

Unmasking and disclosure as sociological practices



Contrasting modes for understanding religious and other beliefs

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Abstract

Unmasking is a recurrent feature of modern sociology and cultural criticism. While *false consciousness* is imputed by intellectuals to religious groups and to certain social classes, *unmasking* is, or claims to be, a corrective performed by intellectuals themselves. Unmasking supposes that enlightened enquirers are able to help the less rational to understand their real interests; a type of exposure, it offers a cognitive tool of emancipation. This article (a) examines *unmasking*; and (b) contrasts it with an approach to understanding that we call *disclosure*. Our claim is that disclosure is more attuned to the full keyboard of social action, and less demeaning of its players, than unmasking is. Disclosure attempts to grasp what actions are like for those who enact them. Nothing has been more often or consistently unmasked and with more venom than religion. It is the main example explored in this article.

Keywords: Bourdieu, disclosure, Durkheim, false consciousness, Freud, James, Marx, Nietzsche, Runciman, social theorists, tertiary understanding, unmasking, Weber

Introduction: elements of unmasking

Unmasking refers to a mode of exposure that is employed to condemn ways of life deemed deceitful, fraudulent, repressive and defunct. Its champions

hail from many quarters. They include revolutionaries, artists, philosophers, psychologists, as well as many sociologists. Unmasking appears in a variety of versions, some more far-reaching than others. It may be a synonym for debunking, muckraking and satirical attack, where it has only modest objectives. It may be part of a therapy to emancipate society and self from domination. It may be a rhetorical weapon in ideological mass movements of an especially violent kind, notably Jacobinism and Bolshevism.

According to Jean-Paul Marat (1911 [1790]: 123), writing in 1790, the French people owed the recovery of its rights 'to patriotic writers who unmasked the selfish views of the privileged orders, jealous of perpetuating their domination'. Chief among these writers was Marat himself, 'For four years', he wrote in 1792, 'I have exercised the functions of public censor for the safety of the homeland. I have unmasked a horde of traitors and conspirators' (Marat, 1911 [1790]: 325). In *Everyday Stalinism*, an account of daily life in Soviet Russia in the 1930s, Sheila Fitzpatrick (2000: 134) describes how the mentality of unmasking percolated from Stalin himself downward into society:

The 'unmasking' of individuals hiding their pasts sometimes occurred as a product of police investigations.... But very often the press or fellow citizens, or a combination of the two, did the job. For journalists ... unmasking stories were the liveliest kind of human-interest material available, and they also gave scope for investigative reporting. In the spring of 1935, for example, a Leningrad paper published a series of exposé stories on hidden class enemies in hospitals and schools of Leningrad oblast. The writing, typical of the genre, imparts sinister motives to anyone concealing social origin and makes generous use of emotive words like 'refuge', 'lurking', and, of course, 'enemy'. (on unmasking, see also Fitzpatrick, 2000: 22, 116, 132)

In radical political movements one's political rivals are not merely opponents but evil dissemblers, enemies of the people who must be eliminated. Alternatively, they are not evil but deluded, they require instruction, forced, if need be, to show them the truth that the revolutionary movement vouchsafes.

To identify unmasking properly, we must draw some boundaries around the concept; otherwise, every act of critical re-description could be seen as an analogy of Marat's denunciations. For our purposes, an approach to human affairs is unmasking to the extent that it involves most of the following factors simultaneously. It (a) specifically employs terms such as mask/veil, masking/veiling, or unmasking/unveiling, thus drawing attention to a way of viewing human subjects and situations as potentially transparent; (b) claims that the object unmasked is in some fundamental way false, illusory; (c) claims that the object unmasked is one that aids domination, either of those deceived by masking or of the maskers themselves; (d) claims that agents who allow themselves to believe in this reality, and who are hence misled by it, are ignorant or irrational; and/or (e) claims that the

point of unmasking is human liberation, or at least resistance to an unjust order of things.

The overall effect of such claims, but especially (d) is deflationary: what you hold dear, I designate as a concealed mode of domination of which you yourself may be the unwitting perpetrator or victim. If a victim, you betray no hypocrisy, but your beliefs are false all the same; your holding them shows deficiency and false consciousness, the stigmata of the politically untrained and the sociologically innocent.

Those who unmask beliefs – as, for instance, Marx and Nietzsche do – generally disparage them and, explicitly or by implication, the people unenlightened enough to profess them. This explains the special style of the unmasker with its characteristic *hauteur* and predilection for the mocking lampoon. So it is that while Marx often sensitively depicts the plight of the proletariat and only mildly patronizes their misconceptions, he vilifies with gleeful abandon the ethos of capitalists, such as the ‘disgusting’ bourgeois ‘clap-trap about the family and education’ (1978 [1848]: 487). In *Beyond Good and Evil* (2008 [1886]), Nietzsche is capable of considerable poignancy, as in aphorism 31 (a reflection on youthfulness and maturation), but he also harshly denigrates the ideas of Jews and Christians: the compassion their religion mandates is, in reality, a weapon to secure the triumph of morally diseased feminine weakness over manly potency. In the unmasking mode, to explain a belief is to undermine it. This is not to say that those who unmask lack human sympathy. They may feel it keenly towards some groups and situations. It is more that exposure *itself* is a partisan style that tends to confer disgrace on others.

Two signature features of unmasking stipulated previously – the unmasked object is illusory and unmasking is liberation – deserve further discussion.

Illusory reality

To say that the object unmasked is in some fundamental way illusory is not to deny that it has some reality. It must have, otherwise there would be no point in debunking it. Illusory means that the object unmasked is *deceptive* – not essentially what it seems to be – and *defective*, not what it ought to be.¹ Unmasking ostensibly exposes both. Marx and Nietzsche, for instance, do not deny the reality of religion; nor does Freud.² How could they? Religion is an ancient social institution. It has effects, functions. Yet religion is not, fundamentally, what its believers believe it to be. In Marx’s crisp formulation, religion is a ‘misty creation’ that inverts ‘subject into object’ (1976 [1867]: 494, 990). So pervasive is its power to confuse and deceive that the ‘criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism’ (Marx, 1975a [1844]: 243). Further:

It is the task of history, once the other-world of truth has vanished, to establish the truth of this world. It is the immediate task of philosophy, which is in the

service of history, to unmask self-estrangement in its unholy forms once the holy form of human self-estrangement has been unmasked. Thus the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of earth ... (Marx, 1975a [1844]: 244–5)

As a fierce unmasker of socialism Nietzsche's argument took a different route but reasserted the deceptive and defective aspects of religion. To be sure, Nietzsche (2008 [1886]) acknowledges that religion is indubitably a civilization-shaping force, a psychological branding iron stamped on human minds and bodies, a penetrating reality. Alas, it happens to be the reality of a 'neurosis' [47],³ an 'infection' [48] that subverts the will to power in its most virile form. The slave morality of Judaic-Christian civilization is 'an ongoing suicide of reason' that entails the 'sacrifice of freedom, pride, spiritual self-confidence'. Its *ressentiment*-fuelled veneration of weakness over strength (a sickly will to power of its own) eventuates in '[self-]subjugation, and self-derision, self-mutilation' [46]. But not that alone. In tandem with Marx, Nietzsche recognized the functionality of religion for domination; unlike Marx, he sometimes approved of it. Thus, religion insulated the Brahman rulers from the mundane cares of the masses, enabled the best, through self-discipline, to rise above the common herd, and facilitated their capacity to dominate. Religion is the felicitous 'bond that ties rulers and subjects' together [61]. Rulers use it as instrument of mastery. The hoi polloi cleave to it to salve 'the semi-animal poverty of their souls' [61].

Freud, like Marx and Nietzsche, claimed that religion was bankrupt in any modern society dedicated to rational enlightenment and greater self-control. Religion was an illusion. An illusion is something different from an error. The miasmatic theory of disease was an error; we can show it to be such via the biochemistry of bacteria and viruses. But believers in miasmatic theory did not believe it because they wanted their belief to be true, or because believing it served some fundamental psychological need or drive; they fell into error because, given the state of medical knowledge at the time, miasmatic theory seemed plausible. In contrast, 'it was an illusion of Columbus's that he had discovered a new sea-route to the Indies. The part played by his wish in this error is very clear.' An illusion is not necessarily erroneous, 'unrealizable or in contradiction to reality'. A young middle-class girl may wish and believe that one day a prince will marry her. That illusion quickly passes for most girls, yet in a few cases it turns out to be true. 'Thus we call a belief an illusion when wish-fulfillment is a prominent factor in its motivation, and in doing so we disregard its relations to reality, just as the illusion itself sets no store by verification' (Freud, 1989 [1927]: 704). This would seem to bracket judgement about the reality of religions, pending empirical study of how particular religions frame the category of hope. Yet Freud speaks of religion generically. God, he theorizes, is a displacement of the primal, slain father; 'religious doctrine tells us the historical truth' but 'distorted and systematically disguised'. Seen scientifically or 'rationally', religion is the 'universal obsessional neurosis of humanity',

a 'system of wishful illusions together with a disavowal of reality'. Humanity will be better – wiser, stronger, healthier, more honest and mature – without religion's 'symbolic disguisings of the truth' (quotes from Freud, 1989 [1927]: 704–14; for Freud as the great unmasker, see: Rieff, 1959: esp. chs 3, 4, 7).⁴

Liberation

Marx, Nietzsche and Freud were all committed to versions of liberation, whether of groups such as the proletariat, or individuals freed from the snares of religious idiocy and psychological infantilism. But here we come across a paradox of unmasking. The more comprehensive it becomes, the less liberatory unmasking must be because nothing, including the ideal of liberation, can ultimately escape its defoliating gaze – unless limits are put on unmasking itself. As a visionary socialist, Marx could not unmask everything, especially the possibility of a society free of domination. His thought thus constitutes two radically separated fields of belief, that associated with the bourgeois world and that associated with his own aspirations: the *terminus a quo* of the unmasked illusion, and the *terminus ad quem* of emancipation. He urged Christians and Jews to halt their opposition to one another, not by reconciliation, but by 'abolishing religion' altogether; the necessary prelude to that was recognizing that their respective faiths were no more than 'snake-skins cast off by history', redundant 'stages in the development of the human spirit'. The Jew's god is 'nothing more than illusory exchange', from which he must be liberated. 'The social emancipation of the Jew is the emancipation of society from Judaism' (Marx, 1975b [1843]: 213, 239, 240, italics omitted).⁵

Nietzsche had other liberating ideals to advance. Opposing nihilism, he sought to give those human beings brave enough to break out of slave morality the chance of self-mastery. Freud was far more focused than Marx was on the limits of rationality; but while he was happy to debunk religion, he fought hard to save psychoanalysis from that fate. Its basic theory, he averred, was true. It could help people live a more rational, dignified, self-controlled and resigned life; it had the capacity to ease, though not to obliterate, extreme human suffering. Much will be gained, he famously states near the end of *Studies in Hysteria*, if we can transform 'hysterical misery' into 'common unhappiness' (Freud, 2004 [1912]: 306).

The unmasking attitude is common in sociology. Karl Mannheim, in *Ideology and Utopia* (1968 [1936]), saw it as a skeletal feature of the sociology of knowledge. Peter Berger (1963, 2011) conceives it as vital tool of sociological humanism, Luc Boltanski (2011) as a form of democratizing critique. But probably the greatest modern exemplar of unmasking is Pierre Bourdieu, a writer who leaves no social endeavour free of the iron grip of field, *habitus* and symbolic violence. Education was doubtless among Bourdieu's favorite topics of unmasking because it is the institution on

which so many naifs pin their hopes for a more humane world.⁶ Social change is another such topic. Students in the German Democratic Republic who attended his lecture on the cusp of the regime's downfall might have expected him to give credence to those who had risked everything to fight a regime they viewed as morally repugnant. Bourdieu (1998 [1989]: 14–18) does not deny such decency; nor does he mention it. Instead he coolly assigns the crisis to a battle between two interested parties: academic intellectuals and *nomenklatura*. The crux of the matter, the real mechanism behind the growing crisis, is that 'the holders of academic capital are those most inclined to be impatient and to revolt against the privileges of the holders of political capital' (Bourdieu, 1998 [1989]: 17).

The problem that Bourdieu announces throughout his work is that agents do not know what they are doing. Stated like that, the contention is a banality. None of us can know all the determinants of our action, let alone its consequences. Bourdieu means something more. He mobilizes terms such as 'uncloaking', 'uncovering', 'delusion', 'collective self-denial', 'disimulation' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1988 [1970]: 65, 159, 195, 199, 219) to argue that subjects are clueless about what they are *really* doing; despite the best intentions, even dissident intellectuals have no idea of the dominating role they are playing. In a famous passage on pedagogic judgement and deliberation, Bourdieu (1996 [1989]: 39) remarks:

Agents entrusted with acts of classification can fulfill their social function as social classifiers only because it is carried out *in the guise* of acts of academic classification. They only do well what they have to do (objectively) because they think they are doing something other than what they are doing, because they are doing something other than what they think they are doing, and because they believe in what they think they are doing. As fools fooled, they are the primary victims of their own actions. It is because they think they are using a strictly academic classification ... that the system is able to effect a veritable *deviation of the meaning* of their practice, thereby getting them to do what they would not otherwise do for all the money in the world. (emphases in the original)

In the foregoing, believers are sincere; fools fooled, they perform a task they consider to be just. They are casualties and reproducers of domination, of a system in which their honest beliefs form the ideational boosters. However, Bourdieu asserts elsewhere that we need to reconsider the very concept of disinterestedness. When we do, we see that it is itself a structural phenomenon, one whose existence depends on 'a habitus predisposed to disinterestedness and the universes in which disinterestedness is rewarded'. Such universes comprise literary, artistic and scientific fields where economic imperatives are devalued. Presumably, however, without some reward, disinterestedness would be impossible so the very concept of disinterestedness has been redefined as a modality of interest in the process of subjecting it to sociological analysis. Moreover, to say that literary, artistic and scientific fields are those that enable disinterestedness, even in the

redefined sense, is by no means to deny they are bereft of peculiar interests as well. Hence ‘the sociology of art or literature’ which ‘unveils (or unmasks) and analyzes the specific interests which are constituted by the field’s functioning (which led Breton to break the arm of a rival in a poetic dispute), and for which one is ready to die’ (Bourdieu, 1998 [1989]: 87–8).⁷

Disclosure

The previous remarks enable us to draw a simplified, but important, distinction between disclosing beliefs and exposing them; each is the result of a choice of object to investigate and a manner of investigation; each emits a distinctive moral or amoral vapor.

Writers who generally disclose without unmasking, such as Weber and Durkheim and William James, show that agents have a story of their own with a pathos of its own. Disclosive understanding is not confined to agents’ own terms of reference, even if grasping such terms is often a necessary prelude to the scientific re-description that follows. The believers’ reality may be conjoined to other realities of which they are unaware. All the same, disclosure entails a wider variation of registers than unmasking, a greater range of sympathy, a more scrupulous attention to the emotional matrix and nexus of meaning in which agents try to make sense to themselves; and disclosure does not demean them. Nor is disclosure tempted by violent or total solutions. It takes distance from the young Marx’s characterization of philosophy as a ‘weapon of criticism’ engaged in a ‘hand-to-hand fight, and in such fights it does not matter what the opponent’s rank is, or whether he is noble or interesting: what matters is to hit him’. Marx goes so far as to say that the ‘people must be put in terror of themselves in order to give them courage’. In the ‘war on the conditions in Germany’, he argues, criticism is ‘not a scalpel but a weapon. Its object is its enemy, which it aims not to refute but to destroy.’ The ‘essential task’ that moves criticism, ‘is denunciation’ (Marx, 1975a [1844]: 246–51). And what Marx advocated, Lenin perfected in theory and practice. As Kolakowski (2008 [1976]: 772) observed: ‘If his opponent is not a lackey of the bourgeoisie and the landowners he is a prostitute, a clown, a liar, a pettifogging rogue, and so on.... Everyone is constantly suspected of the worst intentions.’ Nietzsche opposed socialism of any kind but, like Marx, he nurtured a desire to obliterate inherited cultures if not classes, to transvaluate, rather than reform.

Now, in contrast, consider William James’s (1985 [1902]: 6–12) treatment of religion. James employed biographical and other documentary accounts to make sense of some of religion’s more extreme, personal manifestations. A psychological approach to religion, he insists, to the degree to which it is scientific, will seek to classify religion into types and explain its extra-religious causes. But this affirmation, he is equally clear,

by no means dishonours religious experience itself. George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, was a seriously disturbed individual, a ‘psychopath or *détraqué* of the deepest dye’. Yet the religion Fox founded, James says, was ‘[one] of veracity rooted in spiritual inwardness, and a return to something more like the original gospel truth than men had ever known in England’. In ‘spiritual sagacity’ no one can pretend that ‘Fox’s mind was unsound’. Now spiritual sagacity presupposes a realm of spiritual meaning by which such sagacity is to be measured; it presupposes that the contents of spiritual consciousness are in this case valuable – capable of wisdom – irrespective of their cause. Accordingly, James expressly opposed the modern reflex of ‘discrediting states of mind for which we have an antipathy’. That reflex works by ‘general assimilation’, and facile analogies, while ignoring the peculiarities of the phenomenon in question. Assimilation does more than causally relate one thing to another; it dissolves one thing into another.

Moreover, James (1985 [1902]: 48–50) depicts religion as an expansion of human experience, ‘an absolute addition to the Subject’s range of life. It gives him a new sphere of power.’ That being the case, religion is something for us to ‘respect’ for ‘its value for life at large’. Religion is not merely a mask that covers pre-existing interests; it unleashes new possibilities of action. It alters the course of life. It is a ‘momentous option’:

Since belief is measured by action, he who forbids us to believe religion to be true, necessarily also forbids us to act as we should if we did believe it to be true.... If the action required or inspired by the religious hypothesis is in no way different from that dictated by the naturalistic hypothesis, then religious faith is a pure superfluity, better pruned away.... I myself believe, of course, that the religious hypothesis gives to the world an expression which specifically determines our reactions, and makes them in a large part unlike what they might be on a purely naturalistic scheme of belief. (2000 [1896]: 215–18)

This attitude is the antithesis of the unmasker’s denigration. It recognizes incommensurable realms of validity, whereas the unmasker prioritizes one realm, science or philosophy, over another realm, the religious in this case.

If James is a discloser, in our terms, what about Durkheim? Surely his theory of religion, as a collective representation of society, is a debunking stratagem par excellence? To some degree it is. Yet in other respects Durkheim’s approach is at a far remove from the unmaskers’ approaches sketched above. For one thing, Durkheim (1995 [1912]: 2) is emphatic that ‘there are no religions that are false. All are true after their own fashion: All fulfill given conditions of human existence, though in different ways.’ For another, the nature of this religious reality is *fundamentally* true as well. To be sure, believers typically do not understand what they are worshipping. But a sacred realm, a palpable ‘consecrated’ (Durkheim’s term) demarcation of good and evil, holy and profane really does exist – something that Marx, Nietzsche and Freud deny. Religion is emblematic of the social group, of

human solidarity. It provides a fundamental storehouse of, and the paradigm case of, interaction rituals that give society its sense of belonging and order. For Durkheim (1995 [1912]: 208–10), society, as an ‘object of genuine respect’, of constraint, of obligation, arouses no sensation but ‘the sensation of the divine’. It follows that society without religion is as unthinkable as religion without society.

As a ‘system of ideas by means of which individuals imagine the society of which they are members and the obscure yet intimate relations they have with it’, religion ‘is true with a truth that is eternal’. It is living proof that ‘there exists outside us something greater than us and with which we commune’ (Durkheim, 1995 [1912]: 227). That being the case, religion is neither imaginary nor the imposition of a class nor a sign of popular idiocy nor something science can replace. The Australian native who ‘is carried above himself, feeling inside a life overflowing with an intensity that surprises him’ is ‘not the dupe of an illusion’. What he feels is ‘real and really is the product of forces outside of and superior to the individual’ (1995 [1912]: 227). Freud, guided by the metaphor of inside–outside, sees religion as an exteriorized projection of neurotic inner states. Durkheim, guided by a metaphor of outside–inside, sees religion as a system of collective representations that are individually absorbed. Religion could only be an illusion if society were one. So it is that, for Durkheim, the belief in God is more correct than mistaken because such belief captures the reality of the sacred. To that extent, the most humble and naïve believer recognizes the nature of religious reality more accurately than Marx, Nietzsche and Freud do. Here Durkheim recapitulates in scientific form the surety that many great religious thinkers insist on – as did Pascal (1995 [1670]: 36) when he wrote that the heart is an organ of religious knowledge; more than reason, it is God’s channel to Man. The simple view of God, cleaved to by the unlearned, is in no need of being dispelled and Durkheim never debases it. In this way, too, his thinking lacks the acrid atmosphere of unmasking. One recalls Heinrich Heine’s (1993 [1852]: 201–2) confession that a lifetime’s religious debunking had been in vain. Now he no longer chuckled at the taunts against religion of his ‘obstinate friend, Marx, not to mention Messrs. Feuerbach, Daumer, Bruno Bauer, Hengstenberg’ and other similar ‘godless self-gods’. For Heine had learned that the ‘cobwebbed dialectic of Berlin cannot tempt a dog from behind the stove; it cannot kill a cat, far less a God. I know from my own experience how little dangerous its destructive powers are.’⁸

Weber’s position is somewhat analogous to Durkheim’s. Unlike Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, Weber never denies the existence of God, never belittles religious sensibility, never suggests that the world would be a better place without religion – though he does insist that the Christian ethic of conviction is politically unworldly and that the modern epoch, with its conflicting values spheres, resembles less a monotheistic universe than the

cacophonous age of ancient polytheism (Weber, 1994: 78–9, 357–69.) Nor does Weber slight the Calvinists' credo or Protestantism more generally – its asceticism marked him – though he does show the paradoxical social consequences of the former and he criticizes the Lutheran authoritarian legacy in Germany. The disenchantment or de-magicalization (*Entzauberung*) of the world is not something that Weber himself does to it; it is the 'fate of the times' that he records. And to say of himself that he was not religiously musical no more deflates religion than being tone deaf renders meaningless a Stravinsky score.⁹

It is also significant that among Weber's most important sociological concepts was one with a striking religious aura. *Charisma* was a deliberate provocation to the secular mind, allowing Weber to represent the existence of the extraordinary but socially consequential, as contrasted with the routine and everyday. Weber (2008 [1917]: 48) also bucks the unmasking impulse because he neither flourishes the option of emancipation nor suggests that the religiously benighted require science to see the light of truth. Given the 'ethical irrationality of the world', the 'irreconcilability of the possible ultimate attitudes to life and the impossibility of any resolution of the conflicts among them', the question we must answer is 'which of the warring gods shall we serve, or shall we perhaps serve a completely different one, and if so, who might that be?' (2008 [1917]: 48). And while no one was more combative politically than Weber, he made the all-important distinction that is lost on the unmasker. In political discourse, we employ words 'as swords to use against the adversary. They are weapons of struggle'. But in the cultural and social sciences, words have an entirely different purpose: 'to break up the soil of contemplative thought' (2008 [1917]: 42). As sociologists, our purpose is to enlarge the understanding, not destroy ideas with which we have no sympathy.

Disclosure as 'tertiary understanding'

Disclosure approximates what W.G. Runciman (1983: 223–40) calls 'tertiary understanding'. Runciman identifies three main types of understanding: *primary* (understanding 'what' happened; reportage); *secondary* (understanding what caused it to happen; explanation); *tertiary* (understanding not just 'the terms in which [the action] is characterized by the agent' but understanding '*what it is like* for the agent to do it').

The basic test of tertiary understanding is 'whether those whose thoughts and deeds are being represented could in principle be brought to accept the portrayal as "what it was like"'. The second test, applicable when the ideas and experiences of a whole group are being characterized, is whether its members 'would agree that the divergent points of view of distinguishable groups or categories within their institution or society have all been taken into account'. The first test suggests 'authenticity' of the description; the

second test suggests 'representativeness'. These are the two fundamental tests to ascertain whether what Runciman calls 'description' (and what we call disclosure) has been successful.

Runciman concedes that these tests pose methodological difficulties, for:

the concepts in which descriptions are grounded are unlikely to be those used by the agents whose behavior is being described unless they happen themselves to be trained practitioners of descriptive sociology (or, perhaps natural adepts at understanding in the tertiary sense).

He suggests a variety of balancing procedures that make possible an amalgam of 'the researcher's interests', on the one hand, and 'the agents' scale of priorities', on the other. In contrast, unmasking, or what Runciman (1983: 223–48) calls 'misapprehension' and 'mystification' occurs 'when the sociologist does not merely fail to see what "they" see but when he supposes that they see it in a way which is preemptively dictated by a descriptive theory of his own'. The key dangers – and limits – of misapprehension and mystification are incompleteness (neglect of features of a group which are peripheral to the observer's theoretical interests but significant to group members), exaggeration (overstating a description to make a polemical point), and milieu-ethnocentricity (hostility to alien lives/values).

One way that disclosers produce their effects of sympathetic detachment is by showing that what appears to be illogical or repugnant has palpable continuities with what we – the readers – typically consider normal, human, or at least explicable in the circumstances. Consider, as a masterwork of this sociological genre, Jack Katz's (1988) analysis of crime's 'seductive qualities' or 'those aspects in the foreground of criminality that make its various forms sensible, or even sensually compelling, ways of being'. Katz (1988: 3–18) is interested in 'what it means, feels, sounds, tastes, or looks like to commit a particular crime'. He employs first-person narratives of those guilty of non-predatory homicide (violent deaths caused by family disputes, lovers' quarrels, arguments between neighbours, etc.) to show that such violence is often an attempt by the assailant to defend 'the sacred core of respectability'. Denying that this kind of 'crime is motivated by materialism', Katz says, 'the modal criminal homicide is an impassioned attempt to perform a sacrifice to embody one or another version of the "Good"'. The typical homicide is 'a self-righteous act undertaken within the form of defending communal values'.

Killing, in these situations occurs not as a result of prolonged reflection but is triggered impulsively by a sort of religious passion (Katz frequently uses the terms 'sacred', 'sacrifice' and 'righteous'). Assailants see themselves as the real victims; their aim is obliteration of the source of shame, more than the death of the offender, which is often unpremeditated and unintentional. Katz, the discloser, gives the killer a human face; or rather, in the act of sociological interpretation, restores a face that the killer's public dishonour

extinguishes. A significant part of that restoration consists in the voice people are accorded when they are considered to have a cogent scale of values that informs their behaviours. Killers know why the violence took place; not all the reasons why but those that comprise their wild attempt to reaffirm their value as persons worthy of respect, persons who seek to live out core aspects of the social good (protection of property, affirmation of marital fidelity, defence of children) as they have come to grasp it.

Under Katz's sedulous gaze, a terrible and otherwise incomprehensible act reveals common features with 'normal' systems of belief. This does not mean that the act should be pardoned; but the deed takes on an air of eerie familiarity. Katz had the option of showing 'righteous slaughter' to be no more than a front or legitimating ritual to disguise domination, especially by men; alternatively, he might have pointed to crime as the fault of society. He takes neither path. More than society is in play; humiliation is often experienced without graduating to homicide. Yet the assailant's action cannot be hived off to some alien world. Disclosers display attunement with those they wish to understand. They narrow the gap between the strange and the normal, student and studied. Unmaskers operate differently. Preoccupied with those they deem benighted and duplicitous, they have difficulty hiding their Olympian disdain.

Conclusion

Another way to explore the key distinction at the heart of our article would be to follow Charles Turner (2010: 140–65) in distinguishing between cynical and sceptical styles of thinking. Cynics seek to liberate us from illusion. They relentlessly unmask the elevated as 'a vehicle for baser motives'; the putatively majestic is, they suggest, in fact banal and squalid. The sceptic, on the other hand, takes note of human weakness yet marvels at striving for human greatness, is moved by the ineradicable pathos of events, and believes that liberation from illusion often becomes an illusion itself because the 'gap between intention and fulfillment can never be closed' (2010: 142).¹⁰ When discussing the literary text, for instance, the sceptic seeks to enter 'into the texture of the work', to recover rather than uncover it, to elicit hitherto unremarked on dimensions of richness, rather than strip them down to a standard, already well attested, drive or interest. Sceptics wish to reconstitute an unfamiliar perspective before examining it. They do not claim that their own theory supersedes all professions of faith.

We have sought in this article to draw a marked contrast between unmasking and disclosure, arguing for the latter and criticizing the former. Yet disclosure itself is not without dangers. It may strain to find more in a belief than is actually there; the more banal an agent's ideas, the more attunement will be pointless or impossible. An associated hazard is that disclosure ends up as a kind of mawkish, saccharine brew that appears to validate

ideas rather than understand them. Religion, our main example above, is a source of much that is elevated, expansive and altruistic. It is also a font of fanaticism and hatred. Fanaticism must be understood in its own terms, but that does not preclude one from the further step of subjecting it to critical analysis.

Nor is disclosure more generally incompatible with criticism, provided the latter remains controlled, disciplined and balanced. Consider, in closing, two examples.

The first is Marc Bloch's attempt to understand French hostility to the British. During the early stages of the Second World War, British troops fought alongside the French before being forced to flee from the beaches of Dunkirk. Captain Bloch, a witness in uniform to the events, and a historian with an evident orientation towards sociology,¹¹ describes the typical British soldier as tough, courageous and good-natured, but also as a 'looter and a lecher' who infuriated the French farmers by stealing their goods and compromising their daughters. More generally, the 'Anglophobia' (Bloch's term) of the French is something that Bloch deplores, while accounting for it with considerable insight. An Anglophile himself, he explains to his French compatriots why it was only natural for the British to give priority to their own soldiers in the retreat. But he also deems it 'essential that we try to understand the Frenchman's inevitable [resentful] reactions'. Here is the context he provides:

Our men, deprived by their own leaders of the power to resist, had been desperately waiting on the long Flanders beaches, or among the dunes, for their last chance of escaping capture by the enemy, and long months of incarceration in the prisons of the Third Reich.... In such circumstances they would have needed a superhuman dose of charity not to feel bitter as they saw ship after ship drawing away from their shore, carrying their former companions in arms to safety. (1968 [1948]: 71)

It is thus possible to disclose the experience of one group sympathetically, while opening up critical perspectives on the same group – in this case, by simultaneously disclosing the viewpoint of another group (the French soldiers) whose experiences are intertwined with the first (the British soldiers). This juxtaposition of perspectives is one technique that disclosers can use to avoid the naive reiteration of one group's perspective.

A second example of critical disclosure is, on our reading, offered by the Canadian journalist Jonathan Kay (2011a, 2011b) who has investigated a group of conspiracy theorists called 'the truthers' – people who believe the 9/11 attacks were the handiwork of the United States government. The 'truthers' are determined to unmask that evil. Kay asked the truthers two questions: What do you believe? When did you start to believe it? The answer to the first question delineates a perception of evil that, in all essentials, mirrors the template of the infamous 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion'. The answer to the second question is both more revealing and personal. As

Kay observes, it is tantamount to asking: When did your world fall apart? When did you come to believe that the government is invariably lying? Kay found that those who subscribed to conspiracy theories were typically people who had suffered some major crisis of trust in their dealings with an official organ of power, such as the government or the media or a public corporation. Parents who believed their children's autism was a result of the MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella) vaccine came to believe that the pharmaceutical companies, the Food and Drug Administration, and the state itself were complicit in covering up the scandal. And if these facts about autism were being disguised and dissimulated, what else was officialdom hiding? A similar extrapolation characterized the truthers. They came, retrospectively, to believe in government mendacity about 9/11 when they concluded that the same government had lied about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction so as to justify the invasion of that country in 2003. Kay (2011a) summarizes his key finding as follows:

What I found was that different people had their own very different, very personalized points of entry into the world of conspiracy. But once they went down that rabbit hole, once the trust was broken, they became vulnerable to every conspiracy theory under the sun. You very rarely run into someone who believes only one conspiracy theory. Typically, what happens is that at first they'll buy into one conspiracy theory, then they'll get on the Internet, they'll get on a few websites, they'll start watching some videos, and before you know it, they believe dozens of conspiracy theories.

Through such a reconstruction, Kay seeks a real understanding of the conspiracy theorists. He neither sentimentalizes nor dismisses them; instead, he tries to explain why they think the way they do, what prompts their suspicion, what rationale they adduce for it. Equally, Kay is adamant that conspiracy theorists are a destructive force in modern politics. By contributing to a climate of polarization and paranoia, conspiracy theorists poison much of modern discourse. Expecting the worst, the truthers find it. Denial of their theories is seen as confirmation of them, one more strand of official fabrication or evidence of lamentable public ignorance and gullibility.

These two examples show us that, in the hands of skilful practitioners, disclosing is able to avoid extreme identification with its subjects and combine understanding with criticism, *albeit as separate and separable moments of analysis*. By contrast, the framework of unmasking has no interpretive compensatory corrective. To be sure, its postulation of deep currents, which control agents and which hide from them the sources of their motivation, may offer a modicum of understanding to, and sympathy for, those who are so grievously misled. But that understanding and sympathy does not require an investigation of what actors feel, does not ask for their story, does not, accordingly, seek to make sense of their reported beliefs and, in consequence, is likely to misunderstand them. Unmaskers presume to know the truth of the world on the basis of a theory about it. They form the elite pole

of a habit of mind that runs the gamut from theoretical sophistication to distressed disappointment. It is a habit of mind, all too common in sociology, which itself calls out for disclosure.

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Notes

- 1 We take this distinction from Rosen (1996: 49–50).
- 2 Nor did Feuerbach, but unlike the others just mentioned he operated with a particularly simple epistemology. Feuerbach (1957 [1841]: xxxvi) declared that his book on religion ‘contains a faithful, correct translation of the Christian religion out of the Oriental language of imagery into plain speech’. Accordingly, the views he represents are no more than ‘objective facts’ of which his book is the purveyor. These facts offer a solution to the ‘enigma of the Christian religion’. ‘Not to invent, but to discover, “to unveil existence” has been my sole object; to *see* correctly, my sole endeavor’.
- 3 Numbers in square parentheses refer to the aphorism number in Nietzsche (2008 [1886]).
- 4 ‘Freud’s tactic was not to dispute Dora’s logic but to suspect her motives. “The patient is using thoughts of this kind, which the analyst cannot attack, for the purpose of cloaking others which are anxious to escape from criticism and from consciousness”’ (Rieff, 1959: 82, quoting Freud).
- 5 While the quotes are from ‘On the Jewish Question’ (Marx, 1975b [1843]), the emphasis on emancipation is especially strong in ‘A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*’ (1975a [1844]). By liberating itself, and by being the universal class that has no other class to oppress, the proletariat initiates ‘the total redemption of humanity’ (1975a [1844]: 256, emphasis omitted).
- 6 See Bourdieu and Passeron (1988 [1970]: 65) on the ‘utopian vision of a “critical university”’: a ‘utopia not far removed from the illusion, cherished by certain anthropologists, that institutionalized education, unlike traditional education, constitutes a “mechanism of change”’.
- 7 One is reminded of La Rochefoucauld (2007 [1664]: 73): ‘Humility is often merely a pretense of submissiveness, which we use to make other people submit to us’; and, even more, his judgment of Cardinal de Retz that ‘he has little piety, though some appearance of religion’ (2007 [1664]: 269).
- 8 Heine was mortally ill when he wrote these words and so it is easy to debunk them as the product of a desperate man’s fear of death. But not only do Heine’s earlier works show some annoyance at boorish religious irreverence, he also never succumbed, as he put it, to ‘phosphorous vapors of pious piss’ (1993 [1852]: 11). Besides, the common view that turning to God at times of grave illness bespeaks a weakened mind assumes that illness is not a potential source of insight. One insight it provides is on the ultimate helplessness and dependence of human beings.

- 9 'It is true that I am absolutely unmusical religiously and have no need or ability to erect any psychic edifices of a religious character within me. But a thorough self-examination has told me that I am neither antireligious *nor irreligious*' (Max Weber's letter to Ferdinand Tönnies of 9 February 1909, quoted in Marianne Weber, 1988 [1926]: 324, italics in original).
- 10 On Bourdieu as a cynic, see Alexander (1995: 129). Aware of this kind of characterization, Bourdieu (1998 [1989]) bitterly rejected it and sought to turn the tables on exponents of action and rational-choice theory by describing them as the real cynics.
- 11 For Bloch's debt to Durkheim and Mauss, see especially Bloch (1968 [1948]: 126, 155, 173).

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