
PREFACE

The essays collected and revised here have been written over a period of twenty-five years and recount a journey from a radical Marxism to somewhere else. I cannot find a name for where I am now, which is perhaps appropriate given the arguments developed here. I have been occasionally embarrassed and occasionally surprised to find some of the continuities through these chapters. The emphasis is on something called *experience*, not only as something which is important in understanding individual and social action, but as a value, something in theory to be protected against sociologistic explanations, and in the outside world to be protected against manipulative 'abstract systems' and the state. Sadly, sociology can easily become such an abstract system and I have grown increasingly aware of what might be called the 'sociological critique' of society as a sort of underground current in sociology – the view, or the paradox, found in Simmel, for example, that if sociology can supply powerful explanations of social life, then that fact is a criticism of the society with which these explanations are concerned.

If these essays start with Marxism and travel through sociology, they end with psychoanalysis. This position offers no more comfort – it is more likely than sociology to act as an abstract system attempting to force lives into preconceived patterns, but like sociology psychoanalysis can offer subversive ideas which can point to an opening up of possibilities, albeit uncomfortable and painful possibilities.

The Introduction and Conclusion are new and they explore these themes. They could perhaps be read as the first and last sections of the same chapter. The middle section runs through the various chapters as codas and contemporary commentaries and self-criticisms through which I try organize the different subjects around the central themes of the book.

The ideas developed here owe much to generations of colleagues and students in the Sociology Department at Essex and elsewhere, but I alone am responsible for the various eccentric forms that their ideas might take here. I am particularly grateful to Jessica Evans of the Open University for her comments on Chapter 2, and to Chris Rojek for the original suggestion.

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Ian Craib