Sociology

A brief but critical introduction

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SECOND EDITION

Anthony Giddens

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Preface

Over the past decade or so, major changes have taken place within sociology, and in the social sciences more generally. These developments, however, have for the most part been discussed only in literature of considerable complexity; they are not readily accessible to people lacking an acquaintance with the subject. I was prompted to write this book, therefore, in order to provide an introduction to sociology which reflects current developments, making them available to the beginning reader. I call the book a 'critical introduction' for two reasons. It is critical of a range of ideas that for a long period were the conventional wisdom of sociology. But I also claim that sociology, understood in the manner presented here, is necessarily directly linked to social criticism. Sociology cannot be a neutral intellectual endeavour, indifferent to the practical consequences of its analyses for those whose conduct forms its object of study.

This book differs from most other introductory texts in sociology in several ways. It incorporates a discussion of basic problems of social theory – the core of theoretical concerns which sociology shares with all the social sciences. I do not adopt the usual view that these issues are unimportant to those seeking to achieve an initial acquaintance with sociology. Neither do I accept the

equally common idea that such matters are too complex to be grasped before the reader has a mastery of the more empirical content of the subject. In analysing this empirical content, I make certain emphases which diverge from those usually found in introductory works. Many accounts of sociology are written primarily with regard to one particular society – that in which the author, or the audience to which the book is directed, live. I try to avoid this type of parochialism, in the belief that one of the main tasks of sociological thought is to break free from the confines of the familiar. But perhaps the chief distinguishing feature of the book is its strongly historical stress. ‘Sociology’ and ‘history’ may be ordinarily taught as though they were distinct fields of study, but I think such a view to be mistaken.

I have tried to be concise, and this means some sacrifice in respect of comprehensiveness. I make no attempt to offer an encyclopaedic coverage of the whole range of topics that are legitimate areas of sociological interest. The reader wanting such a coverage must look elsewhere.

Anthony Giddens

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