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Telling About Society

I have lived for many years in San Francisco, on the lower slope of Russian Hill or in the upper reaches of North Beach; how I describe it depends on whom I am trying to impress. I live near Fisherman's Wharf, on the route many people take from that tourist attraction to their motel downtown or on Lombard Street's motel row. Looking out my front window, I often see small groups of tourists standing, alternately looking at their maps and at the large hills that stand between them and where they want to be. It's clear what has happened. The map's straight line looked like a nice walk through a residential neighborhood, one that might show them how the natives live. Now they are thinking, as a young Briton I offered to help said to me, "I've got to get to my motel and I am *not* climbing that bloody hill!"

Why don't the maps those people consult alert them to the hills? Cartographers know how to indicate hills, so it is not a restriction of the medium that inconveniences walkers. But the maps are made for motorists, originally (though no longer) paid for by gasoline companies and tire manufacturers, and distributed through service stations (Paumgarten 2006, 92)—and drivers worry less than pedestrians do about hills.

Those maps, and the networks of people and organizations who make and use them, exemplify a more general problem. An ordinary street map of San Francisco is a conventionalized representation of that urban society: a visual description of its streets and landmarks and of their arrangement in space. Social scientists and ordinary citizens routinely use not only maps but also a great variety of other rep-

resentations of social reality—a few random examples are documentary films, statistical tables, and the stories people tell one another to explain who they are and what they are doing. All of them, like the maps, give a picture that is only partial but nevertheless adequate for some purpose. All of them arise in organizational settings, which constrain what can be done and define the purposes the work will have to satisfy. This understanding suggests several interesting problems: How do the needs and practices of organizations shape our descriptions and analyses (call them representations) of social reality? How do the people who use those representations come to define them as adequate? Such questions have a bearing on traditional questions about knowing and telling in science but go beyond them to include problems more traditionally associated with the arts and with the experience and analysis of everyday life.

For many years, I've been involved with a variety of ways of telling about society, professionally and out of native curiosity. I'm a sociologist, so the ways of telling that come most immediately to my mind are the ones sociologists routinely use: ethnographic description, theoretical discourse, statistical tables (and such visual representations of numbers as bar charts), historical narrative, and so on. But many years ago I went to art school and became a photographer, and in the process I developed a strong and lasting interest in photographic representations of society, which documentary and other photographers have been making since the invention of the medium. That led quite naturally to thinking about film as still another way of telling about society. And not just documentary films but fiction films as well. I'd been an avid reader of fiction since I was a kid, and like most other readers of stories, I knew that they are not just made-up fantasies, that they often contain observations worth reading about how society is constructed and works. Why not dramatic representations of stories on the stage too? Having always been interested and involved in all these ways of telling about society, I decided to take advantage of the somewhat haphazard and random collection of examples that had deposited in my brain.

To do what? To see the problems anyone who tries to do the job of representing society has to solve, what kinds of solutions have been

found and tried, and with what results. To see what the problems of different media have in common and how solutions that work for one kind of telling look when you try them on some other kind. To see what, for instance, statistical tables have in common with documentary photographic projects, what mathematical models have in common with avant-garde fiction. To see what solutions to the problem of description one field might import from another.

So I'm interested in novels, statistics, histories, ethnographies, photographs, films, and any other way people have tried to tell others what they know about their society or some other society that interests them. I'll call the products of all this activity in all these media "reports about society" or, sometimes, "representations of society." What problems and issues arise in making those reports, in whatever medium? I've constructed a list of those issues from the things people who do this kind of work talk and complain about to each other, using as a basic principle of discovery this idea: if it's a problem in one way of making representations, it's a problem in every way of doing so. But the people who work in one area may have solved that problem to their own satisfaction, so that they don't even think of it as a problem, while for other people it seems an insoluble dilemma. Which means that the latter can learn something from the former.

I've been inclusive in making these comparisons, encompassing (at least in principle) every medium and genre people use or have ever used. Of course, I haven't talked about everything. But I have tried to avoid the most obvious conventional biases and have considered, in addition to reputable scientific formats and those invented and used by professionals in recognized scientific disciplines, those used by artists and laypeople as well. A list will suggest this range of topics: from the social sciences, such modes of representation as mathematical models, statistical tables and graphs, maps, ethnographic prose, and historical narrative; from the arts, novels, films, still photographs, and drama; from the large shadowy area in between, life histories and other biographical and autobiographical materials, reportage (including the mixed genres of docudrama, documentary film, and fictionalized fact), and the storytelling, mapmaking, and other representational activities of laypeople (or people acting in a lay capacity, as even professionals do most of the time).

Who Tells?

We are all curious about the society we live in. We need to know, on the most routine basis and in the most ordinary way, how our society works. What rules govern the organizations we participate in? What routine patterns of behavior do others engage in? Knowing these things, we can organize our own behavior, learn what we want, how to get it, what it will cost, what opportunities of action various situations offer us.

Where do we learn this stuff? Most immediately, from our experience of daily living. We interact with all sorts of people and groups and organizations. We talk to people of all kinds in all kinds of situations. Of course, not *all* kinds: everyone's social experience of that face-to-face kind is limited by their social connections, their situation in society, their economic resources, their geographical location. You can get by with that limited knowledge, but in modern societies (probably in all societies) we need to know more than what we learn from personal experience. We need, or at least want, to know about other people and places, other situations, other times, other ways of life, other possibilities, other opportunities.

So we look for "representations of society," in which other people tell us about all those situations and places and times we don't know firsthand but would like to know about. With the additional information, we can make more complex plans and react in a more complex way to our own immediate life situations.

Simply put, a "representation of society" is something someone tells us about some aspect of social life. That definition covers a lot of territory. At one extreme lie the ordinary representations we make for one another, as lay folks, in the course of daily life. Take mapmaking. In many situations and for many purposes, this is a highly professionalized activity based on centuries of combined practical experience, mathematical reasoning, and scientific scholarship. But in many other situations, it's an ordinary activity we all do once in a while. I ask you to visit me sometime, but you don't know how to drive to where I live. I can give you verbal directions: "Coming from Berkeley, you take the first exit on the right off the Bay Bridge, turn left at the bottom of the ramp, go several blocks and turn left on to Sacramento, keep

going until you hit Kearny, turn right and go up to Columbus . . ." I can suggest you consult a standard street map along with my directions, or I can just tell you that I live near the intersection of Lombard and Jones and let you use the map to find that spot. Or I can draw my own little map, personalized for you. I can show where you would start from—"your house"—and draw in the relevant streets, indicating where you should turn, how long each leg will be, what landmarks you will pass, and how you will know when you reach "my house." These days an Internet site will tell you all that, or you can let your GPS device do it for you.

Those are all representations of a portion of society, contained in a simple geographical relationship; a simpler and better way of saying it is that these are all ways of telling about society or some portion thereof. Some of the ways, the standard automobile map or the computer description, are made by highly trained professionals using a lot of specialized equipment and knowledge. The verbal description and the homemade map are made by people just like the people to whom they are given, people who have no more geographical knowledge or ability than any ordinarily competent adult. They all work, in different ways, to do the job of leading someone from one place to another.

My own professional colleagues—sociologists and other social scientists—like to talk as though they have a monopoly on creating such representations, as though the knowledge of society they produce is the only "real" knowledge about that subject. That's not true. And they like to make the equally silly claim that the ways they have of telling about society are the best ways to do that job or the only way it can be done properly, or that their ways of doing the job guard against all sorts of terrible mistakes we would otherwise make.

That kind of talk is just a standard professional power grab. Considering the ways that people who work in other fields—visual artists, novelists, playwrights, photographers, and filmmakers—as well as laypeople represent society will show analytic dimensions and possibilities that social science has often ignored that might otherwise be useful. I will concentrate on the representational work done by other kinds of workers, as well as that done by social scientists. Social sci-

entists know how to do their job, and that's adequate for many purposes. But their ways aren't the only ways.

What are some of the other ways? We can categorize representational activities in many ways. We could talk about media—film vs. words vs. numbers, for instance. We might talk about the intent of the makers of the representations: science vs. art vs. reportage. Such a comprehensive review would serve many purposes well, but not my purpose of exploring generic problems of representation and the variety of solutions the world has so far produced. Looking at some major, highly organized ways of telling about society means attending to the distinctions among science, art, and reportage. Those are not so much distinct ways of doing something as they are ways of organizing what might be, from the point of view of materials and methods, pretty much the same activity. (Later, in chapter 11, I'll compare three ways of using still photographs to do those three kinds of work, seeing how the same photographs might be art, journalism, or social science.)

Telling about society usually involves an interpretive community, an organization of people who routinely make standardized representations of a particular kind ("makers") for others ("users") who routinely use them for standardized purposes. The makers and users have adapted what they do to what the others do, so that the organization of making and using is, at least for a while, a stable unity, a *world* (used in a technical sense I've developed elsewhere [Becker 1982] and will discuss more fully below).

Often enough, some people don't fit well into these organized worlds of makers and users. These experimenters and innovators don't do things as they are usually done, and therefore their works may not have many users. But their solutions to standard problems tell us a lot and open our eyes to possibilities more conventional practice doesn't see. Interpretive communities often borrow procedures and forms, using them to do something the originators in that other community never thought of or intended, producing mixtures of method and style to fit into changing conditions in the larger organizations they belong to.

This is all very abstract. Here's a more specific list of standard for-

mats for telling about society, which have produced exemplary works of social representation worth inspecting carefully:

Fiction. Works of fiction, novels and stories, have often served as vehicles of social analysis. The sagas of families, classes, and professional groups by writers as dissimilar in aims and talent as Honoré de Balzac, Émile Zola, Thomas Mann, C. P. Snow, and Anthony Powell have always been understood to embody, and to depend on for their power and aesthetic virtues, complex descriptions of social life and its constituent processes. The works of Charles Dickens, taken singly and as a whole, have been understood (as he intended them to be) as a way of describing to a large public the organizations that produced the ills his society suffered from.

Drama. Similarly, the theater has often been a vehicle for the exploration of social life, most especially the description and analysis of social ills. George Bernard Shaw used the dramatic form to embody his understanding of how “social problems” came about and how deeply they penetrated the body politic. His *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* explains the workings of the business of prostitution as it provided the livelihood of at least some of the British upper classes; and *Major Barbara* did the same for war and munitions making. Many playwrights have used drama for similar purposes (Henrik Ibsen, Arthur Miller, David Mamet).

To say that these works and authors deal in social analysis doesn’t mean that that is “all” they do or that their works are “only” sociology in artistic disguise. Not at all. Their authors have purposes in mind beyond social analysis. But even the most formalist critic should realize that some part of the effect of many works of art depends on their “sociological” content and on the belief of readers and audiences that what these works tell them about society is, in some sense, “true.”

Films. In the most obvious case, documentary film—Barbara Koppel’s 1976 *Harlan County, U.S.A.* and Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch’s 1961 *Chronique d’un été* are well known examples—has had as a primary object the description of society, often, but not necessarily overtly,

in a reformist mode, aiming to show viewers what’s wrong with current social arrangements. Fiction films also often mean to analyze and comment on the societies they present, many times those in which they are made. Examples range from Gillo Pontecorvo’s pseudodocumentary *Battle of Algiers* (1966) to classic Hollywood fare like Elia Kazan’s 1947 *Gentleman’s Agreement*.

Photographs. Likewise, still photographers have, from the beginnings of the genre, often occupied themselves with social analysis. A well-defined genre of documentary photography has had a long and illustrious history. Some exemplary works of that genre include Brassai’s *The Secret Paris of the ’30s* (1976), Walker Evans’s *American Photographs* ([1938] 1975), and Robert Frank’s *The Americans* ([1959] 1969).

So far I have talked about “artistic” modes of making representations of society. Other representations are more associated with “science.”

Maps. Maps, associated with the discipline of geography (more specifically, cartography), are an efficient way of displaying large amounts of information about social units considered in their spatial dimension.

Tables. The invention of the statistical table in the eighteenth century made it possible to summarize vast numbers of specific observations in a compact and comparable format. These compact descriptions help governments and others organize purposeful social action. A governmental census is the classical form of such use. Scientists use tables to display data others can use to evaluate their theories. Twentieth-century social scientists became increasingly dependent on the tabular display of quantitative data gathered specifically for that purpose.

Mathematical models. Some social scientists have described social life by reducing it to abstract entities displayed as mathematical models. These models, intentionally removed from social reality, can convey basic relations characteristic of social life. They have been

used to analyze such varied social phenomena as kinship systems and the world of commercial popular music.

Ethnography. A classic form of social description has been the ethnography, a detailed verbal description of the way of life, considered in its entirety, of some social unit, archetypically but not necessarily a small tribal group. The method came to be applied, and is widely applied now, to organizations of all kinds: schools, factories, urban neighborhoods, hospitals, and social movements.

Somewhere between the extremes of art and science lie history and biography, usually devoted to detailed and accurate accounts of past events but often equally given to evaluating large generalizations about matters the other social sciences deal with. (Remember that all of today's sociological reports will be raw material for historians of the future, as masterworks of sociology like the Lynds' studies of "Middle-town" have turned from social analysis into historical document.)

Finally, there are the sports, mavericks, and innovators I spoke of earlier. Some makers of representations of society mix methods and genres, experiment with forms and languages, and provide analyses of social phenomena in places we don't expect them and in forms we don't recognize as either art or science or that we see as some unusual and unfamiliar mixture of genres. So Hans Haacke, who can be called a conceptual artist, uses uncomplicated devices to lead users to unexpected conclusions. Georges Perec and Italo Calvino, members of the French literary group OULIPO (Motte 1998) devoted to esoteric literary experiments, made the novel, in one form or another, a vehicle for subtle sociological thinking. And in David Antin's "talk pieces," stories that may or may not be fictions convey complex social analyses and ideas. Like all such experiments, the work of these artists forces us to reconsider procedures we usually take for granted, and I'll discuss their work at length later in the book.

Facts

I must make an important distinction, even though it is fallacious and misleading and every word involved is slippery and indeterminate. I

don't think those faults make much difference for my purpose here. It's the distinction between "fact" and "idea" (or "interpretation"): One part of any report on society (of any of the kinds I've just outlined) is a description of how things are: how some kinds of things are, in some place, at some time. This is how many people there are in the United States, as counted in the year 2000 by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. This is how many of them are women and how many are men. This is the age distribution of that population—so many below five, so many aged five to ten, all the way up. This is the racial composition of that population. This is the distribution of their incomes. This is that income distribution in racial and gender subgroups of the population.

Those are facts about the U.S. population (and, of course, similar facts are more or less available for all the other countries in the world). They are descriptions of what a person who went looking for such numbers would find, the evidence that results from the operations demographers and statisticians have undertaken in accordance with the procedures of their craft.

In the same way, anthropologists tell us, for instance, how *these* people living in *this* society reckon kinship: they recognize these categories of familial relationship and think this is how people related in those ways should behave toward one another; these are, in the classical phrase, their mutual rights and obligations. Anthropologists support their analyses with accounts of the facts about how those people talk and behave, contained in the field notes that report their on-the-spot observations and interviews, just as demographers support descriptions of the U.S. population with the data produced by the census. In either case, the professionals begin with evidence gathered in ways their craft peers recognize as sufficient to warrant the factual status of the results.

Now for the caveats. Thomas Kuhn long ago persuaded me that facts are never just facts but are rather, as he said, "theory-laden" (1970). Every statement of a fact presupposes a theory that explains what entities are out there to describe, what characteristics they can have, which of those characteristics can be observed and which can only be inferred from characteristics that are observable, and so on.

Theories often seem so obvious as to be self-evident. Does anyone

need to argue that you can tell a human being when you see one and distinguish such a being from some other kind of animal? Does it need arguing that these human beings can be characterized as male or female? Or as black, white, Asian, or of another racial variety?

In fact, scientists and laypeople argue about things like that all the time, as the continually shifting racial categories in censuses all over the world make clear. Characteristics like gender and race don't appear in nature in an obvious way. Every society has ways of telling boys from girls and distinguishing members of racial categories its members think are important from one another. But these categories rest on theories about the essential characteristics of humans, and the nature of the categories and the methods of assigning people to them vary between societies. So we can never take facts for granted. There are no pure facts, only "facts" that take on meaning from an underlying theory.

Moreover, facts are facts only when they are accepted as such by the people to whom those facts are relevant. Am I indulging in a pernicious kind of relativism, or malicious wordplay? Maybe, but I don't think we have to discuss whether there is an ultimate reality science will eventually reveal in order to recognize that reasonable people, including reasonable scientists, often disagree on what constitutes a fact, and when a fact really is a fact. Those disagreements arise because scientists often disagree on what constitutes adequate evidence for the existence of a fact. Bruno Latour (1987, 23–29) has demonstrated, well enough to suit me and many others, that, as he so neatly puts it, the fate of a scientific finding lies in the hands of those who take it up afterward. If they accept it as fact, it will be treated as fact. Does that mean that any damn thing can be a fact? No, because one of the "actants," to use Latour's inelegant expression, that must agree with the interpretation is the object about which the statements of fact are made. I can say the moon is made of green cheese, but the moon will have to cooperate, exhibiting those characteristics that other people will recognize as green cheese-like, or else my fact will become an unacceptable nonfact. Worse yet, my fact may not even be disputed; it may just be ignored, so that you might say it doesn't exist at all, at

least not in the discourse of scientists who study the moon. There may be an ultimate reality, but we are all fallible human beings and may be wrong, so all facts are disputable in the real world we live in. That fact is at least as obdurate and hard to talk away as any other scientific fact.

Finally, facts are not accepted in general or by the world at large, they are accepted or rejected by the particular audiences their proponents present them to. Does this mean science is situational and its findings therefore not universally true? I'm not taking a position on such ultimate questions of epistemology, just recognizing what's obvious: when we make a report about society, we make it to somebody, and who those somebodies are affects how we present what we know and how users react to what we present to them. Audiences differ—this is important—in what they know and know how to do, in what they believe and will accept, on faith or with evidence of some kind. Different kinds of reports routinely go to different kinds of audiences: statistical tables to people more or less trained to read them, mathematical models to people with highly specialized training in the relevant disciplines, photographs to a wide variety of lay and professional audiences, and so on.

Instead of facts supported by evidence that makes them acceptable as fact, then, we have facts based on a theory, accepted by some people because they have been gathered in a way acceptable to some community of makers and users.

Interpretations

It's not easy to separate interpretations from facts. Every fact, in its social context, implies and invites interpretations. People move easily and without much thought from one to the other. The same facts will support many interpretations. To say, to take a provocative example, that racial groups differ in IQ scores might well be a fact—that is, demonstrated by the use of tests commonly used by psychologists who make a business of such measurement. But to interpret such a finding as a demonstration that such differences are genetic—inherited and thus not easily changed—is not a fact, it's an interpretation

of the meaning of the reported fact. An alternate interpretation says the fact demonstrates that the IQ test is culture specific and can't be used to compare different populations.

Neither do the findings about race, gender, and income we can find in the U.S. Census speak for themselves. Someone speaks for them, interpreting their meaning. People argue more about interpretations than they do about facts. We can agree on the numbers describing the relations between gender, race, and income, but the same census data might be interpreted to show the existence of discrimination, the lessening of discrimination, the joint working of two disadvantaged conditions (being female, being black) on income, or many other possible stories.

A report about society, then, is an artifact consisting of statements of fact, based on evidence acceptable to some audience, and interpretations of those facts similarly acceptable to some audience.

2

Representations of Society as Organizational Products

People who gather facts about society and interpret them don't start from scratch every time they report. They use forms, methods, and ideas that some social group, large or small, already has available as a way of doing that job.

Reports on society (remember that *representation* and *report* refer to the same thing) make most sense when you see them in organizational context, as activities, as ways some people tell what they think they know to other people who want to know it, as organized activities shaped by the joint efforts of everyone involved. It's a confusing error to focus on nouns rather than verbs, on the objects rather than the activities, as though we were investigating tables or charts or ethnographies or movies. It makes more sense to see those artifacts as the frozen remains of collective action, brought to life whenever someone uses them—as people's making and reading charts or prose, making and seeing films. We should understand the expression *a film* as shorthand for the activity of "making a film" or "seeing a film."

That's a distinction with a difference. Concentrating on the object misdirects our attention to the formal and technical capabilities of a medium: how many bits of information a television monitor with a particular degree of resolution can convey, or whether a purely visual medium can communicate such logical notions as causality. Concentrating on organized activity, on the other hand, shows that what a medium can do is always a function of the way organizational constraints affect its use. What photographs can convey depends in part on the budget of the photographic project, which limits how many