

Review essay

Science, sense, and sensibility

A discussion of George Caspar Homans, *Coming to My Senses: The Autobiography of a Sociologist* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1984).

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Autobiographies by scientists are rare. They are even more rarely written by social scientists. This is perhaps because fewer people are interested in the lives of social scientists. It is also because there are very few social scientists who write well enough to pull one off.

On both counts George Homans is an exception. His eminence and impact not only on sociology but on fields beyond makes him noteworthy. His family lineage in the American aristocracy lends to this notability a broader, more cosmopolitan cast. His ability to write well-formed and lively prose makes all of this not only possible but downright pleasurable to read. *Coming to My Senses* is filled with wonderful vignettes; with humor, wry self-criticism, and a becoming modesty. It provides us with an insider's history of the Harvard sociology department in the postwar years and a fascinating sketch of how the son of a blue-blood family, trained to be a leading professional or businessman, took up science as his vocation and the arts as his avocation. The book well embodies the charm and grace of the man himself.

The crusty outspokenness of Homans is embodied in the work as well. Homans clearly intends to be utterly frank, about himself and his work. I will not dispute the honesty of his intent. I do wonder, however, just how much frankness has really been achieved. How can any human being know himself well enough to tell others what his motives really were? How can an intellectual, moreover, really know the "true" meaning and

full intent that lay behind his or her own ideas? My general skepticism about these possibilities, and my effort to make this skepticism scientifically significant as well as relevant to Homans's own story, is what this review is about.

Autobiographies of scientists who have done important work are important because they can give us precious insight into the nature of science. Led by post-positivist philosophers and historians like Polanyi, Kuhn, and Holton, students of science have come increasingly to question Popper's radical distinction between the context of discovery and the logic of verification. If a scientist's "personal knowledge" – his tacit and idiosyncratic feelings and ideas about reality – significantly affects his scientific observations and generalizations, then it seems difficult to maintain the radical distinction between scientific "theories" and the "facts" upon which conventional verification procedures are said to rest. After all, these procedures are carried out by the same scientists who make discoveries. If "reality" is personally mediated in the situation of discovery at one moment in the scientist's life it seems just as likely that it will be personally mediated when he or she tries to verify discoveries at another.

Homans, of course, is a pronounced positivist. It is not even clear, indeed, whether he is aware of the critiques of deduction and induction that have been internal to logical positivism, let alone the challenge to the very possibility of verification launched by Popperian empiricism. For our purposes, however, these finer distinctions are not significant. Both positivism and empiricism portray science not only as linked directly to the empirical world but as increasingly approximating it. For both philosophical positions, science is taken to be cumulative and progressive.

Now this received view of scientific growth does not, of course, stipulate criteria for scientific autobiography. It seems likely, however, that the notions of objectivity and progress upon which it rests might well mislead an autobiographer in certain distinctive ways. Positivist reconstruction and real life experience do not always make a good mix.

These broader considerations are what make Homans's book important reading, over and above its interest on purely personal grounds. For Homans does, indeed, want to make the story of the growth of his personal knowledge, his *Bildung*, seem as progressive and cumulative as (his view of) science itself. While freely acknowledging the role of happenstance and personal idiosyncrasy in determining the precise path his science

took, he wants to insist that its main lines were derived from his (increasing) knowledge of the objective world.

Homans's, then, is a positivistic autobiography, not just an autobiography by a positivist. What is particularly threatening to positivistic autobiography, it seems to me, is any abrupt or radical change of scientific direction, unless, of course, this change can be shown to be a logical deduction from earlier work. If they cannot be so demonstrated, "breaks" tend to belie the notion of progressive accumulation. Moreover, because they are often associated with personal crises in the scientist's life, they threaten to undermine implicitly the objective epistemology of knowledge as well. Thus, Marx hardly mentioned his writings before 1845, and when Engels tells us that he and Marx submitted that early, more idealistic work to the "criticism of mice" – i.e., stuffed in some dusty drawer – he excuses its errors as the indiscretions of youth. Durkheim never acknowledged that any break ever occurred in his work at all, though ramifications of the shift made some of even his most intimate students extremely uncomfortable. In Parsons's work, the concern for retrospective consistency at times became truly maniacal, as in his contorted efforts logically to deduce the AGIL model from his earlier pattern variable scheme.

The casual observer of Homans's theorizing, however, might well think that his science has, indeed, actually been linear and progressive in the positivist sense. It certainly has not substantially changed in thirty years, and thirty years is about as long as most contemporary sociologists have been reading theoretical work. Moreover, Homans's presentation of self in this book, as in all his others, emphasizes his intellectual stubbornness in the face not only of criticism but of intellectual fads and fashions.

I think, however, that this is a reconstruction rather than a faithful account, and that a deconstruction is necessary. Homans's work actually reveals profound discontinuities. From his writings of the 1930s through the publication in 1950 of his first major work, *The Human Group*, Homans was decidedly sympathetic – if not slavishly devoted to – functionalism, systems theory, irrationalist psychology, and the role of culture in human affairs. In the course of the 1950s, he began to change his mind. Beginning at least with his 1958 Presidential Address, "Social Behavior as Exchange," he became ferociously anti-functional, anti-systemic explanation, one-sidedly anti-culturalist, and behavioristic. The single most important fact about *Coming to My Senses* is that Homans does not acknowledge the fundamental character of this shift, let alone explain how it could take place.

From the publication of "Social Behavior as Exchange" to the present day, Homans has advocated a strongly rationalistic approach to action and a polemically individualistic approach to order. These presuppositions have, not surprisingly, been tied to strong attacks on a "functional" approach to societies as more or less integrated systems. Homans has also denied the relative autonomy of culture from institutional constraints and argued strenuously against the notion that social order is linked to the centrality of norms.

In one corner of his mind Homans seems to be aware that these positions were ones he became fully committed to only later in life. As he writes of his story on the first page of his preface, "its heart is an effort to describe how over many years I 'came to my senses,' that is, reached the ideas I now hold about the nature of social science" (xi). I will talk later about the fundamental ambivalence toward his development that this kind of remark reveals.

In general, however, such brief and scattered references do not typify Homans's position. Indeed, the point of his autobiography, it seems to me, is to argue that the key theoretical positions with which he is currently associated – and which he has done so much to promote in contemporary social science – are the ones that, in utero, he has always held. A clear-headed reading of the autobiography compels one to suggest that Homans has used this unique genre as much to conceal as to reveal. In the intellectual parts at least – I am certainly in no position to comment on the personal parts – Homans seems to have rather systematically distorted his own theoretical past.

Let us consider first the individual-versus-society dichotomy, which for the last thirty years Homans has insisted *is* a dichotomy and on this basis has opted for the individualistic side. When he looks back in the autobiography at his earlier work, he is at some pains to give us the impression that he had always more or less upheld the individualistic. Describing his encounter with Radcliffe-Brown's work in Elton Mayo's seminar in the 1930s, he writes "But wait! As I got into the problem I discovered there were many forms of functionalism" (155). He goes on to laud the individualistic and psychologistic alternative presented by Malinowski, describing it in the terms he has developed for his own work today – "not far different from the behavioristic one," "the reward it brings to individual men," etc. He recounts that, at the time, he had a "fierce discussion" with Conrad Arensberg, then a holistic functionalist, after a Society of Fellows dinner.

We would think that the upshot of this early rebellion would certainly have been a paper championing the individualistic against the holistic approach. Nothing of the kind. Homans himself notes, in a single sentence that concludes his long reflection on this theme: "I wrote a paper trying to reconcile the positions of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown" (157). Indeed, that article, which appeared in 1941, actually represented as much a criticism of Malinowski's individualism as a defense, and it concluded with an Aristotelian plea for "trying to find a common ground," a plea which argued against "presenting their theories as alternatives when in fact they are complements" (Homans 1962: 201).

The same kind of retrospective distortion occurs in his references to *The Human Group*. In the surprisingly few pages he devotes to that once very influential discussion, Homans picks out for discussion the passages that prefigured his present work. He makes much, for example, of his proposition that individual interaction leads to mutual affection (*Coming*, 319). He follows this discussion by recalling the pages where he articulated the distinction between Social Contract and Social Mold theories of social behavior. His description of the former is quite neutral, of the latter more sarcastic. Though the recollection explicitly comes down on neither side, when Homans says "this difference in emphasis still exists among sociologists" there is the unmistakable implication that it was his preference for individualism that led him to introduce the distinction between contract and mold in that earlier work.

When we look back at that earlier discussion, however, we see that this was not at all the case. Homans insisted that whatever individuals brought to groups was, in large part, already socially instilled. He described the relation between contract and mold as a "continuing cycle" and concluded that "both are wrong and both are right because both are incomplete" (Homans 1950: 320). Homans's ambition in *Human Group* was synthetic and ecumenical, not individualistic and polemical. Indeed, we will see that if there was any disbalance it was definitely toward the social and away from the individual. Group morale was pointed to, time and time again, as the key for individual performance and happiness (e.g., 313ff).

I would call the individual-society distinction a presuppositional issue, an issue of conceptualizing social order. Closely related in Homans's own mind are issues I would relate to models, namely the issue of the relative systematicity of social phenomena and their relative equilibrium. Here, too, the autobiography paints a misleading picture of the consistency of Homans's thought. The time, once again, is the late 1930s.

Homans is recounting his experiences with the biologist L. J. Henderson, the noted biologist who became an amateur social theorist and who introduced Pareto's work to assorted Harvard students and faculty. Henderson accepted Pareto's notion that societies were interconnected and, armed with his own experience of biological organisms, strongly recommended the system notion to social scientists (see Barber). Homans freely acknowledges the tremendous influence that Henderson had on him. But after paraphrasing Henderson's ideas about systems, he says that while "the notion of a social system . . . is often a useful guide to research" and while "I used it myself in planning the research for my book *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century*," it can "often be used uncritically, and Henderson did so" (110). The problem, he writes, is that "the idea seems to imply that every feature of society is in mutual dependence with every other, so that if any one of them changes, all the others are to some degree affected" (p. 111). While he can accept such systematicity for human bodies, he cannot for societies: "Societies are a good deal 'looser,' less 'organic,' less 'systematic.'"

Homans goes on to make similarly short shrift of the concept of equilibrium, a concept dear to Pareto and Henderson both. He acknowledges that "there are societies that exhibit, often over fairly long spans of time, equilibrium-like features," yet he insists that "stability is hardly what strikes us most about human societies over the millennia of recorded history." His conclusion? One should not spend time "worrying much intellectually about the idea of social equilibrium" (111).

English Villagers was published in 1941, and Homans gives the impression in this discussion that he had little use for the notions of system and equilibrium after that. Readers familiar only with his later work certainly would have no problem with such an impression, for Homans has been an outspoken leader of "anti-functionalism" since the later 1950s. This easy link between past and present is, I think, just what Homans is trying to produce. He wants to describe his career as incremental growth in a kind of inductionist way.

The problem is that this neat and easy link cannot be made. The career grew incrementally only in retrospect. Its pivotal ideas were not so much induced as reduced from different states of the theorist's mind. In the passage I have just described Homans has conveyed a distorted impression of the development of his ideas not by commission but by omission. It is true that systemic models informed *English Villagers* in 1941. It is also true, however, that they even more fundamentally informed *The Hu-*

man Group, published in 1950. That work was a manifestation of micro-systems theory if ever there was one! Homans described groups as “internal systems” facing “external systems.” Citing Whitehead, Henderson, and Pareto, Homans moved directly from systems and equilibrium in the physical world to its use in the social one. “A scheme of analysis that breaks down the phenomena being studied into organized wholes, or systems, and environments in which the systems exist,” he writes, “has . . . again and again been found useful, in sciences as far apart as physics and biology” (86). Here is how the next paragraph begins:

Our definition of the group draws a line between the systems we shall study and their different environments. The activities, interactions, and sentiments of the group members, together with the mutual relations of these elements with one another during the time the group is active, constitute what we shall call the social system. *The rest of the book will be made up of detailed analyses of social systems* [87, italics added].

Much later in that work, Homans makes a similar assertion about the concept of equilibrium. “There is,” he writes, “nothing inherently mysterious about the idea of equilibrium.”

The effort of a group to decrease the amount by which a member departs from his existing degree of obedience to group norms, and the effectiveness of this effort under some circumstances, but not all, are surely facts of experience and observation. *Indeed, we can watch this kind of process more closely in sociology than in other sciences* because we are in the midst of it every day. We have given it the name of equilibrium only because that name has been given to analogous processes in fields as far separated as mechanics and economics [301, italics added].

Obviously, the skepticism that Homans the autobiographer holds about functionalism only consciously emerged at some time after Homans the sociologist wrote these passages.

Much the same retrospective revision seems to affect Homans’s musing about the rationality of action. In the autobiography, he asserts “what I found troublesome from the very beginning of my reading of Pareto was the distinction he makes between logico-experimental and nonlogico-experimental actions” (111). He argues, in opposition to this distinction, that “in one sense, people always act logically (rationally)” and concludes that as social scientists “we do not want to know whether it [an action] was rational, but what caused it” (112). Certainly no one can argue that this is not Homans’s current view. But I wonder, once again, just how well he is actually describing the views of his past?

In 1934 Homans published, with Charles Curtis, a spirited defense and introduction to Pareto's thought, *An Introduction to Pareto*. The authors found nothing particularly troubling at that time about the distinction Homans refers to fifty years later. Two years after that, moreover, in "Men and Land in the Middle Ages," the young Homans explicitly makes Pareto's notion of nonlogical action one of the major foci of his work. He argues that the open-field system of agriculture can be explained only by understanding the difference between nonlogical and expedient action and, therefore, independent causal significance of economic custom from economic necessity. The relevant passage is worth quoting at some length, because it demonstrates in such a striking way the very different character of Homans's earlier thought, a difference the autobiography elides.

The open-field system seems a strangely formalized one to people of the present day. . . . They do not appreciate that in any such situation a set of customs are built up which prescribe what the conduct of every member of the group which is working together shall be. . . . Behind [these customs] is the force of sentiment, not the logic of the economic situation. Indeed, they often run counter to the demands of the economic situation. . . . Whereas in . . . modern factories the nonlogical customs of behavior are not recognized, but can actually be found by looking for them, the reverse is true of open-field villages. . . . Its nonlogical customs of cooperation, unlike those of the factories, had time to become recognized in its dispositions and institutions. . . . *These customs are the important thing about any society and they are the important thing about medieval villages* [Homans 1962: 139–140, italics added].

If this contradiction of his purported early skepticism about nonlogical action is not clear enough, we need only consult the preface Homans added to this 1936 article when he reprinted it in his 1962 collection, *Sentiments and Activities*. "Toward the end of the essay," he writes, "I made a distinction between 'logical' and 'nonlogical' behavior that I took from Vilfredo Pareto, *Traite de Sociologie Generale* (Paris, 1917) and that I no longer find useful." Homans goes on: "In the present reprinting I might have revised the distinction out of existence, were it not absurd to pretend that in 1936 I believed something different from what in fact I believed" (Homans 1962: p. 127). Absurd indeed!

The distinction between expedient, utilitarian action and custom-mandated, nonrational action also plays a central role in — what else? — *The Human Group*. At the beginning of his chapter on "The Individual and the Group," for example, Homans goes out of his way to insist not only that the distinction exists but that it is essential for understanding society itself. "Our account of social control in the last chap-

ter,” he writes, “was inadequate because it implied that a person always calculates, consciously or unconsciously, the various painful consequences of a breach of a norm, whereas many persons, perhaps most persons for at least part of the time, feel a direct and immediate hurt if they violate a norm” (Homans 1950: 314).

Finally, there is a similar if less clearly articulated effort at reconstructive consistency when Homans discusses his attitude to the relative autonomy of the cultural norms that inform nonlogical action. In the autobiography he says that he was suspicious of the culturalist argument from the very beginning of his career (159). Thus, in the very midst of his recollections about his early anthropological readings, he lays out a systematic, highly materialist theory of the origins of the avunculate pattern of jural authority. This account emphasizes technology and natural environment as primary causes of normative patterns and concludes that “what many families do in fact becomes in time what every family ought to do, [t]hat is, it becomes a norm.”

Whether this actually reflected Homans’s belief at that early time there is reason to doubt. I have cited earlier his 1936 insistence that medieval land use was actually based as much on custom as on utility, a position he reiterated in *English Villagers* in 1941 (Homans 1941: 402–415). Nine years later, in *The Human Group*, he has not entirely changed his mind. At one point, for example, he writes, “so far we have been behaviorists: we have looked at observable social behavior and sought to reach what generalizations about it we could, without making any assumptions, one way or the other, that the ideas in men’s minds have an influence on behavior.” He goes on: “We can no longer disregard ideas; we must bring them into our theory as a new element” (Homans 1950: 121–122). What follows is a discussion of the centrality of norms, in which Homans links norms to broader patterns of culture. True, at a much later point in the book Homans chides the “culture and personality” school for overemphasizing the cultural at the expense of the biological and institutional, but even then he does not wish to pit one side against the other. Again, his aim is synthetic and ecumenical, not onesided and polemical: “For full understanding, both halves of the cycle – and we repeat, *both halves* – must be studied” (332, original italics).

Personal as compared to explicitly theoretical statements are not in a strict sense relevant to the argument at hand. Still, it is interesting – in a “by the way” manner – to note that in ad hoc remarks throughout the autobiography Homans continually evokes just the kind of “super-

structural” explanations he says he has disavowed. In trying to explain Pareto on residues, he suggests, for example, that “the moral convictions that make men ready to fight to preserve their institutions and societies [are] necessary condition[s] for the stability of a social order” (113). He explains the behavior of the U.S. Navy, as compared to the British one, by referring to the effects of Calvinism (250). Pondering the greater ability of Southern officers to assume military command, he refers to their “tradition” of command (269). Pitrim Sorokin’s unruly behavior as department chair he ascribes to “what cultural anthropologists would call his Russian authoritarianism” (130).

In considering his most important presuppositional and model commitments, then, Homans has reported his recollections in a misleading way. He does not acknowledge, let alone come explicitly to grips with, the fundamental shifts that occurred in his theoretical orientation in the course of his career. The reason, I think, is that he is committed to reconstructing the growth of his knowledge in a positivist way. I do not believe this to be a strategic misreading involving conscious duplicity, though some of Homans’s critical remarks about his own lack of scholarly sincerity – to be considered below – might lead to doubts on this score. I assume, to the contrary, that Homans’s autobiographical account sincerely indicates his present state of mind.

While key elements of the past may not be immediately accessible to consciousness, however, they have not necessarily disappeared from a person’s mind. In 1962, we have seen, Homans was uncomfortably aware of a shift in his work, at least as compared to his thinking in 1936. Even in the autobiography, moreover, some hints surface about intellectual changes taking place. Describing his theoretical differences with the founders of the Harvard Social Relations department in the immediate post-war period, Homans writes: “But then I had been away for a long time, and my ideas had been changing” (296). He says nothing more. Later, after telling us that his account of the external system in *The Human Group* was a “mistake,” he mentions that, sometime in the subsequent period, “I came slowly to the conclusion that human social systems were much less organic, less systematic than what Henderson had in mind” (316). This admission, which differs so strikingly from his general insistence about being a life-long skeptic about functionalism, is made in an off-hand manner and its implications are never pursued. Indeed, while he acknowledges that the 1950 work has been, of all his books, “the favorite with both [my] students and teachers” and that “it is not mine,” he immediately adds, “I will certainly not disown it.”

It seems safe to assume, indeed, that on some less than fully conscious level Homans is aware even while writing the autobiography that a change in his orientation occurred. What can Homans do with such tacit knowledge, knowledge that he would prefer to disown? I believe he does two things with it, the first explicit and straightforward, the second implicit and indirect.

The one change that Homans readily acknowledges – though, once again, he describes it in a gradual, incremental, and cumulative way – is his growing understanding that, to be scientific, theory must be placed in a propositional form. He locates the most dramatic growth in this understanding in the period after the publication of *The Human Group* in 1950 and before the publication of “Social Behavior as Exchange” in 1958. In this manner he offers some explanation for what must, I earlier argued, have been the major period of theoretical upheaval in his life.

Characteristically, Homans’s explanation is primarily a positivist one. He wants to make sure his readers understand that it was through observation of reality – through first-hand experience of it or through reading about it – that his theory changed. It changed, moreover, not by affecting any of the substantive apriori assumptions that (I would argue) affect science but by affecting its methodological form. Methodological assumptions, according to Homans’s positivist faith, allow access to reality without occluding the perception of reality itself. At the end of his chapter on *The Human Group*, Homans separates the substance of his empirical findings from the form of their expression. “My teaching and my study of the literature in social psychology,” he writes, referring to his work preparing for a course on groups that he taught after completing the 1950 book, “gave me further reason to consider whether the scheme I put forward in *The Human Group* for organizing intellectually the findings on fundamental social processes were really adequate” (320). He concludes: “Other intellectual issues I had to face in the early years of the new department were driving me in the same direction, especially the issue of theory.”

This “intellectual” shift is described as follows. Ironically, Thomas Kuhn was the initiator, for he introduced Homans to the modern physical writing of Ernst Mach and Max Planck. Though this reading “provided me with good examples of theories,” Homans writes, “I did not study them with the deliberate purpose of discovering what a theory was” (322). Another intellectual event stimulated his attempt to make this discovery – “contact with, and reading the works of, Talcott Parsons.” Homans’s ir-

ritation with Parsons was, he says, about the proper form of social science.

My trouble with Parsons centered on his notion of theory. . . . Implicitly I was sure it was not mine, but I could not yet make explicit in what ways it was not. . . . Parsons's notion of a theory was obviously so different from the one I instinctively held after reading Mach and Planck that I decided to pursue the matter further and discover what the philosophers of science had to say about theory" [323, 325].

As a guest lecturer in Cambridge, England, in 1953, Homans "first began to read what the philosophers of science had to say" (p. 325). He accepted the views of R. B. Braithwaite, the heir of logical positivism, who laid out the propositional, deductive model. "I was now satisfied," Homans writes, "that for practical purposes I knew what a theory was" (328). It was but a simple step, he suggests, to the behaviorist theory that appeared in 1958. He needed general propositions that could function as covering laws. Even before World War II he had reached the conclusion that there was "a single human nature," that is, a human nature that was consistent across cultures.

Therefore my general propositions would have to be propositions about this human nature. And they would have to be psychological rather than sociological. . . . The position I now adopted [was] methodological individualism [329].

Though this account certainly reveals one line of Homans's scientific development, it seems inadequate on several grounds. First, it focuses only on the form of Homans's theorizing, ignoring shifts in the substance. Even if he had come to conceive of a single human nature, for example, why must this nature be a behaviorist one? There is ample evidence, I have pointed out, that Homans actually held a more non-rationalist conception of human nature in his pre-behaviorist work, even while he held to cross-cultural consistency. Why, moreover, should his discovery of a single human nature be the basis for his coveted covering laws, the Skinnerian-derived laws of exchange? In point of fact, they could not be the sole basis, for they refer only to action and say nothing about order. Homans has smuggled into this discussion of human nature an assumption that can in no way be derived from it: he has presupposed not simply instrumental action but the individual as opposed to the collective basis of social order.

In addition to such considerations, Homans's account of this shift is simply too formalistic. I doubt whether major scientific transitions –

and one certainly occurred in the post-1950 work, even if Homans himself describes it much more narrowly – ever occur for such purely intellectualist reasons.

But Homans also does something quite different with his tacit knowledge that the theory he now holds is dramatically different than the theory of his earlier work and, therefore, that the changes in his science have been more radical and inconsistent than the autobiography allows. At the key points in his account where he does acknowledge publishing theoretical statements that differed substantially from his present ideas, he maintains that those were not his real ideas at the time. His teachers and readers were not aware of this, of course, because they only had access to his ideas in their publicly stated form. In other words, Homans puts forward what is really quite an extraordinary claim, namely, that in his discussions with his teachers and in his published work he did not tell the truth about what his theoretical ideas really were.

He testifies to making these prevarications at three different times in his career. The first occurred when the young Talcott Parsons asked the even younger Homans to read and criticize the manuscript of *The Structure of Social Action*, apparently in 1936. Homans himself had just published his own book on Pareto and, because Parsons's manuscript emphasized Pareto as well, this request, as Homans acknowledges, must have seemed to Parsons quite a reasonable thing. Here is what Homans says of his response.

I conscientiously read it, but did not criticize it, I hated it so much. It was another book of words about other persons' words. Rarely did it make contact with actual human behavior . . . I did not think Talcott had come even close to proving his thesis. . . . There was so much wrong with the book that, were I to do justice to my disapproval, I should have to write a book equally long. That I was certainly not going to do; I had my own fish to fry. So I returned the manuscript to Talcott with very general, pusillanimous, and hypocritical words of approval, accompanied with only enough objections to show that I was independent minded. I did not disabuse him of his conviction that I was at heart an ally [323].

The second instance Homans recounts is related to the paper he prepared, under the tutelage of Elton Mayo, comparing the functionalist theories of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. I have referred to this paper earlier, suggesting that while Homans discusses it in the context of recounting his rebellion against holistic theories the paper itself criticized Malinowski's individualism as much if not more than Radcliffe-

Brown's functionalism. While Homans does not deny that the paper's explicit purpose was "to reconcile the positions," the general point of his discussion is to indicate the opposite, that he had written it in order to break away from Radcliffe-Brown's position, the one, of course, that was held by Mayo as well. Once again, Homans explains this incongruity by suggesting that he was merely being obsequious and that, as a result, he hid his real ideas: "Mayo approved of the paper. Underneath, I remained a skeptic about societal functionalism" (157).

Finally, there is Homans's account of the reasons for his inclusion in the Social Relations department in the immediate post-war period. Recounting the theoretical beliefs of Parsons, Henry Murray, Gordon Allport, and Clyde Kluckhohn, he observes: "If the founding fathers had fully understood how different, in some ways, though not in all, my ideas were from theirs, I doubt if they would have shown themselves so ready to welcome this viper into their bosoms" (p. 296). The reason they did not fully understand how different his ideas were, Homans suggests, is that he never told them. "In fact," he writes, "they thought for a while that I was a *conformer*" (p. 297, original italics).

What are we to make of Homans's claims to deception? I think there are compelling grounds not to take them at face value as accurate descriptions of how the younger Homans felt. Most subordinates, of course, dissemble before authority. But intellectual life, even inside the academy, is not a bureaucratic system, and this is particularly true during graduate training. Homans is the first to say, moreover, that he values above anything else in this life his freedom to speak out. It is also true, of course, that Homans often describes himself as a tough nut to crack, as the kind of person quite capable of acting with the coolest of self-interested calculations. Whether he was always like this, I will suggest below, is something very difficult to say.

It seems much more likely to me that these earlier relationships were more sincere and these earlier writings more straightforward than Homans now allows. He himself testifies to the great warmth he felt toward the various intellectual authorities who took him under their wing. That this warmth and respect inspired sincerity seems consistent, moreover, with other considerations that the autobiography obscures.

Every reservation that Homans in 1984 says he had about Parsons's work in 1936 actually characterized his own work at that point. Homans, too, had written a book of words about other people's words and, at least

from the many references he made to that work in the years after, it seems evident he had felt at the time that this was a perfectly legitimate, not to say a desirable mode, of gaining access to the truth. As for his secret skepticism vis-a-vis Mayo, he expressed exactly the same sentiments about organicism in the conclusion to *English Villagers*. That book was not written under Mayo's tutelage and it was published the same year as the article in question. It seems clear, moreover, that Homans wanted very much to make that theoretical point in his thesis book, since the conclusion constituted a somewhat awkward theoretical addendum to an otherwise thoroughly empirical work. Finally, of course, Homans had chosen to attend Mayo's seminars; he was not required to do so. The issue of his sincerity in the Harvard Social Relations department is a bit more complex. Homans writes at one point that he had changed during the war years, and his work after 1950 certainly was radically different. Yet in the late 1940s, the same period during which he "confesses" to hypocritical conformity, he was composing a work, *The Human Group*, that expounded functionalist and normative analysis, a theory that not only conformed to the expectations of the Soc Rel group but to Homans's Henderson-Mayo reference group as well.

If Homans was not, in fact, equivocating about his intellectual beliefs, why does he say now that he was? An answer to this question is crucial for understanding Homans and his science.

Until the age of forty, Homans filled his writing with notions of solidarity, group morale, customs, morality, and ritual. After that time he devoted himself to the isolated individual, the individual's selfish motives, and the ephemeral quality of morality as against real interests. It is striking how this dichotomy corresponds to the very different kinds of "selves" Homans attributes to himself in the course of this book.

On the one hand, Homans tells the reader how much he values the solidarity he has experienced as part of the densely interconnected network of his extended family, his ethnic group, and even his social class. He refers time and time again to his WASP roots. He notes that he and his young friends were extremely "class conscious" (p. 9) and recounts that they felt themselves very much engaged in group struggle.

We youngsters did not articulate the social ideas we learned in the Back Bay. Had we done so, they might have sounded something like this: "We are a group, the Yankees, and we are different from other ethnic groups. Not only are we different, we are better. [B]ut our very identity is at stake. We are a great group with a great history, but we are bound to disappear as surely as Cooper's Mohicans [p. 19].

He was, he assures us, never an isolated individual.

Like class and ethnicity, I learned about extended kinship early. I never knew a time when I felt I was a social isolate, when I was not an insider, when I had no social identity [p. 15].

At the same time, however, the autobiography reveals that in one part of his being Homans felt rejected by the most primary group of all, namely by his nuclear family, at least in the person of his mother and father. He reports that his feelings toward his mother were “mixed.” Noting her stubbornness, he says that “there are some surprising things she just would not do, even for her husband and her children.” For example, when George and his sisters complained about the food she ordered from the cook “we got nowhere.” She would, however, be quick to order what she herself liked. Homans recounts how, in fruit season, she ordered cherries *ad infinitum*. “Her children would not have begrudged Ma her cherries,” Homans writes, but “what galled us was her forcing them on us for weeks on end.” Two episodes of his mother “exiling” him to his room because of her supposition that he had an infectious disease are ambiguously reported. He sarcastically exclaims, “how boring it would be for her to undergo the rigors of Christmas with not only me but her other children down with pneumonia”! His conclusions about his mother reveal his rejection and hurt:

My sisters and I never doubted that our mother loved us. But when we were out of her sight, we were often out of her mind too; she did not worry about us. Her apparent lack of interest may have just been the other side of her greater interest in my father. More likely, it may have reflected the way her own mother had brought her up. Still, one likes to think that one’s mother worries about one a little [pp. 35–37].

Although Homans reports much more positive feelings toward his father, he also says he never “felt emotionally close or intimate with him” (p. 29), and he still smarts from the exile he suffered when his father sent him off to boarding school at St. Paul’s in 1923. “I have often wondered why my father decided to send me,” Homans remarks (p. 51). The Homanses had never been sent away to school, Homans remarks, a good Boston day school having been considered quite good enough.

Is it any wonder, then, that in the face of this experience of relative emotional rejection Homans became something of an isolated individual? Describing his early love for sailing, he writes that “in summer I was a rather solitary boy spending long hours sailing in my boat” (p. 50). Writ-

ing, somewhat incongruously it seems to me, about his father's reasons for sending him to St. Paul's, he says that "getting a young man away from home, especially as solitary a one as I, is probably good in itself" (p. 52).

A clear conflict seems to exist between Homans's conceptions of himself. On the one hand, he says that he felt closely integrated with his family and ethnic group, and that he never felt himself to be a social isolate. On the hand, he says quite the opposite, namely that he felt himself to be an isolated individual whose emotional needs had been rejected by those he most loved.

Ambivalence, of course, is a universal human experience. When stated so sharply, however, it points to sources of anxiety and strain. This tension between acceptance and rejection helps us to understand what at some point became one of the most outstanding characteristics of Homans's personality: his "toughness." He became a "tough guy" who prides himself on his self-reliance. Early on he tells us that he holds "sentimental humanitarianism" in the "greatest contempt" (p. 17). Recalling his encounter with the conservative cultural critic Wyndham Lewis while at Harvard, Homans sympathizes with Lewis's attacks on the "exploitation of the childlike, the primitive, the psychopathological, what might be summed up as the softness in much of modern art" (p. 79). At a much later point, commenting on Harvard faculty meetings in 1969 and 1970, he writes scornfully that "the bleatings and wafflings" of liberal academicians "make me puke" (p. 306). He describes himself, by contrast, as identifying with military virtues: "In a society and era that, at least in the West, is increasingly pacifist, I am reading to affirm the characteristic values of the soldier and the seaman" (p. 114). The Second World War is described as "the greatest event of my time," and Homans quotes a soldierly slogan – which "would have shocked sensitive and 'liberal' civilians" – to the following effect: "'It was a hell of a war but better than no war at all!'" (p. 292).

From what we know about Homans's sense of rejection, we can see how this toughness was such an effective defense. Homans would seem to have made a virtue out of necessity. He could reject others before they rejected him.

If the tensions in Homans's character do, indeed, throw light on the nature and development of his scientific beliefs, the emphatic references to war in these last quotations raise an intriguing possibility. Is the relation

between secure group member and isolated tough guy a temporal one? Did Homans know he was lonely as a child, or did he come to this realization only in the course of deciding to explicitly reject a group-oriented, "soft" life that heightened unrequited needs? While such temporal considerations are only suggested by the autobiography, they converge with other indications of personal transformation that Homans's account makes directly accessible.

Before getting to these, however, two other pieces of the puzzle should be brought into play. The first complements the tough guy mystique. Homans enjoys insisting to his readers that he is not a good person and that it doesn't bother him one bit. He contrasts himself to his father, whose kind and considerate nature, Homans believes, made it impossible for him to live up to the Homans family maxim "never help out." "I myself," Homans writes, "have encountered no pangs in living up to the maxim" (p. 27). "I knew I was never going to be good in the sense in which he was good," Homans explains (p. 29). Describing his early methodological training as a psychiatric interviewer, he writes that "I never acquired the slightest desire to become a psychiatrist or indeed to 'do good' to others in any way whatsoever" (p. 148).

This can be read as refreshing honesty. I think, rather, that Homans may be protesting too much, that he feels regret and real anxiety about some thoughts or acts, and that as a result he actually feels that he may be a "bad" person. Looking back on his early religious training in the Unitarian church, he confesses that he regrets its elimination of the doctrine of original sin.

I have since come to believe that some doctrine of original sin is crucial to the survival of any religion, and that it would be well for everyone, everywhere, to recite once a day the General Confession of the Church of England, which puts the matter succinctly: "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us" [p. 18].

Because Homans is an acknowledged agonistic, the point of this recitation would have to be psychological rather than religious. It should, I think, be read more as a statement about himself than as a gloss on the nature of religion. Boys often feel they have "sinned" against their fathers, even when they have not. Homans himself does not believe in the Oedipus complex. We will have to see for ourselves.

Homans portrays his father as the prototype of goodness against which

he found himself wanting. Idealizing his father, who died when he was twenty-four, he describes him as the best man he has ever known. It is not entirely surprising, then, to find that Homans is convinced that he disappointed his father. He goes over very carefully his rejection from Porcellian, the prestigious Harvard Finals Club to which his father had belonged and that he had wanted George to join in the most fervent way. Indeed, Homans speculates that it was to make his accession to the Porcellian more likely that his father sent him away to St. Paul's. This sense of having failed his father, combined with the rejection he experienced at his mother's hands, might be responsible for the adult Homans's inchoate sense of sin and corruption.

Whether it was this sense of disappointing father, his father's relatively early death, an unfulfilled need for motherly nurturance, or, as seems likely, some combination of all these, it is a fact that, while relatively isolated from his peers, Homans as a young man formed a series of extremely close relationships with older men. This is the second piece of the puzzle that must be brought into place before the full significance of the war years can be properly understood.

Homans's father figures included Bernard De Voto, L. J. Henderson, Howard Zinsser, Charles Curtis, Samuel Eliot Morison, Elton Mayo, and Charles Francis Adams. They were almost all not only extremely influential but extremely accomplished men, and to them Homans attributes his most serious education. All of these relationships were established before the Second World War. After the war, no new such quasi-paternal ties are reported to have been made. What happened during the war Homans tells us at great length and with obviously great pleasure. For five years he commanded his own fighting ships. At first he was afraid he could not handle command. Later he became confident and even a bit domineering. Though his assignments were in relatively safe areas, he still lived face-to-face with death. By the war's conclusion he felt he had survived a profoundly maturing ordeal.

It is quite possible, then, that it was in the course of the war that Homans found a way to transform neediness into aggression and isolation into rugged individualism. He also seems to have overcome his desire to maintain deferential, father-son relationships. If World War II was not actually the greatest event of our times, on personal grounds it may well have been the greatest event in Homans's life. If such a personal transformation did take place, this may explain Homans's retrospective remark that he had "been away for a long time" and that his theoretical ideas

were changing. Although no evidence of fundamental scientific change emerges until after 1950, it is true, I think, that the highly structured mode of intellectual life often means that personal upheavals take a long time working themselves out.

These considerations help answer the question of why Homans feels that he lied about his theoretical beliefs in earlier days. Most of the paternal authorities with whom he formed close bonds believed in Pareto, functionalism, and the significance of sentiment in some crucial way. It would be understandable for Homans to feel that these men, too, would be disappointed with the turn his later ideas have taken and, given the “overdetermined” power of these early attachments, to experience no small amount of guilt for his scientific rebellion. Responding to this guilt, he accuses himself of having acted in bad faith all along. His new theory lends support to this reading of his past, for it claims that people are selfish rather than good and that they guide their actions according to strategic calculations. His new ideas about original sin lend to this new reading of himself a theological frame.

Sometime around 1950, apparently in the period that followed the completion of *The Human Group* – the last work of what I have been calling Homans’s “old ideas” – the manuscript of Parsons and Shils *Towards a General Theory of Action* began to circulate in the Harvard Social Relations Department. After a period of discussion, Homans recounts, Parsons laid the manuscript before the entire faculty at a department meeting. While “urging us all to read it,” he continues, Parsons also implied, “though without quite saying as much, that it ought to be adopted as the official doctrine of the department to guide future teaching and research” (p. 303). Judging by Homans’s recollections, this was where he finally decided to draw the line. Up until this point he had never made his growing antagonism to “Soc Rel” theory explicit, nor his personal antipathy toward some of its leading members, most notably Parsons himself. This meeting marked the turning point.

As soon as I was satisfied that Parsons had finished [his presentation], I spoke up and said in effect: “There must be no implication that this document is to be taken as representing the official doctrine of the department, and no member shall be put under any pressure to read it.’ . . . A dreadful silence followed my attack, and I thought no one was going to support me. But finally Sam Stouffer, a tenured professor and a member of the senior committee, spoke up. . . . He declared that the . . . book ought not be treated as departmental doctrine. . . . My seniors at last realized I was a bit of a rebel. No further official effort was made to integrate theory for the Department of Social Relations [p. 303].

If my reading of his life and work is correct, this act of rebellion, so long delayed, had been in preparation for a long time. It allowed Homans to crystallize his growing feeling that he no longer needed paternal love, requited or otherwise. It made his feeling real by making it palpable and public. After the rite of passage, he was ready to reshape his theory in a fundamental way. The new theory would be a hard and tough-minded explanation of social life, but at least it would be his own.

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