



EDITOR'S Introduction: Truth, Enlightenment and Moralism: the Debate Over "Unmasking"

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Published online: 1 May 2020

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In this issue we present a series of wide-ranging essays that focus on Peter Baehr's recent book, *The Unmasking Style in Social Theory* (2019), followed by a rejoinder by the author. The topic is timely and highly relevant, especially as the field of sociology becomes increasingly politicized and polarized. Partisans of more "scientific" or more "engaged" sociology now invest much time and energy in critiquing and unmasking one another.

People are generally aware, on a common-sense basis, that "things are not always as they seem." An image of water in a desert might be a mirage. A swimming area at a public beach might contain a deadly rip tide. A harmless looking mushroom might be poisonous. In the same way, social relations are not always as they seem. Friendships prove false. Elected leaders turn out to be hypocritical and corrupt. And, more happily, people that seem gruff and unapproachable turn out to be generous and loving.

Over the centuries, members of diverse cultures have wrestled with the issue of how to distinguish real truth from apparent truth. In the Buddhist tradition, the ability to accomplish this task is linked to the idea of enlightenment, that is, freedom from everyday illusions. Hebrew prophets claimed an ability to speak absolute truth on the basis of personal revelations from a higher power that was absolutely truthful. Greek thinkers in the classical period, especially Plato and Aristotle, offered a method of attaining truth through logical reason and dialectics. Plato famously ranked knowledge from the least certain, based on sensation, through that based on opinion and ordinary reasoning to the highest form, grounded in philosophy.

Thinkers in the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, reacting against the traditional Christian view of divine revelation as the touchstone of truth, enshrined reason, though which Biblical miracles could be debunked. This prepared the way for the doctrine of positivistic science, famously articulated by Comte, according to which empirical science alone possesses genuine ability to discern truth, by transcending earlier religious superstition and unreliable philosophical speculation. Karl Marx built on this idea, but he combined it with the principle of an enlightened political

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consciousness that enabled members of victim groups to overcome illusion and reveal underlying oppression in social arrangements. And this became the basis of a widespread and influential tradition of “critique” in sociology that began with social class and has more recently focused on race/ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation. W. E. B. DuBois unmasked race relations via analysis of “double consciousness.” Early feminists debunked “the feminine mystique.”

Critique has long been both intellectual and moralistic, involving simultaneous claims of more accurate knowledge and a superior ethical consciousness. Both of these claims have often disturbed their audiences and have led to challenges that say in effect, “What makes you smarter than anyone else?” and “Why do you think you’re better than others?”

Much recent controversy has been on the political left, flowing from Marx’s famous claims that he had turned Hegel’s idealism upside down to reveal material interests, that the powerful seek to conceal their domination through ideology, and that religion in particular is a harmful organized means of deception. But critique and unmasking extend across the political spectrum. Vilfredo Pareto, as a famous exemplar on the political right, claimed that social relations are fundamentally non-logical, rooted rather in emotion, and that they are only made to seem logical via complex strategies of rationalization. Freud was likewise an unmasker who interpreted human behavior in terms of underlying drives, especially the sexual instinct and the death wish. Robert K. Merton perhaps drew on this when developing the concepts of manifest and latent functions, in the sense that the latent is “what is really happening.” It is interesting that the more modern and contemporary unmasking approaches share the view that what is “lower” (e.g., the substructure in Marx, the “id” in Freud) is more powerful and important than what is “higher” (e.g., the substructure in Marx, derivations in Pareto). Plato, Hebrew prophets and Christian theologians unmasked in the opposite direction. Such sources are an important background to the articles presented here.

Julien Larregue’s essay faults Baehr’s analysis for being excessively “scholastic” and insufficiently focused on empirical research. Larregue takes particular exception to Baehr’s treatment of Pierre Bourdieu, insisting that rhetorical moves said to be characteristic of unmasking do not apply to his works. For Larregue, Bourdieu always sought the “dual truth” of human action that is at once subjective and objective. He also offers the interesting observation that Bourdieu unmasked himself in analysis.

Jason Manning suggests that Baehr’s book might provide a stimulus for the development of a new sociology of unmasking that would treat unmasking behavior as data to be interpreted. Who are the unmaskers and who are their targets? Where and when and why and how does unmasking occur in organized groups? Such a focus, in Manning’s view, would involve especially the sociology of knowledge and the sociology of conflict and conflict resolution. He cites Donald Black’s conceptual framework as a particularly valuable resource for such an intellectual project, largely because of Black’s emphasis on moralism which is a pervasive feature of unmasking.

Laura Ford offers a generally supportive response to Baehr’s critique. In her view, the problem with the unmasking style is not so much that it condemns others, but rather that it “unforgivingly demands total submission” and “seeks total victory.” Ford disputes the idea that the unmasking style originates in modernity, and she asserts to the contrary that comparable rhetoric is evident by late antiquity, with Augustine’s *City of God* as a famous exemplar. She concludes with a call to dialogue and a renewed commitment to pluralism.

Alan Sica disagrees with Baehr who regards unmasking in the manner of Marx, Mannheim and Adorno as a powerful current in contemporary social theory. Such classical unmasking, which Sica evidently respects, has, in his judgment, recently degenerated into “unthinking denunciation of those with different views.” Sica is concerned that Baehr’s analysis is influenced excessively by an antagonism toward Marxist approaches, which results in insufficient attention to a major unmasker on the political right, Vilfredo Pareto.

Daniel Little presents a deeply felt defense of unmasking analyses, especially those on the political left that expose the hidden injuries of capitalist political economies. Marx, he feels, was correct in exposing how ideology conceals harmful realities and justifies oppressive social orders. Little points to recent communication strategies by large, for-profit corporations that misrepresent the effects of their products and that undermine legitimate science. He is likewise concerned that governments lie about life and death matters of peace and war, and that political apologists conceal inequalities of opportunity and access. Therefore, unmasking meets a fundamental and ongoing need, and it serves the common good.

Gary Jaworski locates Baehr’s book in a larger tradition of polemical attacks on intellectuals, citing Julien Benda’s 1927 work, *The Treason of the Intellectuals* as an influential exemplar. In Jaworski’s view, Baehr’s analysis would have better balance if it did not focus so heavily on grand theory and instead paid more attention to work in the middle range that is prevalent in contemporary sociology. The most successful aspect of the Baehr book, Jaworski argues, is not its polemics but rather the contribution it makes to an understanding of the changing meaning of concepts, which the Germans call *begriffsgeschichte*. This, he feels, remains an incompletely realized project in Baehr’s volume.

Corey Colyer recalls how the unmasking practices examined by Baehr helped draw him into the field of sociology, but he is sympathetic to Baehr’s view of their destructive aspects that result from authoritarian self-righteousness and partisan political motives. Colyer particularly engages, and disputes, Baehr’s treatment of Peter Berger as an unmasker. He notes that Baehr is actually ambivalent toward Berger, citing Baehr’s laudatory observation that Berger’s approach is “a prophylactic against cruelty.” In Colyer’s view, Berger’s sociology, which was deeply influenced by phenomenology and existentialism, aims at humanistic understanding rather than moralistic condemnation. Sociologists who practice debunking in Berger’s manner can still respect the agency and the perspectives of those they study, without presuming to speak from a position of absolute knowledge and indisputable morality.

In accordance with professional courtesy, the dialogue concludes with an energetic rejoinder by Baehr. Each author was given the freedom to engage whatever portion of *The Unmasking Style* seemed most interesting or relevant, and Baehr likewise engages selectively with the critiques and commentaries. He deserves special appreciation for provoking and facilitating the exchanges in this issue, and I hope that these offer a valuable service to our field.

The issue concludes with an article by Lonnie Athens that rebuts the treatment of Robert Park in the recent influential book, *The Scholar Denied*, by Aldon Morris. According to Athens, the depiction of Park in that volume is based on three fundamental errors, or myths, namely that Park was a Social Darwinist who developed a sociology that was conservative and racist. Athens seeks to disprove each of these

allegations by citing excerpts from Park's works. A related and important issue, according to Athens, is that this mistaken framing of Park will prevent him from receiving due credit as the "true progenitor" of the interactionist school of sociology that is usually associated primarily with George Herbert Mead. Thus, consistent with the theme of this issue, one might say that Athens seeks to unmask the critique by Morris that sought to unveil the dark side of Park, who had previously been almost universally respected in the field. And, one might note, the Athens-Morris dispute reflects larger dynamics in U.S. sociology today, especially shifting demographics and an increasingly bitter contest over the priority of science or politics.

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