The Undoing of Humanism: Peter L. Berger's Sociology of Unmasking

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Abstract Over a long and prodigiously fertile academic career, Peter Berger's vision of sociology has consistently emphasized its debunking and unmasking properties. Such properties, Berger contends, are evidence of sociology's humanistic promise. Following a brief description of his early transition from *The Precarious Vision* (a sociological book addressed principally to Christians) to *Invitation to Sociology* (a text keyed to a mostly secular audience), Berger's idea of humanism is described. So, too, are the roles that debunking and unmasking play in its articulation. Debunking and unmasking, conflated by Berger, are then analytically distinguished, historically located, and criticized. *Debunking*, an American specialty, ridicules its targets but explains nothing. *Unmasking*, of European provenance, has pronounced anti-humanist – violent, denunciatory, coercive – tendencies, evidenced in both the French and Bolshevik Revolutions. Accordingly, any defense of unmasking that claims to uphold humanism requires major qualification. The article, as well as assessing Berger's humanism, employs it as an opportunity to think more broadly, and more critically, about the types of debunking/unmasking in modern life.

Keywords Bolshevism · Debunking · French Revolution · Humanism · Sociology · Unmasking

Sociology distinguishes itself from everyday knowledge by demanding a certain rigor of thought that we call scientific or disciplined. Yet few people practice sociology for scientific reasons alone. In the topics we choose, and the arguments we make, moral questions are never very far away. We are concerned about the harms done to others. We are bothered about injustice, variously defined. We quarrel about the meaning of freedom and individualism. We proceed on the basis that some things are worthy and some abhorrent. Scientific discipline, when it works well, is meant to safeguard the results we reach from wishful thinking and *parti pris*. If we are serious about knowledge, we should also be serious about the discovery of uncongenial facts. But our motivation for pursuing knowledge in the first place is typically a nagging question to solve or a persistent worry to confront. And time and again that takes us beyond the protocols of scientific reason.
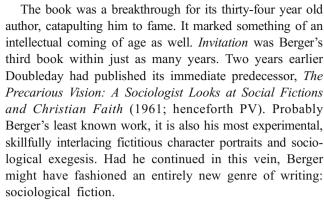
Even so, it is a rare sociologist who deals with moral matters in a robust and systematic way. One major exception is Peter L. Berger, the Austrian-born American sociologist who retired recently from Boston University. A Christian faith, worn lightly and un-dogmatically; a facility with European languages; and a familiarity with the key concepts of Continental existentialism and phenomenology – these qualities have long distinguished Berger from the bulk of his American colleagues. So too has an urbane manner that combines a ready sense of humor with a gift for intriguing book titles – *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies* (1961), *The Precarious Vision* (1961), *The Sacred Canopy* (1967), *A Rumor of Angels* (1969), *Pyramids of Sacrifice* (1974), *The Heretical Imperative* (1979), *A Far Glory* (1992), *Redeeming Laughter* (1997). A consummate stylist who is as likely to quote Robert Musil and Karl Kraus as he is to cite Durkheim and Weber, Berger's work ranges effortlessly across the arcane and the vernacular. No living sociologist has a larger and more active English vocabulary. Perhaps one day someone will explain why Austrians have produced some of the most agile writing in the English language. Aside from Berger himself, think only of Karl Popper, Friedrich Hayek and Joseph Schumpeter.

Now in his early eighties, Berger's teaching career began in 1957 at the Woman's College of the University of North Carolina (now UNC-Greensboro); in 1959 he moved north

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to the Hartford Seminary Foundation (in Connecticut). From there Berger proceeded to the New School (1963–1970), Rutgers University (1970–1979), Boston College (1979–81), and thence to Boston University. A beneficiary of the University Professors' Program established in the 1970s by president John Silber, Berger led a research project on economic culture that produced monographs and edited collections galore, many of which were well reviewed.

But it is his early books that propelled him to academic renown and for which he is best remembered. *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966; co-authored with Thomas Luckmann; henceforth SCR) is among only a handful of texts written since 1945 that are not just *de rigueur* for specialists in a specific field, the sociology of knowledge in this case, but famous across sociology as a whole. I doubt *Social Construction* is much read today by generalists; it is certainly the least lively, most ponderous and jargon-loaded of Berger's works. That matters little. Textbooks ubiquitously reference it. Sociologists think they know it and think that everyone else knows it or should know it. And the *topos* "social construction," and with it an entire attitude towards sociological understanding, is ineffaceably linked to Berger's name. With faultless generational timing, he and his co-author combined what only few authors could then or since provide: the *gravitas* of multi-lingual fluency; a grasp of philosophical concepts that at times seemed as vertiginous as an LSD trip; a synthesis that found room for Marx as well as for Durkheim and Weber, for role theory, reference group theory and social psychology; radical-sounding terms like reification and legitimation; and, not least, democratic credentials: departing from its earlier focus on ideas, ideologies and *Weltanschauungen*, Berger and Luckmann's version of the sociology of knowledge embraced "everything that passes for 'knowledge' in society," from the most grandiose to the most commonplace (SCR: 14–15). Admittedly, the phrase *social construction of reality* is today so clichéd that it is hard to recall the frisson it once ignited or even what it originally meant. Berger is loath to complain. Intellectual banalization is, after all, the tribute posterity pays to an idea's infant charisma.

A major factor contributing to Berger's becoming a sociological household name was the extraordinary success of a text that predated *Social Construction*, anticipated many of its key themes, and rendered them in more graceful prose: *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective* (1963; henceforth IS). Composed in under a month, it has sold over a million copies in English alone, and is now available in twenty-one foreign languages. No sprawling textbook busied by graphs, boxed tables, garish photos, shiny paper and other sundry accoutrements designed to transform education into entertainment, *Invitation to Sociology* offers something unique: a terse, muscular and profound primer that helps us reconsider how to live.

The book was a breakthrough for its thirty-four year old author, catapulting him to fame. It marked something of an intellectual coming of age as well. *Invitation* was Berger's third book within just as many years. Two years earlier Doubleday had published its immediate predecessor, *The Precarious Vision: A Sociologist Looks at Social Fictions and Christian Faith* (1961; henceforth PV). Probably Berger's least known work, it is also his most experimental, skillfully interlacing fictitious character portraits and sociological exegesis. Had he continued in this vein, Berger might have fashioned an entirely new genre of writing: sociological fiction.

The book was also personally daring. From a position of radical Protestantism, indebted to the existential theology of Karl Barth and particularly Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Berger challenged fellow believers to return to the basics of their faith and to recognize the inhuman side of Christianity as an ossified and corrupted religion. Religions such as Christianity, Berger charged, repeatedly validated society's "carnival of masks," giving the "illusion of absoluteness to one particular coloration of the social stage" (PV: 21). Condensing Sartre, Marx, and Heidegger, he accused Christianity of bad faith, of legitimating power, and of obscuring the active choice believers must make if they are to live authentic and individual lives. Atheists were right to charge religions, Christianity included, with deception and self-righteousness. They were right to see religion as a distorted projection of human qualities. They were right to dispute the conflation of religion and ethics.

The Christian alternative to atheism was, paradoxically, a rejection of religion and an affirmation of *faith without fictions*, one that opposed the figure of Jesus Christ to society's institutionalized callousness and cruelty. "It is this figure of the crucified one which continues to haunt both the oppressors and oppressed." Jesus's example "calls us to an exodus, not only of the Egypt of social mythology but also out of the Zion of religious security. The exodus takes us out of the holy city, out past the scene of cross and resurrection, and beyond into the desert in which God is waiting. In this desert all horizons are open" (PV, pp. 22–23).

Berger's passionate Christian declaration was too alien to have garnered a wide sociological readership. Accordingly, in the transition from *The Precarious Vision* to *Invitation to Sociology*, *credo* cedes ground to *cogito*, "faith" (prominent in the subtitle of *Vision*) to a "humanist perspective" (the subtitle of *Invitation*), the adjective broad enough to embrace believers, agnostics and atheist alike. Other differences are just as evident. In *The Precarious Vision*, Berger appears to have hesitated as to which among competing abbreviations of sociology's approach he should adopt. Was it a *vision,* an *imagination* or a mode of *consciousness*? All of these terms spoke to aspects of his personae.

But two of the three brought baggage that was uncongenial for an author seeking to establish a distinctive sociological voice. "Vision" carried religious connotations ill suited to a predominantly secular sociological audience.[1] "Imagination" was better, evoking the poetic side of sociology that Berger so often affirms. But it was strongly associated with C. Wright Mills. The danger of playing second fiddle was obvious. Already, *The Precarious Vision* looked dangerously close to being one long appendix of Mills, as the book opened with extensive references to him.

Denoting both a philosophical preoccupation and a psychological reality, *consciousness* was, on the face of it, more turgid than *vision* and blander than *imagination*. But its generic, free-floating quality - redolent of George Herbert Mead, William James, Henri Bergson and Edmund Husserl - made it roomy enough for Berger to fill it with conceptual furniture of his own choosing. Accordingly "Sociology as a Form of Consciousness" is the anchor chapter in *Invitation to Sociology*. An added bonus to *consciousness* was a word that straddled mental and moral, ideational and agentic, aspects of human life; it alerted readers to not just a state of mind in some neutral sense, but to a state of *awareness*, namely that "freedom begins with consciousness" of the largely fictitious world in which we live (PV: 66). It is often said that sociology is deterministic. That in good measure is true simply in virtue of sociology's claim to be a science. Science entails causal attribution; the idea of freedom is utterly alien to a causal frame of reference.

Yet change the frame and sociology can itself be interpreted in an existential way. It is, after all, a discipline that reveals a creature willing to act as a role-player, as a person often content to be absorbed into his occupational function, as an individual who behaves like a "social generality" (Heidegger's *das Man*) rather than a unique being. Once one appreciates that we play on a stage rather than being confined to a cage, horizons of choice come prominently into view: we become conscious that the "social sciences present us not so much with man the slave as with man the clown" (PV: 65). By showing us how we live, and explaining the social reasons for living the way we do, sociology opens up the prospect of questioning how we live and prompts us to consider whether we might live differently. The comic and playful features of Man's existence, as much as those of joy, fear and awe, illuminate the ever-present possibility of standing outside oneself, shaking oneself free of social labels; the Greek *ekstasis*.

Despite adaptations in terminology and, later, a widening of empirical interests, Berger's work has consistently asserted sociology's moral impulse. That should already be evident but can be given further specification. From his earliest published work to his memoir of 2011, Berger has repeatedly proclaimed his revulsion towards racism, the persecution of homosexuals, and capital punishment. In each case he asserts that sociology itself offers grounds for humane critique. Sociology shows that race is a label that becomes a reality, typically noxious. It shows that sexual identity is unfixed by biology. It shows that it is people who decide to kill, not a law that decides for them.

More generally, Berger claims for sociology a *humanistic* orientation. I will examine that now together with his partner contention that the sociological consciousness is integrally *debunking* and *unmasking*. Berger affirms not simply the compatibility of these motifs but their conceptual interlocking. In contrast, I will show the tensions among them. On my account, the debunking/unmasking style that Berger applauds requires a robust set of qualifications because that style is just as likely to produce polarization and cruelty than it is to encourage the honest and tolerant society he upholds. Far from cultivating humanism, debunking and unmasking have, since the eighteenth century, been a persistent and salient means of destroying it.

What is Humanistic Sociology?

That sociology is a humanistic enterprise is among Berger's firmest precepts. He shares that belief with a number of other notable sociologists, including Lewis Coser (1972), Robert Nisbet (1976) and Andrew Abbott (2007). And though he now questions whether the term *humanism* is entirely appropriate for his purposes, Berger continues to endorse full bloodedly the approach it signals to him. His memoir, *Adventures of an Accidental Sociologist* (2011; henceforth AAS), telegraphs it this way. A humanistic approach is one that stresses the interdisciplinary character of sociology, envisaging "sociology as one of the 'humanities' (or *Geisteswissenschaften* [cultural sciences]), closely related to history and philosophy but also to the intuitions of the literary imagination" (AAS: 25; cf. 40, 76). Or as he puts it elsewhere, sociology "takes its place in the company of the sciences that deal with man *as* man". Without a "continuous conversation with both history and philosophy," sociology would lose "its proper object of inquiry" (SCR: 188; cf. IS: 168).

A humanistic approach is one that further emphasizes "the contribution of sociology to a humane society, based on its debunking of the myths legitimating cruelty and oppression." Sociology is "akin to comedy because it debunks the social fictions" (AAS 25, 73). It is thus a legatee of satirical as well as Enlightenment visions of the social world, reinforced by modern existentialism. Two other sources of Berger's debunking predilections are, so to speak,

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[1] Admittedly, the religious connotations of "vision" can be readily secularized. An example is Schumpeter's (1954: 41) depiction of the "vision" of great economists. Vision is a "preanalytic cognitive act that supplies the raw material for the analytic effort."

more local. As a graduate student at the New School during the early fifties, he had been gripped by a course taught by Albert Salomon entitled "Balzac as a sociologist." The émigré scholar introduced students to a systematic reading of the clutch of novels that Balzac called the *Human Comedy*. They revealed to Berger a perspective "normally hidden from view and denied to polite circles," which is to say, a "perspective that was inherently irreverent, debunking, subversive" (AAS: 12). Debunking was enjoyable in its own right. It was a boon to the curious. More than that, however, it furnished sociology with a more elevated, liberating purpose:

> to free individuals from illusions and to help make society more humane…Sociology derives its moral justification from its debunking of the fictions that serve as alibis for oppression and cruelty…Sociology liberates by facilitating a standing outside one's social roles (literally, an "ecstasy" – *ekstasis*) and thereby a realization of one's freedom (AAS: 76).

The other source of Berger's attachment to debunking is forcefully articulated in *The Precarious Vision*. In *Vision*, the dress rehearsal for *Invitation to Sociology*, Berger reminds his readers that while Judaic-Christian scripture recounts how God created the heavens and the earth, and then created Man, it never says that God created Society. Man did that all by himself. For this very reason, the Judaic-Christian tradition has the potential to be the most radical of social debunkers. After all, "Man enters into the world naked, without a name, without social roles, without involvement in the great institutions" (PV: 196). "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return" (Job 1:21). It is human beings who create their "masks and cloaks" (PV: 19), whereas for God "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free" (Gal. 3:28). Our modern term *person* derives from a Latin term for "mask." But God, Berger declares, is "no respecter of persons" in that dramatic sense, no reader of law books, political constitutions or corporation mission statements. God sees us for who we are as opposed to what we pretend to be. Because "Christian humanism" sees through "the deceptions of social structure, through the web of bad faith and rationalization," it assumes by implication a "debunking, unmasking character" (PV: 196, 228–9).

It is natural that a memoir covering the whole span of a career will truncate each of the themes it touches on. *Adventures of an Accidental Sociologist* emphasizes only two ingredients of humanism. I have just described them. Sociology is humanistic by being a discipline on the interface of the humanities. Sociology is humanistic by being humane, and, correlatively, by unmasking social fictions. In *Invitation to Sociology*, however, one sees a much richer, more variegated rendering of humanism. At least six elements, many overlapping, are explicitly mentioned. Sociology is

humanistic insofar as it promotes irony and skepticism, not least in regard to its own procedures and findings. In this way, sociology joins the broader "human comedy" it studies (IS: 165). Sociology is humanistic when it concerns itself with "the human condition." Precisely because the social world is of such salient importance to human existence, "sociology comes time and again on the fundamental question of what it means to be a man and what it means to be a man in a particular situation" (IS: 166). Sociology is humanistic wherever it discovers, through its own practice, "human values" such as "humility before the immense richness of the world one is investigating, an effacement of the self in the search for understanding, honesty and precision in method" and a willingness to be proved wrong (IS: 166).

Sociology is humanistic to the degree it defends the space in which humanistic learning preeminently occurs: the university. That is connected to the obligation to fight for the freedom to pursue knowledge wherever it takes us, resisting the bureaucratic and commercial seductions of non-scholarly powers (IS: 172). Sociology is humanistic when it engages in liberal learning because liberal education offers the prospect of "intellectual liberation;" such an education assumes that it is "better to be conscious than unconscious and that consciousness is a condition of freedom." In turn, such consciousness upbraids sociologist to be "less stolid in their prejudices, a little more careful in their own commitments and a little more skeptical about the commitments of others" (IS: 178). Moreover, Berger suggests that sociology is humanistic by being "motivated by human needs rather than by grandiose political programs;" it enjoins the sociologist "to commit oneself selectively and economically rather than to consecrate oneself to a totalitarian faith, to be compassionate and skeptical as the same time." In all these ways, sociology attains the "dignity of political relevance as well, not because it has a particular political ideology of its own to offer, but just because it has not" (IS: 171).

As well as sociology's being humanistic it is also *humanizing* for sociologists themselves and, by extension, for members of the broader society to the extent to which they come to think sociologically. Sociology is not a philosophy. Nor can it ground a philosophical anthropology. Nor does it necessarily humanize social reality; if it did, sociological practitioners would be less deterministic than they so often are. Yet, as we saw earlier, sociology's analysis of social fictions is a perspective that enables us to refuse, reject and modify them.

In a similar way, while sociology cannot "by itself be a school of compassion, it can illuminate the mystifications that commonly cover up pitilessness" (IS: 161). How does it do that? By, paradoxically, reasserting a common humanity in the very process of relativizing absolute claims. Sociology shows that much that is considered essential is a "socially assigned identity," often an invidious one. To

impute ontological significance to racial or sexual categories is to mistake the artificial for the human. Sociology explains how such significance comes to be attached and accomplished. It induces "skepticism about the conceptual apparatus with which society assigns some human beings to darkness and others to light" (IS: 159).

If a humanistic orientation provides something of the moral framework of sociology, the moral purpose that animates it, debunking or unmasking (Berger uses the terms synonymously) furnishes its chief tool. Debunking, he says, is integral to the "logic" of sociological thinking, and sociological thinking is itself a "peculiarly modern and Western cogitation" (Berger IS: 37; cf. PV: 19.) The centrality that Berger accords debunking in the sociological enterprise is nowhere more evident than in the chapter of *Invitation* to which I have already alluded, "Sociology as a Form of Consciousness." To be sure, three other "dimensions of sociological consciousness" are also there itemized: unrespectability, the relativizing style and cosmopolitanism. But debunking has primacy – literally and conceptually: it comes first in the exposition and pervades all the other three dimensions.

Sociological *cosmopolitanism* debunks by offering an "emancipated vista on human life" that explodes "narrow parochialism" (IS: 53). Sociological *relativization*, the intellectual child of nineteenth century historicism, debunks by exposing absolute claims to be partial and perspectival (IS: 48). Sociological *unrespectability* debunks by according specific disciplinary attention to the "other America" of the hobo, the jazz player, the prostitute, the delinquent, and their attendant sub-cultures, each of which finds conventional society a problem, a menace and a sham. For the sociologist, conformity requires as much explanation as deviance does; in such wise sociology is naturally irreverent (IS: 45).

It is also inherently skeptical. Sociology conceives society as the "hidden fabric of an edifice, the outside façade of which hides that fabric from the common view" (IS: 30). It is sociology's job to pierce that façade, to "see through" and "look behind" hackneyed definitions of the situation, standard versions of everyday life, publicly approved interpretations. Sociological understanding invokes "latent" as well as "manifest" functions. It highlights the role of ideology. It uncovers the opaque social roots of religion. Sociology as a mode of modern consciousness "presupposes a measure of suspicion" about the veracity of official accounts. As such, it is a legatee of Nietzsche's "art of mistrust," though, unlike Nietzsche, democratic in its instincts (IS: 30). Nothing escapes sociology's scrutiny, whether love or politics. Nothing is taken for granted, least of all the voices of the privileged. Accordingly, "The sociologist will be driven time and again, by the very logic of his discipline, to debunk the social systems he is studying. This unmasking tendency need not

necessarily be due to the sociologist's temperament or inclination…. [He] is compelled by what he is doing to fly in the face of what those around him take for granted. In other words, we would contend that the roots of the debunking motif in sociology are not psychological but methodological. The sociological frame of reference, with its built-in procedure of looking for levels of reality other than those given in the official interpretations, carries with it a logical imperative to unmask the pretensions and the propaganda by which men cloak their actions with each other. The unmasking imperative is one of the characteristics of sociology particularly at home in the temper of the modern era" (IS: 51).

Humanism and Debunking

When given the opportunity almost 20 years later to revisit sociology's method in *Sociology Reinterpreted: An Essay on Method and Vocation* (1981; jointly written with Hansfried Kellner; henceforth SR), Berger continued to count debunking as the pivotal sociological instrument. But his message was more ambivalent than it had been in *Invitation to Sociology*. It was also more cautious. Two caveats are emphasized. The first is that unmasking, as a subversive sociological "way of seeing," is a purely negative disciplinary attribute: negative in the sense of negating official definitions of the situation. Conversely, wherever sociology seeks to take up the role of advocacy it is "at odds with" itself, because sociology is then helping to set up a new order which, overlaid with rules, methodologically invites a new exposure. Yet, second, the temptation towards advocacy is great because debunking can be interpreted to mean that what can be deconstructed can be reconstructed; unmasking coincides, for many, with the ambition to remake society, to improve and change it, to make it more humane. Puncturing received wisdom and engaging in amelioration or social transformation seem to go together. "Not only is the world not what it appears to be, but it could be different from what it is" (SR: 13–14; italics omitted). The problem with such a view, however, is that it contains a rationalizing view of the world that is untenable, at least in its radical form. We have less confidence today about the human possibilities of social engineering, about the "rational 'makability'" of social relations, about the fabrication of society, than our Enlightenment forebears and their imitators did. We have more experience than they had of what happens when groups seek to manufacture a New Man or a New Society. And much of that experience is chilling. Indeed, "it could be argued that both modernity and modern secular rationality are today in a state of crisis" (SR: 14). For this reason, Berger counsels an avoidance of both utopianism as well as positivism; "a *reprise de conscience* of sociology

will, perhaps more than anything else, involve *a recognition of limits*" (SR: 22; italics in original).

Not that *Invitation to Sociology* had been unaware of other problems as well. Specifically, Berger warns sociologists against crude muckraking, romantic posturing or, conversely, plain cynicism (as in IS: 46). But these unwanted associations are raised in passing, residual to the main theme of debunking which, as we have seen, is advertised as sociology's principal mode of seeing. Suppose, however, we look more closely at the debilities of debunking and unmasking. Suppose we bring them center stage. When we do we find that they have profoundly anti-humanistic uses. We also find that it is historical investigation, far more than sociological schematics, that helps us locate the most dubious and dangerous aspects of the debunking/unmasking mentality. Returning to the roots of these terms not only helps to clarify them. It also accords with Berger's own insistence that sociology is humanistic to the extent to which it engages with history (and philosophy and literature – the humanities). Ironically, had Berger been more attentive to the historical origins and uses of the terms he employs, he might also have been more dubious of their sociological utility. "Whatever the demands of a social theory," Robert Nisbet (1969: 304) wrote, "the first demands to be served are those of the social reality we find alone in the historical record." The historical record of unmasking reveals a concept stained in blood.

Debunking (originally, de-bunking) is a term that first came into use to describe a peculiarly American form of satire associated with a group of journalists and novelists – notably Sinclair Lewis, Don Marquis and, at its epicentre, H.L. Mencken – who thrived in the period 1910 to 1930. "History is more or less bunk," Henry Ford announced laconically to the *Chicago Tribune* reporter Charles N. Wheeler on 25th May 1916, delivering the great car maker's verdict on the uselessness of tradition as a guide for modern thinking. *Debunking* was coined soon after in William E. Woodward's satirical novel, *Bunk* (1923). Its chief protagonist, Michael Webb, after explaining that bunk, "is the diminutive, or pet name, for buncombe," - "a kind of illusion" - describes its antithesis as "intellectual deflation." De-bunking is "the science of reality." The foe of all that is mindless and jejune, de-bunking extracts the bunk out of things. And the reality that de-bunking exposes "is to bunk like a lighted match to powder" (Woodward 1923: 2–7, 158–9).

As an intellectual current, debunking revelled in assailing tradition, provincial manners, vice-crusading, Protestant moralizing, linguistic flapdoodle, humanitarian "benign booziness," Wilsonian internationalism and middle class mediocrity (a good overview is Martin 1984). Debunkers sought to rescue the American language from the corruption of sentimentality and obfuscation. Unlike the chief European *unmaskers*, such as Marx or Freud, debunkers never aspired to grand theory or system building. Not for them the fetishism of commodities, the peregrinations of the dialectic or the return of the repressed. Debunkers were aesthetic provocateurs. Their darts consisted of barbed apothegms and finely turned phrases. They deplored, as Marx did, bourgeois complacency, but socialism was worse, a conspiracy of politicians and idealists and the mob to muzzle the nonconformist. Characteristically it was Nietzsche, of all the European unmaskers, whom they most admired, warming to his reckless individualism, his brash courage, his emotional aristocratism. Such strains are audible in Mencken's (1982 [1919–1920]: 11, 63) definition of democracy as "the inferior man's hatred of the man who is having a better time," and his definition of faith as "an illogical belief in the occurrence of the improbable." Nor were other debunkers safe from Mencken's scorched-earth assaults. Using a technique that C. Wright Mills would perfect many years later in his dismissal of Talcott Parsons, Mencken juxtaposes chunks of Thorstein Veblen's serpentine prose (it is "impossible to imagine worse English, within the limits of intelligible grammar") to Mencken's own spare and elegant translations. "To say what might have been said on a postage stamp he took more than a page in his book" [*The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 1899]. And even that distillation, Mencken makes plain, reveals only the tortured platitudes of The Great Thinker, this "doctor obscurus." Veblen's other work is no better, as evidenced by *The Higher Learning in America*'s bitter "reboilings of old bones" (Mencken 1982 [1919]: quotes straddle 265–276).[2]

The sheer playfulness of debunkers, their loathing of all moral and political campaigns, leads Berger in one of his later books, *Redeeming Laughter* (1997; henceforth RL), to describe Mencken as a purveyor of "wit" rather than satire (Berger does acknowledge the "satirical element" in Mencken as well: RL: 158.) On such a distinction, Jonathan Swift and George Orwell are satirists whereas P.G. Wodehouse and Oscar Wilde are purveyors of wit. The difference is that while satirists use comedy as a moral and political weapon - against individuals, groups, entire cultures - witticists eschew lofty causes altogether which are invariably rendered amusing or ridiculous or vulgar. The witticist is content to defenestrate modern culture, so called. Rescuing it would consume too many evenings.

But whether debunking springs from the breezy nonchalance of wit or the moral passion of satire, it does not seem especially sociological. To be sure, we would not be human if we did not enjoy the take-down of a pompous ass and an inflated creed. And in an age where sensitivity management stupefies the thoughtless and intimidates the rest, what could

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2 Mencken (1982 [1949]: 265) recalled in a short foreword written several years after this *Smart Set* review - "Professor Veblen" [1919] - that: "I heard from some of [Veblen's] friends that my onslaught had greatly upset him, and, in fact, made him despair of the Republic. He died in 1929."

be more satisfying – and more needed - than the savage mockery of the debunker? Irreverence has a hallowed place in any culture that claims to be alive. But satire and wit and debunking *explain* nothing nor is it obvious that they help explain it. They accuse, ridicule, deride. Their stock in trade is caricature – of the bourgeois, the Puritan, the philistine, the socialist, the democrat, the housewife.

Sociology, in contrast, exists to explain something – courses of action, patterns of conduct, the impact of the unexpected on the unsuspecting. It seeks to understand those it wishes to explain. And if, as Berger puts it, "satire is at its core an act of cursing" (RL: 171) that assertion appears to contradict flatly the humanism he earlier enjoined. The reader may recall Berger's description of sociological humanism as "humility before the immense richness of the world one is investigating, an effacement of the self in the search for understanding, honesty and precision in method" and a willingness to be proved wrong (IS: 166). William James (2000 [1899]: 267) put it somewhat differently when he warned of "the stupidity and injustice of our opinions, so far as they deal with alien lives."

But the depiction of lives as alien, the reduction of biography to parody and a state of consciousness to idiocy, is the debunker's forté. Undoctrinaire sociology, on the contrary, aspires to make lives less alien: to see the sense in them, to grant them a modicum of dignity that is not immediately obvious to the cynic, and to entertain the possibility that "the subject judged knows a part of the world of reality which the judging spectator fails to see" (ibid: 268). Weber's writings on the emotional world of the early Puritans brim with pathos not Mandarin disdain. Durkheim reminded hard core atheists that all religions were true in their own way and that the simplest believers who sense the reality of the sacred, have understood, have felt, something that their deracinated detractors ignore.

If debunking is associated historically with American iconoclasm towards provincial values, *unmasking* first came to prominence during the French Revolution as a mode of revolutionary denunciation. Especially in its Jacobin phase, the trope was employed to root out "enemies of the people" and "traitors of the revolution." Unmasking was a mode of rhetorical mass mobilization. Its advocates were determined to rip off the masks of conspirators, false patriots, and insincere republicans. Discover the miscreant; expose him; punish him. Educate others through the example of his crime. This was unmasking's accusatory and punitive logic (Jordan 1999: 27). Edmund Burke's counter-attack on the luminary myth of the Revolution – its metaphors of light and illumination – is well known. His *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1999 [1790]) boils with indignation towards those among Rousseau's legatees who worshipped "naked reason," who tore off "the decent drapery of life," and who imagined their

metaphysics to be "rays of light which pierce into a dense medium." The transparency of human beings that unmasking presupposed was a brutal fiction. Burke thundered: "We shall not light up our temple from that unhallowed fire" (quotes on pp. 182, 171, 153, 186).[3]

But even the French revolutionaries themselves, and almost at once, hit upon a major snag entailed in unmasking. It was expressed trenchantly by Georges Jacques Danton (1759–1794): "We must pursue traitors everywhere, whatever their disguise, but we must be careful to distinguish between error and crime. The will of the people is that Terror should be the order of the day, but that it should be directed against the real enemies of the Republic and against them alone. It is not the people's will that the man whose only fault is a lack of revolutionary vigor should be treated as though he were guilty" (quoted in Andress 2005: 253–4).

The unmasking theme was so pervasive that it led even ultra-radical opponents of the Church to be accused by Danton of "anti-religious masquerades." After all, such persons could simply be feigning; their loathing of the clerisy might just be a ruse. Who could be sure? Perplexity about good and bad, legitimate and unjustifiable, correct and mistaken unmasking soon issued in a proliferation of further distinctions among the zealous: denunciation versus slander; the denunciation of injustice versus the denunciation of an individual; and, in many permutations, denouncing (*dénonciation*) versus informing (*délation*).[4]

A key difficulty, of course, was the impossibility of discerning with confidence the mainsprings of the human heart, of drilling down to the core of being – and inferring what motive or motives actually animate a person's conduct. You might protest your innocence but protesting too much simply confirms your guilt. Kindness, generosity and sincerity are always open to being interpreted as masks of darker purposes. As Hannah Arendt (1963: 56) observed, "the same sad logic of the human heart, which has almost automatically caused modern 'motivational research' to develop into an eerie sort of filing cabinet for human vices, into a veritable science of misanthropy, made Robespierre and his followers, once they had equated virtue with the

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[3] Thomas Carlyle, a conservative who also wrote a book on the French Revolution, took a far more critical view of custom than Burke did. In *Sartor Resartus* (1994 [1836]: 304, 125), Carlyle claimed that custom habituated humans to stupidity. Burke would have shuddered at the contention of Carlyle's alter ego, Professor Diogenes Teufelsdröckh (= God Begotten Devil's Dung), that "The beginning of Wisdom is to look fixedly on Clothes, or even with armed eyesight, till they become *transparent*," p. 170 (emphasis in the original).

[4] Revolutionary thinkers such as Marat, Mercier and Desmoulins found the distinction between denunciation and delation inherently unstable, so that even "informing" took on positive hues. On this debate, as arcane as it was deadly for those caught within its casuistry, see Guilhaumou 1994 passim and Lucas 1996: 768,785.
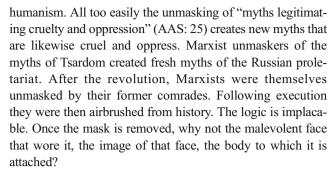
qualities of the human heart, see intrigue and calumny, treachery and hypocrisy everywhere."

Unmasking – "the search for an ulterior motive behind every action" (Mandelstam 1999 [1970]: 135) - reappeared with even greater brutality, and for a longer period, in the Soviet Union between the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and Stalin's death in 1953. It was applied extensively in the Moscow Trials of the 1930s to denounce Communist Party officials as renegades and traitors. But in Russia we see a phenomenon that was only marginal in France: the symbiosis of masking and unmasking. Applications for jobs in the Soviet Union required extensive documentation of one's class background. To avoid the stigma of belonging, for instance, to the petty nobility or some other anathematized class or status, people regularly re-wrote their past. Avoiding detection was key to survival. The Bolshevik regime, thus, provided perverse inducements *for masking* – a kind of totalitarian face work: "Many people, seeking to overcome such 'spoilt biographies,' concealed their origins or past activities. They transformed kulak into poor peasants, priests into village teachers, and traders into workers; they omitted any mention of service in the White army or prior membership in other parties. In other words, they 'masked' their true identities with fictive ones claiming the sort of social background most favored by the Soviet system: that of workers or poor peasants…. 'Masking' was thus common from the early 1920s on, practiced by party members and ordinary citizens alike in order to gain acceptance and secure advancement" (Goldman 2011: 56–7; cf. Fitzpatrick 2005).

Peter Berger, we saw, assumes that unmasking offers a salutary means of puncturing superficial respectability. That is one of its key attractions to the sociologist. Yet, in Russia, the practice of unmasking offered a means of *acquiring* respectability, of establishing one's politically correct credentials. Here is Nadezhda Mandelstam, one of the epoch's greatest witnesses, quoting the clichés of the Soviet Communist Party during the late twenties and early thirties:

"In their struggle for ideological purity, the authorities did everything to encourage 'fearless unmaskers' who, 'without respect for persons,' showed up 'survivals of the old psychology' in their colleagues. Reputations were pricked like soap bubbles, and the 'unmaskers' quickly climbed the ladder of promotion. Every official who moved up the scale in those years was bound to use this method at least once – that is, 'unmask' his immediate superior, as the only way of taking his place" (Mandelstam 1999 [1970]: 90; cf. Grossman 1995 [1985]: 225–6, 334, 433, 511, 580, 628, 776).

If unmasking conduces to accusation and imposture, intimidation and violence, then it is an idea markedly at odds with humanism. All too easily the unmasking of "myths legitimating cruelty and oppression" (AAS: 25) creates new myths that are likewise cruel and oppress. Marxist unmaskers of the myths of Tsardom created fresh myths of the Russian proletariat. After the revolution, Marxists were themselves unmasked by their former comrades. Following execution they were then airbrushed from history. The logic is implacable. Once the mask is removed, why not the malevolent face that wore it, the image of that face, the body to which it is attached?

I have been describing violent situations. Yet even in its pacific modes, both unmasking and debunking rest on an implausible assumption about the transparency of human identity and of human narrative. To show why, I turn now to examine a kind of exposure that is near ubiquitous in modern culture: *character unmasking/debunking*. (Since I will be considering our own period, in which the distinctive meanings of unmasking and debunking have evaporated, I will resort henceforth to the conventional conflation of terms.) It bears emphasis that character unmasking – in my restricted usage, the debunking of greatness - is not a sport in which Peter Berger engages let alone applauds. As we have seen, his preoccupation is with something empirically different: unmasking social "facades," and "seeing through" official "versions of reality" and "publicly approved interpretations" (IS: 34–5).

But when a sociologist endorses the "art of mistrust" (IS: 30); when he finds profit in exposing "middle class, respectable, publicly approved values" (IS: 37); when he insists that sociology carries with it a "logical imperative to unmask the pretensions and propaganda by which men cloak their actions with each other"- when he sanctions all this, it is but a short and natural step to unmasking individuals who are deemed the bearers of these structures and values.

Character Unmasking – Or the Unmasking of Individual Greatness

To unmask persons is to do more than display them in an unflattering light, to show their unappealing qualities. A warts-and-all portrait complicates our sense of the person so painted; it makes them look lifelike; it solicits sympathy through evoking complexity. In contrast, the unmasker's art is the cartoon. Character must be radically simplified, reduced to a nucleus that once magnified can be seen for what it is: something detestable. The unmasking predilection is, in addition, always unidirectional – upwards. One does not expose people who are, by common consent, crooks or incompetents; they have no regard worth confiscating. And, at the extreme, psychopaths such as Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Pol Pot are beyond unmasking; nothing remains of

their reputation to savage – or salvage (at least, in the West at the present time; Hitler is a hero to many Islamists, while Stalin and Mao still have their loyal admirers in the Russian Federation and the PRC). Instead one unmasks the putatively good to show that it is evil in disguise.

Politicians of every stripe are regularly debunked. But because politics is understood by most sensible observers to be an ethically fraught occupation, bound at some point to confront the challenge of *les mains sales*, and because of our lingering, pre-modern sense that politicians have a right to a private life, we moderns are accustomed to judging politicians on a modest human scale. Moreover, to the degree that politics as a profession has sunk in public estimation, so expectations of political probity have likewise diminished. Religious persons, so-called, form an entirely different category. The pious are supposed to be intrinsically good, to possess a wholesomeness, an ethical integration, lacking in ordinary mortals. Accordingly, religious figures deemed pious are never entitled to have a private life discordant with their public deeds and professions. We do not expect them to be consistently good tempered or lacking in human frailty. We are happy to grant them some modicum of human weakness; indeed their very piety, we think, is evidenced by their continual struggle against their all too human vulnerability. Nor does our attribution of piety necessarily entail our sharing's that individual's beliefs. But we do expect the pious to practice what they preach, we assume that their actions are motivated by lofty goals, and that their endeavors are, at the very least harmless, and optimally beneficial.

Piety is the holy grail of the debunker.[5] And in modern times no one has found it more often, or exposed its soiled contents more assiduously, than Christopher Hitchens. Characteristic is his moral defrocking of Mother Teresa (born Agnes Bojaxhiu in Skopje, Albania) and the bizarre happenings at her Calcutta clinic, the Home for the Dying. Hitchens's polemic deploys a standard repertoire of unmasking techniques, exposing Mother Teresa as a rank hypocrite practicing beliefs both wildly eccentric and humanly damaging, while bemoaning the credulity of those who lend her esteem. Her solicitousness to brutal dictators such as the Haitian Duvalier clan; her deliberate restriction of effective analgesics to the terminally ill (despite huge sums of money at her disposal) on the grounds that suffering is itself a path to God; her penchant for providence rather than planning, inspiration rather than careful diagnosis; her role as an emissary of Papal power; her covert baptizing of Muslims and Hindus in the last moments of their agony - these are some of the rockets launched by Hitchens's Katyusha. Drawing on first person accounts of the Home

for the Dying, including medical testimony of doctors and nurses, Hitchens concludes that Mother Teresa's project is "not the honest relief of suffering but the promulgation of a cult based on death and suffering and subjection." Her "questionable motives and patently confused sociological policy" betray "deceit, pretense and hypocrisy." Her "affectation of modesty and humiliation masks both greed and arrogance." Still, Hitchens affirms that his principal argument is not with the deceiver but with the deceived. If Mother Teresa is the adored object of many credulous and uncritical observers, then the blame is not hers, or not hers alone. In the gradual manufacture of an illusion, the conjurer is only the instrument of the audience (Hitchens 1995: 15; previous quotes, in order, are from 41, 37, 47, 48).

The lamentable truth is that "the rich world likes and wishes to believe that someone, somewhere is doing something for the Third World. For this reason, it does not inquire too closely into the motives or practices or anyone who fulfills, however vicariously, this mandate" (ibid.: 49). Hitchens's double lead followed by the right cross – indicting imposture (of Mother Teresa), and condemning the complicity of the gullible – is the debunker's knockout punch.

The devastating impact of Hitchens's book owes much to its denunciatory form. No ambivalence is allowed to intrude on the judgment. The idea that portraits might be one-sided is entirely alien to the unmasker's art. His crayon slashes as if perspective were a technique yet to be discovered. In its absence, we are handed a binary opposition and must choose on which side we stand: is Mother Teresa good or bad, sincere or a fraud? The answer is, after Hitchens's indictment, self-evident: bad and a fraud. Because we are offered evidence of only one side of that polarity, to make the decision on the other side of it would be senseless; it would compound credulity with irrationality. The unmasker is an iconoclast; and shattered reputations – Henry Kissinger, William Jefferson Clinton, Mother Teresa – can no more be vindicated than they can be repaired. If we end *The Missionary Position* on a note of faint weariness, it is probably because we have known from the first page where is leading, and because "a taboo can be broken only so many times" (Paglia 2006: 175). It is also because we sense that the degree of transparency that unmasking supposes is epistemologically simplistic, a point to which I return.

Two qualifications on the foregoing merit attention. A debunker or unmasker in one situation can contest that mentality in another; for that reason, it is more accurate to talk about a debunking style rather than a debunking writer. Hitchens, again, is a case in point. Mother Teresa, Henry Kissinger and Bill Clinton were fair game. But Hitchens fiercely objected to Gore Vidal's and Noam Chomsky's and Edward Said's debunking of the Bush administration's US policy in Iraq and the Middle East, and of George W. himself.

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[5] Piety is an attribution in the same way that goodness is. One cannot describe oneself as pious and be considered as pious by others.

It was not particular statements alone that Hitchens (2010: 394; cf. 415) found irresponsible in the remarks of his ex-friends and former comrades. It was their recycled, dogmatic and tedious conclusion "that if the United States was doing something, then that thing could not *by definition* be a moral or ethical action." On Hitchens's account, such comprehensive debunking, one that suspects the worst in every action and for that very reason finds it, that refuses to appraise issues on their individual merits, is as puerile and self-deceptive as it is politically somnambulant.

Hitchens might have added, though he did not, that Noam Chomsky's anarchist debunking of American foreign policy since the nineteen sixties bears an uncanny resemblance to what, in a different context, Richard Hofstadter (2008 [1964]) called "the paranoid style in American politics." McCarthyism is the case everyone recalls. But, as Hofstadter noted, the paranoid style is no monopoly of the extreme right (nor the monopoly of America). Huey Long and Charles Coughlin were both leftist figures who employed it. The style also found ample expression in anti-Mormonism, some strains of abolitionism, in the Greenback and other populist movements. Today it is the stock in trade of Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam.

I mentioned above two qualifications that merit attention about debunking/unmasking. I have discussed and then elaborated on the first: that debunking is best understood as a style rather than as a person and that debunkers in one context may refuse to debunk in others. The second qualification is that, in any event, not all debunking is as extreme as Hitchens's demolition of Mother Teresa or Chomsky's unmasking of American foreign policy. More subtle variants are available. A contemporary example is Jon Krakauer's unraveling of Greg Mortenson's *Three Cups of Tea*, the story of how its intrepid author braved the harsh Pakistan and Afghanistan wilderness, and the Kalashnikov-toting Taliban who patrolled it, to establish schools for the needy. This story of selflessness and courage has touched millions. More the pity, then, that in large and vital parts it is pure baloney. Because Krakauer's inquiry is based on considerably more first hand research than Hitchens's and paints a more nuanced picture of its subject; because Krakauer was himself at first a supporter of Mortenson and a reluctant critic; and because Krakauer is able to document a host of actual lies told by Mortenson himself in his own documentary account, *Three Cups of Tea* is a more complex study than *The Missionary Position*. It takes up the cudgels of the debunker but is more restrained in using them.

Still, Krakauer's judgment is damning. Mortensen's narrative, Krakauer reveals, is a self-serving fabrication born of "fantasy, audacity, and an apparently insatiable hunger for esteem". His organization - the Central Asia Institute – routinely issues "fraudulent financial statements." Krakauer himself, an early donor to Mortenson's

organization, admits his own shame "at being so easily conned." The reason he adduces is the one offered by one of Mortenson's former colleagues and anticipated in Hitchens' own explanation of Mother Teresa's grip on the human conscience. *Three Cups of Tea* "functioned as a palliative." The illusion it created "made people feel good about themselves, so nobody was in a hurry to look behind the curtain" (Krakauer 2011: 7, 68 respectively).

Earlier, I described Hitchens's account of Mother Teresa as devastating. Is it, though? One obvious response to his critique would be to sift a larger tranche of evidence than Hitchens compiles to look for positive affirmations of Mother Teresa's work and her personality. Hitchens's reproof might then be shown to be empirically tendentious. A far stronger objection to his unmasking method, however, is epistemological; and it still allows us to concede whatever truth exists in Hitchens's onslaught.

The key weakness of character unmasking is that it truncates the narrative form, stripping away its texture, bleaching its colors to monochrome. Unmasking condenses a person to a snapshot. It refuses to grant the ineffaceable opacity of persons and what we can know about them and the totality of what they do. These limitations are integral, not contingent, to the unmasking stance. The very image conjured up by unmasking invites us to behold two mutually exclusive postures, and two separable chronologies: false and genuine, before and after. Behind the mask is the real. Before we didn't see it; now we do. And with that tearing off of the constricting appendage the unmasker's case rests.

Yet the open-endedness of a life means that our unmasking can never be entirely accurate because it can never be fully definitive. Unmasking a lie is relatively straightforward. This is Krakauer's stratagem in his analysis of Greg Mortensen's *Three Cups of Tea*. And it works. He takes Mortensen's own narrative and shows much of it to be bogus. But the unmasked *character* we expose is in good part a function of our story, what we choose to select and emphasize.

Indeed, the opacity of persons is even more basic than this: it is also a function of the impact that a person's life has on others and how we depict *that* story. As Brian Fay (1987: 168) remarks, "the narrative of a person's life can never be settled because the causal repercussions from it will continue indefinitely into the future, and because the story which ought to be told about this life will be deeply affected by these repercussions. One can never fix a life in a 'definitive story' because as new causal outcomes resulting from this life occur, the narrative of this life will change." Consider the possibility that those who knew Mother Teresa are inspired to find ways to soften the crueler edges of our condition. That would change the way we see her and the story we might tell about her. Any "event can be described in terms of a focus that includes a wide swath or a narrow one and – as a related but not identical matter – in terms of a

focus that is close-up or distant" (Goffman 1986 [1974]: 8). *And we have no theory to tell us, let alone adjudicate, which focus is the truest one*. The mistake of character unmaskers is to conflate a frame of reality with reality as such, a "strip" of experience, with its whole fabric; and that conflation occurs principally because of the dislike the framers have for their subject.

But is there, then, no room for debunking at all? Is it something to be eschewed in all respects? Are there no moments when it is not only needed but imperative? It is tempting to say that it is only the pathology of debunking – its extreme, total forms - that should be avoided rather than debunking itself. The problem is that the pathology is now the norm. Partaking of one element, lends legitimacy to the whole. Today, unmasking of the crudest type is the default mode of critical consciousness, the foremost instrument of attack, employed across the political spectrum in print media, cable and the web. The right is as culpable as the left; in the presidential term of Obama, the right is more culpable. If debunking were more discriminating, if it could be divested of blanket condemnation, if its notion of transparency could be tempered by a more realistic sense of complexity, if ….. But the more judicious, selective and subtle debunking becomes, the less it is debunking. It has metamorphosed into something else: a more sophisticated criticism and appreciation.

Legacies and Questions

Almost thirty years after his original invitation to sociology was mailed to curious minds, Berger gave notice that the party, as he knew it, was probably over. Had the flames of youthful ardor cooled to ashes? Not entirely. The classical view of sociology - comparative, historical, theoretically and methodologically pluralistic, disciplined – was as bracing and pertinent as ever, Berger insisted. Alas its riches had been squandered by "parochialism, triviality, rationalism and ideology" (Berger 1992: 16). Such sociology continues to be blindsided by the great events of our time. How could one, in good faith, aspire to induct young minds into a subject that had managed, institutionally, to become authoritarian in its political correctness and, in its formulaic mantra of class-race-gender, a crashing bore?

Among our contemporaries, no sociologist has done more than Berger to broaden the minds, and stretch the sensibilities, of his fellows. His contributions to the study of religion and the sociology of knowledge are likely to endure. So will some of his pivotal concepts: the calculus of meaning, signals of transcendence, plausibility structure, and, yes, social construction too. Yet while a humanist to his core, his vision of humanism – and hence his legacy - is flawed by the unmasking he advertises as sociology's

signature method. Is it possible for a sociologist to be both a consistent humanist and a debunker? I think not, with the emphasis on the word "consistent." Berger is a humanist. He is also a debunker. I have argued that these ideas are in tension and that, all too often, unmasking and debunking substitute understanding by caricature, advance an implausible view of human transparency and, historically, have encouraged cruelty and bloodshed. Debunking and unmasking fracture human solidarity in the very act of insisting on it. If sociology really does rest on these types of exposure, as Peter Berger claims, that may be reason enough to withdraw the invitations and cancel the party.

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