separates the great theorists from the mediocre.

So what? Who cares?

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NOTES

1 However, a person might find interesting a proposition which affirms one of his assumptions if this assumption has lately been strongly attacked by others. New supports for old suppositions are welcomed by those whose beliefs have been recently weakened. ('Just as I always thought!')

2 The quality of being *imaginative* which interesting theorists are praised for possessing consists less of their ability to imagine inventively something novel than of their ability to imagine empathetically what others consider to be traditional.

3 The Vanguard Assumption of the young is derived from a proposition which has attempted to refute the Contemporary Assumption of the old in the following way. Many propositions which the older generation had found interesting become transformed into assumptions which the younger generation find routine. Consequently, those propositions which have interested the older generation—i.e. those which have attempted to refute their own taken-for-granted assumptions—may no longer appeal to the younger generation because these propositions may no longer have a dialectical impact on the younger generation's own taken-for-granted assumptions. They have become the younger generation's taken-for-granted assumptions! Freudian insights, for instance, do not seem to arouse much interest in the young today because the young today already assume the sex drive to be a prime motivator of human behaviour.

4 Jargon is the failure to translate a proposition from one universe of discourse to another. It retains the 'interestingness' of a proposition by actually re-restricting its audience to those very experts who found it interesting in the first place, for jargon is a meaningful unit of discourse only in relation to the baseline assumption of an intellectual speciality.

5 Although it might be thought that the 'review of the literature' section of research articles and books serves this function, in most cases it does not do so adequately. Most social researchers do not clearly understand that the purpose of their review of the literature is to articulate the assumptions of their audience, and not merely to fulfil a rhetorical ritual. Nor do they clearly understand that the purpose of the rest of their research presentation is to increase our interest by refuting these assumptions, and not merely to 'increase our knowledge' by confirming or ignoring them.

6 Should there be more than one other accepted theory about the topic or should it not be clear what this other accepted theory is, the student will also have to handle the preliminary problem, treated in a previous section, of cohering the various competitors of his own theory into a single rival, before he can even attempt to vanquish them. 'Unite and Conquer' is the motto of every successful social theorist.

7 More precisely: Up to a certain point, the more strongly an audience holds an assumption, the more interesting they will find the proposition which denies it. But beyond this point, the more strongly an audience holds an assumption, the more mad they will consider anyone who attempts to deny it. Anyone who attempts to deny his audience's beliefs about natural and social phenomena past this point is, in effect, attacking his audience's very sanity. The audience, in this case, can save its own sanity only by accusing him of losing his.

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