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The Crude and the Refined: Sociology, Obscurity, Language, and Oil

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## 1995 MSSA PLENARY ADDRESS: THE CRUDE AND THE REFINED: SOCIOLOGY, OBSCURITY, LANGUAGE, AND OIL

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*Sociology is too obscure—both in terms of its linguistic clarity and in terms of its societal influence. The reasons for the linguistic obscurity are numerous, but they can be boiled down to two sets of factors. The first involves the fact that clear writing requires hard work. Bad writing, however, can also require hard work—and hard work doesn't necessarily prevent clear writing in other disciplines. The second and more specific set of factors involves fear: the fear of being dismissed as "obvious." Yet, far from being obvious or widely understood, "socio-logical" insights are often the opposite of the usual, individualistic assumptions. One way to lessen the risk of merely stating the obvious, accordingly, may be to spend more time questioning the obvious—particularly those assumptions that also happen to provide convenient justifications for power. This could create other risks, specifically the risk of attack or vilification that seldom afflicts those who remain truly obscure. Where sociological insights truly are relevant to societal debates, however, the proper response may be to increase the amount of effort that is devoted to stating the evidence responsibly, not incomprehensibly. After spelling out this argument in the paper, I take the brave step of trying to illustrate it with a simple example, involving some of my own work with Bob Gramling, which deals with the onshore battles that now rage over offshore oil.*

This article has two main purposes, and it seems only fair that I should give you some advance warning of what they are. The first is to grapple with the age-old problem of atrocious sociological

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This article is a revised version of the 1995 Plenary Address to the Mid-South Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Mobile, AL; it is dedicated to the memory of Joseph DeMartini, a valued colleague whose early conversations with me had a sustained influence on a number of the core arguments being presented in this paper. I thank Steve Kroll-Smith and a pair of anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier draft, but I am solely responsible for any failings that remain.

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writing, and to offer a modest but pragmatic suggestion of how to do better. The second is to illustrate the argument with a specific example—one that is chosen not because it is intended to represent anything like perfection in prose, but because it has a good deal to do with the mid-South region and because it is sufficiently simple to make the point. The article's arguments will focus largely on the importance of clarity, both in our thinking and in our writing, for reasons that are relevant both within the academy and more broadly. The example has been chosen not to impress, but to illustrate, for reasons that are quite straightforward. For those who wonder if it is possible for sociologists write in a way that, while sociological, is also accessible to mere mortals, the need is for an illustration that meets the standard of "existence proof": Anything that exists is possible.

### SOCIOLOGY, OBSCURITY, AND LANGUAGE

Now that you've had fair warning, I plan to move directly to the paper's first main task. There are two main sets of causes, I submit, for sociological writing that is obscure or just plain bad. The first set involves causes that mainly afflict other people, not you and me, so I won't have much to say about them. Instead, I plan to focus on the second set of causes, which can affect even good people like us; if we think about this second set of causes a bit more creatively, we may be able to take the subversive step of bringing a bit more of our prose out of the fog and into the sunshine. If we do so successfully, we may even start to overcome the other kind of sociological obscurity—the virtual absence of sociological perspectives in most of the key debates about society today—a point to which I will return in this article's conclusion.

The first set of causes for bad writing is quite broad; it includes essentially all the factors that are already obvious to the readers of this journal, perhaps summarized most succinctly with the observation that clear thinking is a precondition for clear writing, and that clear thinking is often quite hard work. The hard work problem is probably exacerbated by what a professor of mine once called "The 80% Law," which I believe I can still remember verbatim: "Whatever field you're in, and whatever kind of people you're dealing with, your best bet is that roughly 80% of them won't know what they're doing."

To the extent to which the discussion of all of these obvious

factors can move from the generic to the specific, of course, a focus on helping people "to know what they're doing" can actually be quite useful. Verbs do all the work. Periods are a respected form of punctuation. And, as Mark Twain once observed, the difference between the right word and almost the right word "is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug." Even at a broader level, a focus on this first set of factors can help us all feel better, or even have a bit of fun. What it probably will not do, unfortunately, is offer us as much help as we need in understanding the underlying set of reasons why so many sociologists write so badly.

One of the reasons is quite simple: If the 80% law is true, it is a universal law, whereas bad writing among sociologists is a particular problem. The other reason may be less obvious: Although clear thinking and clear writing do involve hard work, so do the pompous posturing, heavy-duty jargonizing, and other kinds of simply bad writing that afflict our field. Surely, there must be some additional reasons why so much sociological writing seems to hold the same level of appeal as enduring a tax audit in the middle of root canal surgery.

Naturally, I believe there are such additional reasons, and I plan to devote most of this section of the paper to them. One good place to start, of course, is with some of the more insightful analyses of sociologists' linguistic gridlock that have already been published; some of my personal favorites are by Becker (1986), Erikson (1989), and Molotch (1994). A useful next step is to recognize that, as Stanford Lyman emphasized in his presidential address to the Mid-South Sociological Association (1995), there is a clear need for renewed sociological attention to the importance of being able to tell a good story. In addition, however, I will argue here that there are still other factors that need to be confronted; these other factors involve a broad family of influences, but a helpful simplification is to summarize all of those influences in a single word: terror.

The terror in question is a relatively specific one—not unique to sociology, exactly, but not exactly universal, either. It is shared by most other social science disciplines, and in a number of cases it takes an even more virulent form in the humanities, as in many forms of literary criticism and philosophy. And it's not just any form of terror. The most straightforward way to describe it is to repeat the simple form of the question that often inspires it: "So? Isn't that just obvious?"

To understand why this simple question can offer one of the

most effective threats to clear writing ever devised, it is useful to have a bit of context. First, as is the case with most other professions, very few of even the most famous and widely respected of sociologists started out that way, much as they may want to pretend to the contrary. Most, instead, were once younger, less well known, and probably more (visibly) insecure. A significant fraction had friends or family members who wondered—and perhaps still do—“Why on earth would you devote your life to that, and what good is it, anyway? Why don’t you go into something useful, like being a butcher?”

Up to this point, the sociologist-to-be shares a good deal in common with, say, a budding theoretical physicist or hydrogeologist. At this point, however, an important difference begins to crystallize—and it doesn’t just involve that word *useful*. True, a budding hydrogeologist with any promise, for example, can tell a story about nasty chemicals in the nation’s groundwater, and about the need to do better at tracking down those pollutants and cleaning them up. The budding sociologist may not have ready access to such a prepackaged, “practical” response, but neither does a theoretical physicist. Besides, even sociologists in the lower 80% should be able to offer up at least as many examples of practical benefits as theoretical physicists, if only by listing a few of the problems in the world—ranging from the wars that have created employment for theoretical physicists to the kinds of pollution that have created employment for hydrogeologists—that are ultimately caused not by hardware, but by humans.

If practicality is not the key, then what of prestige? Even among in-laws who would be hard-pressed to state the differences between a cytologist and a sociologist, after all, there is often a vague sense that the expertise of the former is more likely to be the source of a good scare, whereas that of the latter is more likely to be the source of a good joke. The lack of prestige probably does contribute to sociologists’ sense of terror, in some ways, but it may also be a consequence of a root cause that goes much deeper—one that is worth examining a bit more closely.

### **Ironies and Options**

The root cause, I believe, is directly connected to our subject matter. Even in the process of providing a completely incoherent answer to the “what good is it?” question, a physicist may provide an answer about quarks, and a hydrogeologist may provide an

answer about dense, non-aqueous-phase liquids (DNAPLs). To most people, these answers can sound incomprehensible even when they are reasonably well explained. By contrast—and by way of irony—if a sociologist is to provide an incomprehensible answer, the answer has to be incomprehensible in its own right. An answer that is merely incoherent is still likely to relate at least vaguely to society or to people—and although almost nobody professes to be an expert on quarks or DNAPLs, almost everybody professes to be an expert on people.

Clearly, there is more than enough irony to go around. First, except among gatherings of specialists, physicists who study alpha particles or gamma rays rarely need to confront a question along the lines of, “Isn’t that just obvious?” Second, unlike people or cultures, alpha particles and gamma rays really are more or less all alike. Third, if we do our jobs sufficiently well, our points should indeed be obvious, at least in retrospect: One of the surest signs that we have been clear in our explanations is when a phenomenon becomes “obvious” through our efforts. Fourth, one of the reasons why an audience of in-laws can be so eager to show how smart they are about something that’s not quite so simple—say, for example, society—is that they may have been intimidated by previous discussions of phenomena that are inherently simple, but that they have nevertheless become convinced that they should not understand, such as alpha particles or DNAPLs. Fifth, a sociologist generally cannot even benefit from factors that often help journalists, such as the insider nature of gossip or the timeliness of a tidbit. Our task is to say something worthwhile about people in general, not about interesting individuals in particular, and to do so in ways that transcend rather than to tackle the issues of the hour. The net result of these individual ironies is an overarching one: As sociologists tend to learn repeatedly, if imperfectly, there can be as much of a burden as a benefit in having a subject matter that so many people find intrinsically interesting.

The ironies can also be joined by irritations, given the ways in which at least some people choose to express their interest. In particular, we probably do need to recognize that accusations about obviousness often have less to do with an interest in good-faith interaction than with an effort to score points. Part of the frustration that social scientists experience, after all, is that the people who feel the greatest need to pronounce something as obvious are often the same people who would feel the same need if they were re-

acting to precisely the opposite conclusion. Birds of a feather flock together? I knew that. Opposites attract? I knew that all along; I was just going to see if you could figure it out. Social scientists have been expressing this frustration for years, of course, but recently, the evidence has become more systematic. The little-known findings have even been summarized in a readily accessible source (Murphy 1991): Research done by Stanford doctoral candidates Lily Wong and Daphna Baratz in the late 1980s showed that, when undergraduates were presented with lists of purported social science findings—half true and half false—those subjects rated the false “findings” as being just as “obvious” as the true ones. These findings were replicated when other subjects were presented with the opposites of the initial statements (see Murphy 1991 for additional discussion).

So now there is quantitative evidence for what we have all long known: Many of the most widespread and heartfelt convictions about obviousness are grounded firmly on thin, hot air. Once we have noted that point, however, and perhaps once we have felt a bit of reciprocal smugness about it as well, we still need to recognize that the common sociological responses can scarcely be considered free from irony of their own.

Although nearly all of us have encountered people who proclaim with confidence, after hearing an explanation, that they knew the answer all along, few of us are likely to admit that we have pondered the possibility of dealing with such people through strangulation. After all, besides being a distinctly male form of behavior, strangulation is scarcely a considerate approach to social interaction. “Considerate,” however, is a description that also tends not to fit a style of writing that inflicts misery not just on smug, know-it-all types, but on nearly all readers; bad writing may protect us from charges of obviousness, but it does so at a needless cost. At least strangulation focuses on specific culprits; bad writing actually inflicts the greatest level of pain on those we should least want to punish, namely those who are sincerely interested in learning what we have to say.

Realistically speaking, do we have an alternative? We probably have a number of them, but my own favorites tend to be those that take advantage of, rather than bemoaning, the fact that almost everything about people can be proclaimed to be “obvious.” Perhaps the best known variant on this approach is one that has been

employed to good effect in introductory textbooks—to start a discussion with a dry recitation of things that are “obvious,” following the list with the revelation that empirical research has shown all of these “obvious facts” to be wrong. A second variant, which has often been used in the physical and biological sciences, is to start not with what “everyone knows” but with what everyone assumes, following with the demonstration that those superficially plausible assumptions are nevertheless in error. Such a demonstration can then be appreciated both by you and by any of those readers who are sage enough to agree with you—a fact that has caused this technique to be quite popular among social scientists who make a living through front-line contact with nonspecialists, as in the case of consulting, although academic purists evidently often recognize the value of the technique as well.

The third variant of this approach is not generally to be recommended to those who are most afflicted by terror, but it can be quite helpful when the need is not so much to impress but to engage an audience, as in many kinds of teaching. This variant is to avoid any temptation to present your conclusions as if they were handed down from the heavens, and instead to admit to the confusion that caused you to tackle the problem in the first place. This method allows you to involve the readers (or those who are attending your lectures) by retracing with them some of the steps you followed in your work before you present them with the reasons why you think your current conclusions are better than the ones with which you started.

The fourth variant, by contrast, is one that tends to be particularly helpful even for the neophyte, including the neophyte who wants to get something published in a mainstream sociological journal. This relatively safe variant is to highlight the confusion or contradictions in “the literature,” permitting the use of the academic version of what may be called “obvious opposites,” namely “competing hypotheses.” Although this variant is thus most often used with academic audiences, it can also be useful in dealing with other kinds of people who don’t know much about your specialty but want to act as if they do; the need is simply to help them to think for a few moments in advance about some of the competing “obvious” explanations, and then to help them to realize how and why it is that real research, not glib assertion, is the

best way to identify the explanations that work the best. The main drawback of this fourth variant, of course, is that it requires you to devote serious and even respectful attention to the ridiculous views of those who have the temerity to disagree with you, rather than simply subjecting those views to the ridicule and abuse they so richly deserve; its advantages, however, include the compensating benefit of making you seem all the wiser for choosing the answer that, in the end, is clearly the better of the two.

For the remainder of this paper, however, the variant I want to emphasize is one that, although related, is also a bit more radical. As I will spell out more fully in the final sections of this paper, what I want to advance is the proposition that, despite the common assertions about sociological analyses that offer little more than a restating of the obvious, the more common reality may well be just the opposite. For at least an important subset of sociologically important topics—and particularly for those topics where the “obvious” explanations also happen to provide a degree of potentially convenient legitimation for social actors who currently enjoy privileged access to resources—I want to suggest that one starting point is the hypothesis that explanations are often accepted as “obvious” for reasons that have less to do with their accuracy than with their political and economic convenience. One of the hypotheses that may need to be examined by sociologists, in short, is not that the sociological explanations are obvious, but that the obvious explanations are wrong—and in part because those explanations are distinctly lacking in socio-logic.

It is easy enough to say—but how easy is it to pull off? Or, to quote from a student of mine who recently put into words what a number of other students were evidently thinking: “That’s easy enough for someone to say if he’s a tenured full professor who has long since paid back his graduate school debts, but what about students who are still looking for that first job?” As we all learn in our student days, moreover, there always seem to be at least a few professors who advise their students to do things the professors cannot actually do themselves. Is my suggestion just another case of, “Don’t do as I do—do as I say”? I believe not, but, like many of my colleagues on the Madison campus, I find assertions to be far more believable when they are backed up by empirical evidence. In the next section of the paper, accordingly, I plan to provide the “existence proof” I mentioned at the start of this paper—doing so by drawing on some of my own recent work.

## SOCIOLOGY AND OIL

Naturally, the decision to illustrate the point with my own work has a few drawbacks; one of those drawbacks is that it creates a need for a few caveats and qualifications. Rather than dealing with all of them individually, however, I will simply note that all of the obvious warnings and apologies should be assumed to apply, but that two caveats are so central that I need to note them explicitly. The first is that there are many fine pieces of sociological writing that would do the job just as well, and some that would probably do it better. That having been said, however, the example I plan to use is one that I know reasonably well and that is reasonably fresh in my mind, growing out of a recent study on which I worked with my good friend and colleague, Bob Gramling, and which resulted in *Oil in Troubled Waters* (Freudenburg and Gramling 1994). That leads to the second caveat: Bob shares full credit for all of the insights that follow, but he shares none of the blame for any points you may find offensive or wrong. I should also add a bit more advance warning: For those of you who may see the use of one’s own work as an act of flagrant self-promotion and are willing to accept this section’s argument on face value, feel free to skip to the next section of this article. For those of you who are interested in reading a highly condensed version of almost any book-length publication, on the other hand, the next several pages may well give you all the reason you need either to read or to skip the idea of reading the whole book.

The focus of our book is on the controversy that now rages—in many regions of the country, but generally not in the mid-South region—over offshore oil drilling. The federal program that leases the ocean bottoms for oil and gas exploration is not well known among the general public, but it is second only to the Internal Revenue Service as an official source of revenues for the federal government, having brought more than \$100 billion into the federal treasury over the past several decades.

So much for the good news. From a federal point of view, the problem is that, in recent years, this otherwise little-known program has begun to bring the government more than just income; by some accounts, in fact, offshore oil drilling almost seems to be producing more friction than oil. In his first address to the little-known agency within the U.S. Department of Interior that has responsibility for the offshore oil program—the Minerals Management Service, or

MMS—the new secretary of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt, offered a succinct confession: “When I look at MMS issues, my first thought is, ‘Hand me the Tylenol!’” (Cedar-Southworth 1993, p. 3).

This next point clearly will not come as a surprise to a group of sociologists, but the reasons for the headaches have to do not just with petroleum, but with people—specifically the people who live along coastal California. The reasons, however, also have to do with petroleum. From 1973 to 1981, the federal waters of what is officially called the Outer Continental Shelf, or OCS—involving the ocean bottoms that are out beyond the 3-mile limit of state jurisdiction—provided 9% to 12% of the crude oil and 10% to 20% of the natural gas produced in the entire United States (Gould 1989). More than 95% of that production, however, came from the Gulf of Mexico, principally from the waters off of Louisiana—and the oil from the Gulf will not last forever.

It would be needlessly melodramatic to claim that the oil reserves of the Gulf are on the verge of exhaustion; in 1991, the most recent year for which figures are available, “Texas and the Gulf of Mexico federal offshore accounted for 61% of the total crude oil discoveries” (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 1992, pp. 1, 2). Still, although the OCS reserves in the Gulf are massive, they are also finite. In that same year, total U.S. crude oil discoveries were 21% lower than they had been in 1990, and they were 36% lower than the average across the prior 10 years (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 1992, p. 2).

Some of the areas that oil experts see as holding the greatest promise for providing future oil supplies are those that lie off the coast of California—but many Californians view the prospect of OCS development as providing something other than promise. California was actually the first place in the world where offshore oil drilling took place. It was conducted from piers, which extended into the Pacific Ocean at Summerland (near Santa Barbara), and began in 1897. As of 1997, however, the California coastline is the last place in the world where a significant fraction of the current residents would want to see any new offshore drilling.

#### **Obvious Mistakes**

That’s the basic background information; now it’s time to bring in the sociologists. Several years ago—after having spent many additional years being told that there was no need for sociological research, because, after all, policymakers were experts

on people—Bob Gramling and I finally managed to get a small grant from MMS to do a pilot study. The explicit purpose of the study was to explore the reasons for the differences in reactions between southern Louisiana and northern California. At the same time, however, both Bob and I had a distinct impression that, particularly in the parts of the agency that a sociologist would be least likely to consider enlightened, the key reason for supporting the study had to do with the value of having a couple of academics document what all of them already knew to be obvious. A number of them had graciously shared their insights with us, often adding, for good measure, that the obvious truth was widely understood within the oil industry, as well. In essence, what all of them knew to be obvious was that there was something a bit strange about those people in California.

This view could also be termed, “To know us is to love us.” In the words of one MMS official, “The more that people know about oil development, the more they support it. That’s going to be true in California, too.” A similar view was expressed in another location and time by a Texas oil industry man: “In Louisiana, they know about oil, and they support it. In California, they just oppose it because they don’t know enough about it. Those of us who are in the industry need to do a better job of educating people about the benefits, but once we do, there’s no question the public will support it.”

Arguments such as these could of course be taken as offering testable hypotheses, but other alternatives were also possible. One such alternative may already be evident to those who are attuned to issues of legitimation: These explanations, besides being “obvious,” were also quite convenient for both the industry and the agency in question. The arguments also had a characteristic or two, however, that were a bit more bothersome. Among them was the inconvenient fact that, by the time the agency decided to commission our pilot study, the industry and the agency had already spent the better part of a decade in “educating people about the benefits”—all without much of a shift in views that either the industry or the agency would have defined as progress. Perhaps that was part of the reason they finally decided to see if sociologists could do a better job of understanding what was going on. Whatever else it was, however, the lack of progress in “educating people about the benefits” was evidence, to a pair of sociologists, that the “obvious” explanations might nevertheless be wrong.

In the process of doing the interviews and the other parts of our study, Bob and I quickly learned that there were a number of other "obvious" explanations, many of which were also simple and plausible, but all of which were also wrong. There was no "silent majority" in California that quietly but calmly supported offshore oil; instead, as one self-described conservative in northern California put the matter, opposition to OCS development "is the one issue out here that cuts across all the lines. And we've got a lot of lines!" The opposition was not a matter of ignorance, whether about the promised benefits or about the low levels of calculated oil spill risks; the people we met, and particularly those who felt most passionately about the issue, were impressively well-informed. Instead, what Bob and I learned from the people who spoke to us had to do not with what made the California experience so unusual, but about the degree to which the unusual region, in terms of its relationships with the oil industry, was Louisiana.

The differences are spelled out in greater detail in other places (see especially Freudenburg and Gramling 1993, 1994), but I will try to provide a simplified summary here. Southern Louisiana is the region where offshore oil first developed, where oil continues to play an important role in virtually all corners of the economy, and where the influences of offshore platforms are felt dozens or even hundreds of miles inland. In Louisiana, even the state bird, the brown pelican, was once driven to extinction in the state, in large part because of the effects of petrochemical products, principally DDT (dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane). According to Catton's (1989, p. 110) calculations, based on data from the Conservation Foundation (1987, p. 20), Louisiana's estimated per person generation of industrial hazardous waste in the 1980s exceeded that of any other state, at three metric tons, per person per year. The state is still number one in toxic emissions—in part because it is also home to the greatest concentration of offshore oil activity in the history of the planet. Although these and other forms of uniqueness can be discussed at some length, however, what we do in the book is to boil them down to three main sets of differences—differences in *historical factors*, in *biophysical conditions*, and in *social and economic conditions*.

#### Historical Factors

Four key historical factors contributed to the uniqueness of the development of Louisiana's offshore oil and gas industry, with

the first and perhaps the most obvious having to do with the historical era when the offshore developments first began. One of the clearest differences between Louisiana in the 1930s and any other coastal region in the 1990s is that more than half a century has passed in the interim—an era that, among other changes, has seen a significant growth in environmental awareness (see, e.g., Dunlap 1987, 1992). Given the relatively low levels of environmental concern that prevailed during the decades when the offshore industry was being established in Louisiana, it was possible for offshore drilling in the state to evolve as an environmentally insensitive activity. At least this point, however, has little to do with the distinctive nature of Louisiana at that time: It is quite likely that, if another part of the country had been the location of the initial push offshore in the 1930s and 1940s, the results would have been comparable. The limited amount of drilling off the coast of Florida in the 1940s, for example, appears not to have differed all that significantly in terms of environmental protection from the drilling that was done in Louisiana during the same era, and the initial drilling along the California coastline at the beginning of the 20th century was environmentally insensitive as well. If oil and gas development were only beginning to take place in Louisiana marshes today, in other words, the same degree of freedom from environmental constraints might well not be in evidence.

Second, not only did OCS development take place during an earlier era, but it also took place before a number of potentially competing uses had become established. In contrast to today's proposed OCS developments in other regions, most of which are already under heavy fishing pressure, the initial development of offshore oil in Louisiana took place at a time when the state had little prior tradition of offshore fisheries. As a result, both of the major offshore activities in Louisiana—oil and gas development, and the harvesting of fish and other types of renewable resources—essentially grew up together. Early exploration for oil even used shrimping vessels that were leased by the oil companies ("Modern Floating Hotel" 1946).

Third and fourth, OCS activity in Louisiana occurred as a gradual extension of land-based activities, and the region eventually developed a good deal of pride over the ingenuity of the homegrown solutions to the first-in-the-world technical challenges. Although the industry is a massive one today, in other words, it did not start out that way; from its earliest days in Loui-



siana, it involved local innovations to adapt to local conditions, and its emergence took place as a series of relatively gradual transitions, first through the coastal marshes and then into ever-deeper federal waters. The latest developments include structures that are taller than the Empire State Building and that are engineered to withstand the fury of hurricanes, but the earliest drilling rigs in the marshes actually involved little more than the construction of traditional drilling equipment on pilings and barges, rather than on dry land. The evolution of offshore technology was paralleled by the similarly gradual emergence of support services and by altered forms of work scheduling (7 days of work, followed by 7 days off duty, etc.) that were adaptations to the logistical problems associated with operating at increasingly remote sites (cf. Gramling 1989). Clearly, such a history is very different from the context for potential development elsewhere on the OCS today, where proposals call for a veritable invasion from a massive, technologically sophisticated, capital-intensive, and essentially alien industry. It stands to reason that a different reception would be expected for proposals that are made during a time of high environmental sensitivity, that pose some degree of threat to established uses, and that appear to have been thrust suddenly and massively into a region where they seem to be quite strange.

### **Biophysical Characteristics**

There are important forms of uniqueness in the physical environment, as well. Two sets of characteristics are particularly striking, and for both the Louisiana conditions tend to differ from those that are found in other coastal regions of the United States today.

#### *The Coastal Environment*

The first set of characteristics has to do with coastal topography. As is revealed by even a cursory examination of a map or an atlas, the distribution of populations and roadways in Louisiana is very different from the distributions found in most coastal states in the United States. In most coastal states, most of the population lives as close to the coast as possible. In Louisiana, by contrast, virtually none of the population lives on or near the coast; particularly in the central stretches of the state's coastline that provide the staging area for offshore oil development, it is often effectively impossible to get within 10 or 20 miles of the coast by road.

The reason is simple: Most of the "coast" is lined with a

broad and virtually impenetrable band of marsh, thanks to the millions of tons of wet goo that have been carried down the Mississippi River over the centuries and spread across the landscape by periodic flooding. The resultant marshes are an excellent habitat for the abundant fish and wildlife of the region, but the region's humans run into a minor difficulty: Most of the marsh "land" has about the same consistency as chocolate pudding. Most of the nearby humans, accordingly, live on land that is relatively high and dry, at least by local standards.

Although the marshes can be beautiful, moreover, they can also seem quite forbidding places even to visit; most residents' descriptions of the state's coastal regions are more likely to involve mosquitoes and alligators than spectacular visual imagery. As one of them put it, "Those marshes are just full of things that sting you, stick you, stab you, [or] bite you." A number of his fellow Louisiana residents have expressed similar reactions, and many of them are inclined to see the marshes in much the same way as Dave Barry (1993) the well known student of environment and society, once described the Florida Everglades—as "an enormous, wet, nature-intensive area that at one time was considered useless, but which is now recognized as a vital ecological resource, providing [the state] with an estimated 93 percent of its blood-sucking insects." Partly as a result of the marshes, the Louisiana coastline is less likely to be seen as a precious resource by the state's residents than would be the case in most coastal states; in fact, the coast is rarely seen by those residents, period, save by those who are on their way to and from work on the offshore oil platforms. As one resident of southern Louisiana explained, "The Gulf is only about 15 miles south of here, but there are probably more people in this town who've seen the Gulf from Florida than who've seen it from any place in Louisiana."

Still, despite these characteristics, the coastal marshes also have a second set of characteristics that have been very helpful for the development of the offshore industry—the presence not just of oil, but also of an extensive estuarine system. Whereas it is difficult for humans to reach the Louisiana coast from land, access to the coast from water is considerably simplified by the numerous bayous of the region; unlike many coastal areas in the United States, Louisiana is characterized by an abundance of waterways that intersect the highway network farther inland and provide ready coastal access for offshore activities. In general, the most important

limitations on available dock space are those created not by lack of suitable harbors, but by lack of facilities—a shortage that can be remedied, and has been, by relatively straightforward construction projects. As a result, there are so many port facilities spread across the southern half of the state that, if they are considered as a single port, they constitute the busiest port in the world (Gramling 1995).

### *The Offshore Environment*

The physical distinctiveness of Louisiana continues even offshore, although some of this distinctiveness is less easy to see, because it lies beneath the surface of the water. Spokespersons for the MMS and the oil industry often express bewilderment that fishing interests in California, Alaska, and elsewhere express so much concern over OCS developments, given that marine use conflicts have been so notably absent in the Gulf. In New Orleans, in fact, the Aquarium of the Americas includes a large display, complete with a catchy title—"From Rigs to Riches"—pointing out the advantages of oil platforms as a form of habitat for many of the fish species of the Gulf. The display was made possible by funding from oil companies, but the advantages it summarizes are real ones.

Part of the reason is that the floor of the Gulf of Mexico in this region is dominated by silt bottoms—another gift of what, after all, we call the "muddy" Mississippi. Certain types of commercially important fish can survive only in the kinds of habitat known collectively as "hard" substrate—rocky bottoms, reefs, rock outcroppings, and the like. In the central Gulf of Mexico regions, where oil development activities have been the most intense, natural outcroppings of this sort are so rare that oil-related structures now make up roughly a quarter of all hard substrate (Gallaway 1984). In effect, the oil rigs thus serve as artificial reefs, concentrating and probably increasing the fish populations, and it is common to see fishing boats literally tied up to oil rigs in search of fish.

The potential disadvantages of offshore rigs for fishing interests, meanwhile, are limited by the very gradual slope of the ocean bottom. Unlike in many coastal areas of the country—particularly along the Pacific Ocean, where the slope is quite steep—there are areas in the Gulf where the ocean floor does indeed resemble a shelf, where the slope is as gradual as 1 or 2 feet per mile. The Aquarium of the Americas, for example, describes one platform that was built 100 miles offshore (near the Flower Garden Banks, the northernmost coral reef in the Gulf), where it stood in just 18

feet of water. As a result, the available area of the Louisiana shelf is far larger than is the case in most coastal regions of the country, reducing significantly the likely intensity of use conflicts over any given acre of the Gulf. The gradual slope also reduces the number of problems that are likely to be created by any given obstacle: Even if a fishing boat needs to make a 1/4 mile detour around oil operations, for example, there is little significant impact on the boat's ability to keep its nets in contact with the sea floor.

In Louisiana, in sum, the coastline is inaccessible to most land-based populations, and accordingly low in social salience, while offering more than enough potential harbor space to meet the needs of offshore oil development and still accommodate the needs of potentially competing uses such as fishing operations. The offshore sea floors, meanwhile, tend to have such gradual slopes as to offer vast areas of virtually level bottoms, relatively free of obstacles, and also so devoid of natural reefs that the oil rigs provide a valuable service for fishing operations. As was the case for the historical factors, however, many of these characteristics are almost precisely reversed for the coastal regions of much of the nation; the very considerations that have contributed to the ready acceptance of offshore oil in Louisiana, accordingly, tend to exert just the opposite effect in the rest of the country.

### **Social and Economic Factors**

On top of these historical and biophysical factors, four sets of social characteristics of the Louisiana population appear to have encouraged the easy acceptance of OCS activities over the decades. They involve the average educational level, the importance of prior extractive industries, the potential for overadaptation, and the patterns of social contacts that have come to characterize the southern regions of the state.

### *Education*

Empirical studies tend to find such broad support for environmental protection in the United States that few sociodemographic predictors show strong correlations with environmental awareness and environmental concern. Contrary to early speculation, for example, more careful studies have shown that Blacks are as supportive of strong environmental controls as Whites (Mohai 1990) and that poor people tend to be as supportive as wealthier ones (Mitchell 1979; Van Liere and Dunlap 1980, 1981; Morrison

1986; for a broader review, see Heberlein 1981). One of the few consistent exceptions, however, has to do with educational levels, with better educated persons in the United States generally expressing somewhat higher levels of environmental concern (Van Liere and Dunlap 1980). Particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, coastal Louisiana had some of the lowest educational levels in the country. In Louisiana's St. Mary parish, the scene of initial OCS activity, only 47.2% of the adult population had as much as 5 years of education in 1940, and only 12.2% had graduated from high school (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1940); other rural areas of southern Louisiana had similarly low educational levels. By way of comparison, more than 78% of the adults in the United States had a high school education, or more, by the time of the 1990 census.

#### *Employment*

The other industries that most characterized coastal Louisiana at the time of initial OCS development were primarily extractive ones; like oil development, that is, they involved the extraction of raw materials from nature. Local residents obtained products both from the Atchafalaya Basin (cypress lumber, fish, crawfish, water fowl, moss for furniture stuffing) and from the coastal marsh (furs, shrimp, oysters). The export of such raw materials had provided the mainstay of the economy in coastal Louisiana for almost a century prior to OCS development. A simple if often effective rule of thumb is that, unless one form of extraction poses a direct threat to another, persons who are involved in extractive activities are less likely to object to new extractive industries than persons in manufacturing or service industries—and they tend to be far less likely to object than will those whose livelihoods depend directly on the maintenance of high environmental quality (for further discussion, see Freudenburg 1991a). Extractive industries, however, have been shrinking rapidly in their relative economic significance. In percentage terms, the proportion of the nation's labor force involved in extraction has dropped by roughly two thirds since 1920—as sharp a decline, on average, as the much better known decline in the proportion of the workforce engaged in farming (for further discussion, see Freudenburg 1992).

#### *Overadaptation*

Yet another way to understand the compatibility of Louisiana as a context for OCS development is to examine the degree of

adaptation that has already taken place. Whereas it was once common for studies of social impacts to fret over whether the people in a given community would be able to adapt to large-scale resource extraction, there is no question that those who lived in southern Louisiana did manage to adapt significantly, and often effectively, to the needs of the oil and gas industry. As is the case for other species, however, adaptations among humans can have consequences, and there is reason for concern if effective adaptations to one set of circumstances create an increased vulnerability to others. In the longer term, unfortunately, the degree of vulnerability in Louisiana proved to be quite severe; the region adapted so extensively to the boom as to create significantly greater problems of adjusting to the subsequent bust, providing in the process a textbook illustration of overadaptation (Freudenburg and Gramling 1992). The former hardware store and bait shop, for example, might have been able to deal well with the tight times that preceded the boom, but if the owner were to have taken on significant debt and turned the shop into a specialized diesel repair facility in the interest of capitalizing on (or "adapting to") the boom-time income potential, he could well have cut off any ability to return to a profitable arrangement—or even to keep making the payments on the associated debts—once the boom collapsed. Alternatively, to consider a communitywide example, the self-proclaimed "shrimp capital of the world" before the boom was Morgan City, Louisiana; by the time the end of the boom caused many former shrimpers to think of returning to shrimping as a way of making a living, however, the city no longer had a resident shrimp fleet or shrimp-processing facilities.

#### *Social Patterns*

As sociologists should be particularly capable of noting, finally, it is also important to consider the powerful if often unnoticed influence on a person's attitudes that can be exerted by social networks and interaction patterns. One particularly important form of influence has to do with what Bob Gramling, Harvey Molotch, and I have come to call the "social multiplier effect": Even if a given individual does not work in the offshore oil industry, his or her attitudes may be affected by whether her friends and relatives do. Given the historical, biophysical, and other social factors summarized above, the average resident of coastal Louisiana in the 1940s would have had many friends and neighbors who were

employed in the oil industry; by the 1980s, it was virtually impossible to live in southern Louisiana without knowing someone who was so employed, and few new people moved to the region except for those who were drawn there by the oil industry. In most of the coastal regions of the United States today, however, the situation is just the opposite. The coastal regions have seen extensive in-migration, with high proportions of the migrants often having been attracted to the coasts in search of beauty and other environmental considerations.

As one simple indicator of the amount of polarization that now exists in most coastal regions outside of the long-time oil regions of Louisiana and Texas, it is useful to turn again to what, at least within the MMS and the oil industry, was generally considered to be the "obvious" explanation for opposition to offshore oil drilling before Bob Gramling and I started our study. The opposition, according to savvy industry insiders, largely "just" reflected ignorance, selfishness, or irrationality, rather than legitimate, well-reasoned concerns on the part of sensible citizens. These, clearly, are not the kinds of descriptions that indicate an eagerness to understand one's opponents better. As if to return the favor, however, today's opponents of offshore drilling seem to have equally little interest in getting to be friends with representatives of the oil industry. As an indicator of the extent to which the antipathy has become mutual, it is useful to realize that when Louisiana citizens think of oil industry representatives, they are thinking of their friends and neighbors, whereas the opponents of offshore drilling in other regions would often have little difficulty in agreeing with the assessment of the Californian who told us, "When I think of the oil industry, I think of fat, pushy Texans in pointy-toed boots."

### LANGUAGE AND SOCIOLOGICAL OBSCURITY

In our book, all in all, Bob and I find that the "obvious" arguments aren't half bad, save for the fact that they are almost completely backwards. The point that needs to be considered in the context of the present paper, however, is that the findings in our book may be anything but idiosyncratic. Here, I need to acknowledge that I am moving onto what we northerners call thin ice, but I am about to repeat the suggestion that, for all of the terror that sociologists feel about obviousness, the reality may well be

nearly the opposite: In many cases, what sociologists offer is not so much what everyone knows, but what everyone overlooks. Perhaps the best way to illustrate this suggestion, however, is in connection with the other meaning of *obscurity*.

In our book, Bob and I refer to *diversionary reframing*—to the technique, often seen in political debates, of trying to divert attention away from opponents' concerns by reframing the debate as being about something else, often about the legitimacy of those opponents themselves. We note that such techniques once worked reasonably effectively in debates over offshore oil. Over time, in fact, such techniques came to be used so skillfully and so consistently that they came over time to be taken as a matter of "obvious fact," or of what "everyone knew"—and in many cases, Bob and I believe, those who accused their opponents of being irrational or ill-informed actually believed the accusations.

From the perspective of the proponents, the technique eventually seems to have become problematic not because of worries about its accuracy, but because of worries about its potential for continued effectiveness. Although I would not want to create the impression that the tactic has now been abandoned altogether—not even after Bob and I did our best to offer a very clear explanation—there does seem to have been a significant reduction in its use. In part, this reduction may also reflect a growing recognition that the tactic may actually have helped to solidify and to intensify the opposition, not just in California, but around most of the nation's coastline outside of the mid-south region. Still, from the perspective of those of us who attempt to understand society, the technique was one that may have deserved more attention even during the earlier times—the times when it was largely taken for granted, but when sociological analyses were essentially nowhere in sight.

The larger possibility, however, and the one I want to explore in the final section of this article, is that this may not have been the only case where such selective "non-obviousness" has been present. In any number of other cases today, it seems—but, ironically, particularly in the debates over some of the most pressing policy issues in society—sociological perspectives appear to be anything but obvious, particularly to those whose policy prescriptions are currently receiving the greatest attention. At least in the mainstream culture of the United States, moreover, this problem is quite an old one. Ours, after all, is a culture that focuses most readily on individuals and motivations, not on structures and in-

stitutions—save perhaps in explaining our own actions. (As noted for example by Fischer [1976], many of us in the United States tend to be quick to jump to conclusions about the motivations of others [e.g., “he’s late because he doesn’t care about other people”]; the times when we seem more likely to point to situational or structural factors are the times when we are making excuses for ourselves [“I couldn’t help it—I got caught in traffic”].)

Still, even in the context of this cultural tradition, what is remarkable is the extent to which sociological perspectives are absent from current-day societal debates—specifically including those debates where sociologists have produced significant bodies of solid empirical findings. Although the arms race with the former Soviet Union may have come to an end, at least for a few years, Congress and various state legislatures now seem intent on engaging in a similar prisons race, almost as if the states are trying to see who can build prisons the fastest and spend the most money in keeping those prisons full, even though studies show that the threat of longer prison terms does very little to deter criminal activities. By the mid-1990s, studies were showing the United States to have the greatest concentration of economic wealth in the industrialized world, and yet the candidate who was leading in the delegate count for the Republican nomination for the presidency up until the end of February, 1996, was a wealthy man whose best known campaign proposal was for a “flat tax,” which would not just have contributed to further income concentration, but would also have exempted most dividend and interest income from taxation. Political leaders were claiming that state and national economic growth was being strangled by regulations to protect labor, health, the poor, and the environment, and yet studies showed that states with purportedly poor business climates actually did somewhat better over time than those that followed the purportedly progrowth prescriptions more closely (see Freudenburg 1991b for further details). In the case of all of these examples, and in the case of others, as well, sociological explanations are inherently not so much the repetition of the obvious as its refutation.

If only for the record, I should pause here to note the fact that, as individuals, sociologists hold political views that do indeed span the political spectrum, and I should note as well that nothing here should be read as an exhortation for sociologists to become more involved in expressing their personal political views—or, for

that matter, to avoid doing so. What any of us choose to do on our own time should remain our own business. The point being stressed here has to do instead with the remarkable absence of professional sociological input into the most pressing social debates of the day—ranging from the environmental and regulatory provisions of the so-called Contract with America to many of the more simplistic calls for welfare reform. The mass media do report on some experts’ views and studies when covering these issues, but rarely are the experts sociological ones (cf. Molotch 1994).

Perhaps in part this state of affairs reflects a different form of fear—the fear of being vilified by skillful politicians, for example, many of whom would far rather score a political point than come to a better understanding of a problem in which they claim to be interested. Still, the old saying has it that, for evil to succeed, little more is required than for those who are good to remain silent; particularly in the current sociopolitical milieu, similarly, it may well be that, for sociologically naive policies to be enacted and enforced, little more may be required than for those who understand sociological findings to remain silent. Perhaps the time has come again, in short, for sociologists to overcome the terror that many of us feel toward the idea of taking our arguments and evidence out beyond the ivory walls of academia.

Given this paper’s emphasis on challenging taken-for-granted assumptions, moreover—combined with my argument that this is precisely what the “socio-logical” perspective often does—it is even possible to offer some suggestions on where it is particularly important for the sociological silence to end. One important line of argument, albeit perhaps not an important model for clear sociological prose, comes from the work of Michel Foucault (1977). As may also be emphasized by other writers who have dealt with some of the less obvious manifestations of power, such as Bachrach and Baratz (1970), Crenson (1971), Gaventa (1980), Schattschneider (1960) or Stone (1980)—or for that matter feminist writers such as Haraway (1988) or Horrigan (1989)—Foucault has drawn attention to what he calls “embedded power.” In essence, the phenomenon involves losing sight of the extent to which a given set of power arrangements works to the benefit of the more powerful actors, if only because the power relations become “naturalized” or embedded even into everyday thinking, thus disappearing from view. These are precisely the views, if this line of thinking is correct, that are most likely to be taken for granted as

“obvious”—and that are likely to be in need of systematic sociological investigation about their actual accuracy.

Another writer who may be still more relevant here, accordingly—both in the substance of his analysis and in the clarity of his writing—is C. Wright Mills (1959). In a time when even society-wide problems are being redefined as personal troubles, we all do well to remember that Mills helped to teach not just sociologists, but also society, about the importance of recognizing the origins of many purportedly personal troubles in broader social structures. The years that preceded the publication of his *Sociological Imagination* were not kind ones for those who shared Mills’s views, but in the years that followed, there was at least some growth of societal attention to social problems. Clearly, he did not bring about that change single-handedly, and yet it would be difficult to argue that his ideas—and the clarity with which he expressed them—had nothing at all to do with the change. The 1960s and 1970s had enough excesses of their own, often in the other direction, to remind all of us of the importance of emphasizing responsibility in the writing and advising we do; at the same time, at least for those of us who enjoy the relative safety of tenured positions, the 1990s and the years beyond the coming of the millennium may be a time when the need for sociological attention to the influences of social structures, of embedded social power, and of beliefs that are taken for granted but false may need again to go well beyond the outer boundaries of the academy.

#### **The Crude and the Refined: A Closing Confession**

The findings from the book that Bob Gramling and I did were anything but obvious, at least in advance, reflecting the fact that there had been little if any sociological input in debates over offshore drilling before Bob and I got involved with the issue. I must admit, however, that I find one of the most flattering comments about the book so far to have come from the student who told me the book said things so clearly that they became obvious. As should be evident from my earlier discussion about clarity and obviousness, I consider such a comment to be a very high form of praise.

That form of praise, however, needs to become much more common in any number of other societal debates: As sociologists, I argue, we are simply not fulfilling our obligations to society unless we do more to assure that sociological insights—and some-

times even just the most basic of sociological findings—are brought to the attention of those who are engaged in the ongoing debates. If we believe that our findings are relevant to the debates, I would add, then our first obligation, beyond doing the research, is to bring the findings to the debates in a language that closely resembles what an ordinary citizen would recognize as English.

Now that I’ve made my point, offered my suggestion for dealing with it, and spoken of the implications of the argument both for sociology and for society, what remains is for me to add a brief word of confession. As many readers may have noticed already, even though this article is a good deal less formal than most, it still includes a number of the bad habits that pervade sociological articles—long words, “academic” sentences, etc. In part, this characteristic may reflect the fact that I have published enough articles in reasonably mainstream sociological journals to have picked up a number of those bad habits. It may even suggest that those bad habits have become functional for me, in the sense of making my articles at least a bit more likely to be accepted for publication; beyond that, they can be seen either as evidence that I use such habits for getting things past journal editors or as a sign of what I have picked up during those times when I have served as a journal editor myself.

In spite of these failings, however, this article is intended to be reasonably clear, and to the extent to which that intent has been fulfilled, this confession of bad habits can lead directly to a final point. Sociological journal articles may indeed need to be just a bit pompous to “fly”—although this point is far from proven—but if so, then on the basis of extensive firsthand experience, I can testify that they don’t need to be much more pompous than this piece is. Instead, success seems to depend partly on having something to say, and partly on “saying it well,” in two senses. The first sense is that an article needs to be reasonably respectable, showing proper deference for at least the relevant norms of journal publication—being fair in characterizing the existing literature, building systematically on that base, and the like—all while overlooking the less sensible norm of using pedantic prose instead of clear or even mildly creative writing. The second sense, which I see as helping the first, is that an article needs to be clearly thought out and clearly presented.

The techniques in this article are intended in part to provide useful wedges into the world of respectability, particularly for

those who may not yet have developed successful techniques of their own. Who knows—if we get more good articles published, maybe the good stuff will start to drive out the bad. If so, then the pieces that offer little more than a blur of bombast will become the first ones to get squeezed off the journal pages; in the best of worlds, those may eventually come to be seen as “the kind of stuff that doesn’t get published.”

Yet the intentions of this article also go beyond the journals—and beyond the academy. They involve “more”: If more of us devote more of our effort to being more clear, more of the time, I believe we may wind up providing a contribution that has more breadth and depth. We may even be able to help the societal pendulum swing at least slightly in a new direction by helping our fellow members of society comprehend, rather than ignore, the influence of social structure. My fondest hope for this article is precisely such a change. If it were to happen, after all, the reduction of linguistic obscurity in sociology might even contribute to a reduction in policy obscurity for sociology. It might help to reduce not just the obscurity of language within sociology, but the obscurity of sociology within society.

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## CONSTRUCTIONS OF IMMORTALITY IN THE AIDS MEMORIAL QUILT

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*Among those who initiated the AIDS Memorial Quilt and acted as its guardians in the first years of its existence, stories abound concerning odd coincidences that happen around the quilt. These "woo-woo" stories suggest that those memorialized on the quilt, who were mostly gay men at the quilt's inception, are somehow ongoingly present and active beyond death. This paper uses Foucault's notion of reverse discourse to make sociological sense of these stories. More specifically, I submit that woo-woo stories can be seen as discourse that situates gay subjectivity in relationship to the supernatural, and therefore reverses the religious right's construction of gays as deserving of God's wrath and condemnation. I conclude with a discussion of some of the gains for gays, as well as limits to social change, that accompany the use of reverse discourse in this context.*

Those of us who have sort of given ourselves to this organization [the NAMES Project—proprietors of the quilt] for the last couple of years really have the sense of the quilt as a personality or as a group of personalities. . . . There are a lot of odd little coincidences which I am sure you've heard stories about. (An originator of the AIDS Memorial Quilt)

Anybody who's worked around the quilt at all will tell you there are just so many weird things that happen. There are so many coincidences . . . (An originator of the AIDS Memorial Quilt)

By now, the AIDS Memorial Quilt, established in 1987 to commemorate people who have died of AIDS, consists of 40,000 panels. With each of these commemorative panels measuring 3 ft

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