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SCIENCE FICTION AND INTRODUCTORY SOCIOLOGY: THE *HANDMAID* IN THE CLASSROOM*

*Although there is a great deal of available material on using nontraditional resources for teaching sociology, the pedagogical uses of science fiction have not been examined for 20 years. This essay first asserts the need for an update based on changes in society and in science fiction over the past two decades. The paper then focuses on the uses of SF to teach sociology and critical thinking by describing how SF can help students to "make strange" (i.e., develop a skeptical, questioning stance), to "make believe" (i.e., develop critical and creative thinking), and to "make real" (i.e., use sociological concepts and theories). As illustration, the essay concludes with a detailed description of the use of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* in teaching introductory sociology.*

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AS REGULAR READERS OF *TEACHING SOCIOLOGY* know, a wealth of nontraditional material is available for teaching sociology (Loewen 1991; Martinez 1994; Miley 1988; Pescosolido 1990, to name just a few). As I will elaborate below, there are good reasons for using such resources. Some kinds of nontraditional material (novels, film) are discussed regularly in print. Other genres—such as poetry—are rarely addressed. Science fiction has fallen into both categories.

In the mid-1970s several authors published volumes on using SF¹ for teaching anthropology (Mason, Greenberg, and Warrick 1974), marriage and the family (Clear 1976), social problems (Greenberg 1975), politics (Greenberg and Warrick 1974), and sociology (Milstead et al. 1974). Since then, little work has appeared in print, and none specifically treats sociology and science fic-

tion. SF aficionados lamented that "Many people stopped paying attention to SF back when bug-eyed monsters cavorted after scantily clad girls, or when Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon zapped their adversaries with ray guns" (Hollister and Thompson 1973:7). In academia we find signs that SF is more credible today than in 1973; these include the number of courses on SF, the diversity of academic locations for these courses, and the volumes of scholarly work on SF. Still, its pedagogical value is far from universally established, especially for introductory students.

Fitzgerald (1992), for example, observes that futuristic novels may require critical and analytical skills which beginning students have not yet mastered. This is probably true of some SF novels. SF is a heterogeneous genre, and not all SF will be useful for teaching introductory sociology. I contend, however, that it can be used effectively to help students see social facts in a new light. Despite its status as fiction, SF is "truthful" because it is consistent with reality. It is not "real" in the sense of being actual, concrete, and verifiable, but it is "true" because it corresponds or conforms to that which *is* real, actual, and verifiable.

In this essay I focus on what Spinrad (1990:19) refers to as science fiction—fiction whose form is characterized by a strong speculative element (in contrast to sci-fi, whose form is more convention-bound and formulaic). I first make the case for an update on using SF to teach sociology. Next I

*I am especially grateful to Rick Eckstein, Peter Lehman, and anonymous reviewers for *Teaching Sociology* for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

¹ Nearly all commentators make some attempt to define science fiction. Most concede that the effort is futile. As a practical matter, following Spinrad (1990:19), I use SF to refer to anything marketed as such; science fiction to refer to any work of fiction containing an element of "could be, but isn't"; and sci-fi to refer to genre or pulp SF. I propose that a variety of forms of SF (including speculative fiction, scientific/"hard" science fiction, utopian literature, and fantasy as well as Spinrad's "science fiction" and "sci-fi") might accomplish the goals I describe here. I do not rule out any form of SF a priori, although I focus on what Spinrad calls "science fiction"—fiction that is speculative and is oriented toward envisioning alternative social arrangements.

describe the uses of SF to teach sociology, focusing on its functions in teaching sociological and critical thinking and particular concepts, in nurturing creative thought, and in developing skills in problem solving. In the final part of the essay, as illustration, I describe my use of one novel, Margaret Atwood's (1985) *The Handmaid's Tale*, in teaching introductory sociology.

SCIENCE FICTION AND SOCIOLOGY

Used effectively, SF encourages and enables students to think about real and imagined social life, their own values and experiences, the ways in which we collectively shape social arrangements, the influences of society on individuals, and the possibilities for and constraints on altering social arrangements. SF does not merely entertain or provide variety; it develops analytic skills. Because novels entail extensive development of character, setting, and plot (read: individuals and groups, society and culture, and interaction), they help students develop their sociological imaginations. SF novels are especially useful because they implicitly or explicitly question existing social arrangements in the process of creating alternatives. Moreover, particularly sophisticated students notice when SF writers fail to question existing arrangements; they observe the "taken-for-granted" quality of some cultural assumptions, practices, and institutions.

All of this could have been, and was, claimed for SF in the mid-1970s. Why, then, is the material on teaching sociology through SF from two decades ago no longer adequate?

WHY DO WE NEED AN UPDATE?

SF as a genre has expanded and changed dramatically in the past 20 years. Csicsery-Ronay describes SF before 1960 as "expansive," reflecting the "optimistic and secure ideology of scientific humanism, which held that classical liberal virtues have some moral-ethical control over the forces of technological production" (1991:186). In contrast, contemporary SF tends to be "implosive." The central themes and problematics

are no longer the exploration or conquest of alien space or "imperial adventures among the stars" (though these persist in pulp sci-fi), but rather the exploration of "inner space"—the body physical, the body social, and knowledge. Contemporary SF is characterized by a profound ambivalence about the body's integrity, the integrity of the knower and the known, and "the breakdown of distinctions between human and machine, between personal consciousness and machine consciousness" (Csicsery-Ronay 1991:188–91). In SF and in the real world, computers and other technologies—transportation, medicine, communications—have raised profound epistemological and practical questions that the most imaginative SF writers of 20 years ago could hardly have begun to pose.

A second change is that SF "has eroded as a self-evident category...[A]llegiance to it is routinely denied by those writers [Vonnegut, Ellison] whom we associate with the genre" (Sutherland 1979:162). Others who claim the SF title for their work (Delaney, Le Guin) have stretched and extended the genre, have developed new themes of gender, sexuality, politics, and religion, and have brought SF to a new level of "literary-ness." Also "mainstream" novelists (Atwood, DeLillo, Pierce) have written successful SF.

There are two principal causes for the expansion of SF and its blurring of genres. The first consists of changes in the contemporary literary, publishing, and academic worlds, and especially changes in the economics of SF production (Spinrad 1990; Sutherland 1979). As a result of the "paperback revolution," the number and availability of SF titles has increased. SF has been transformed into big business by major publishers, who have pushed out the smaller, specialized SF publishers (and the magazines, pulps, and anthologies) of earlier decades (Sutherland 1979:163). Nonetheless, marketing arrangements maintain artificial distinctions between SF and other fiction.

The second source of the expansion and transformation of SF is social and cultural. Topics such as technology and gender, to name two issues of long-standing interest to sociologists, have made their way to the foreground of SF novels in the past two

decades. SF writers now treat these issues in a sustained fashion and in ways that parallel current sociological (and postmodernist) thinking.

McCaffery notes that the most recent generation of SF writers is “the first generation of artists for whom the technologies of satellite dishes, video and audio players and recorders, computers and video games... digital watches, and MTV were not exoticisms, but part of a daily ‘reality matrix’” (1991:12). These technologies and their products (reproductions, abstractions, images) are woven into recent SF, not simply as props or gadgets, but as fundamentally altering and problematizing identity and the self and the relations between self and society.

The most recent wave of feminism has resulted, in sociology, in an explosion of interest in and work on gender. For evidence, one need look no further than the size and enthusiasm of the Gender Section of the ASA. In SF the consequences have been far-reaching. Through the mid-1970s, SF was “alien to femininity” (the title of a 1987 volume edited by Marlene Barr; also see Friend 1977; Wood 1980). There were few women or feminist SF authors; women and gender were largely invisible, as in chapter headings such as “Man as Part of Nature” (Mason et al. 1974) and “Images of the Man-Machine Intelligence Relationship in Science Fiction” (in Clareson 1977). In *Sociology through Science Fiction* (Milstead et al. 1974), the chapter “Social Differentiation” contains sections on social class, race, and age, but none on gender. Since the mid-1970s, however, a generation of female and feminist SF authors (for example, Le Guin, Tepper, and McIntyre) has achieved commercial and literary success and has introduced gender as an important theme.

In sum, as a consequence of changes in the production, distribution, and marketing of SF and of changes in the larger society, SF in the past 20 years has developed new themes and problematics. The result for teachers of introductory sociology is fewer stories about “bug-eyed monsters cavort[ing] after scantily clad girls” and more thoughtful, more complex, and more pedagogically useful SF novels.

MAKING STRANGE: DEVELOPING SOCIOLOGICAL SKEPTICISM

Many introductory texts begin with a brief discussion of “sociology and common sense.” Sociology is not merely common sense, the texts say; it requires a skeptical, questioning stance. Sociologists look “behind the scenes” and refuse to take “what everybody knows” at face value. Things are not always as they seem, says the sociologist; we “know” both “how they seem” and “what they really are” as the result of scientific method and empirical research. In sum, the sociologist (at least temporarily) makes strange the familiar (or the not-strange).

Science fiction writers do the reverse; they make the strange not-strange. Darko Suvin describes SF as “the literature of cognitive estrangement...SF takes off from a fictional (‘literary’) hypothesis and develops it with extrapolating and totalizing (‘scientific’) rigor” (1976:60). Robert Heinlein describes the task as follows: “The science fiction writer must build up a scene strange to the reader, perhaps a wholly new culture, and he [or she] must make it convincing...[and she or he] must do it without slowing up the story...” ([1959] 1969:36–37). The SF author cannot depend on familiarity and cannot assume that readers will share the assumptions of the fictional universe.

Science fiction thus shares with sociology the task of “estranging” students. It does so by presenting worlds, actions, and people which are simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar and in which, at least superficially, students themselves are not invested.

MAKING BELIEVE: SF, SOCIOLOGY, AND “WHAT IF?”...

Sociology often has an eye to the future, in terms of either social change, preserving the status quo, or (in less an obviously ideological way) simple prediction. SF, aside from the future setting of its stories, likewise looks ahead. But science fiction, Ursula Le Guin contends, is *not* about the future or about prediction. Rather, it is descriptive and speculative. Le Guin describes science fiction as “a thought experiment. Let’s say (says Mary Shelley) that a young doctor creates a human being in his laboratory; let’s say (says Philip K. Dick) that the Allies lost the sec-

ond world war; let's say this or that is such and so, and see what happens..." (Le Guin 1976). Much science fiction can be read in such "thought experiment" terms. What if (Margaret Atwood asks in *The Handmaid's Tale*) some group wanted to take over the United States? How could they accomplish it? What if (Marge Piercy asks in *He, She, and It*) cyborgs were programmed to acquire emotions and desires and to be self-correcting? What then would differentiate people from machines?

Le Guin, however, believes that science fiction is not about the future. Despite the apparent futuristic quality of *The Left Hand of Darkness* (set in Ekumenical Year 1490–97 and peopled by androgynes), Le Guin argues,

I'm merely observing in the peculiar, devious, and thought-experimental manner proper to science fiction, that if you look at us at certain odd times of day in certain weathers, we already are [androgynous]. I am not predicting, or prescribing. I am describing. I am describing certain aspects of psychological reality in the novelist's way, which is by inventing elaborately circumstantial lies (1976).

SF authors thus create striking and unusual thought experiments; they invent lies—fictions—to represent "reality" and to present "truth." As sociology teachers using SF, we create a classroom situation in which we ask students to apply sociological skepticism and sociological principles derived from "real" life to the world of what is, on the surface, fiction.

MAKING REAL: USING SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

The sociology instructor's first task is to make students question what they normally take for granted, to be skeptical. The second is to develop their ability to use sociological methods, concepts, and theories to begin answering questions. SF can work toward this aim on a number of levels. It may be used as example or illustration. More fundamentally, however, SF translates abstractions—concepts or theories—into particular people and actions, and it is the comprehensible, plausible actions and reactions of these particular people, the characters in the story, that engage and hold our interest. When students step back from the story and

"see" examples in fiction, in effect they are translating particulars back to abstractions. They are developing and using concepts, models, and hypotheses.

Heinlein proposes that in SF we "can try experiments in imagination too critically dangerous to try in fact...[and SF] can warn against dangerous solutions, urge toward better solutions" (1969:45). If SF does this (and not all of it does), its long-term utility, like that of sociology, is the amelioration of the human condition.

THE HANDMAID'S TALE

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in the rigidly stratified, not-too-distant future society of Gilead. The protagonist is Offred, a Handmaid (i.e., a woman in reproductive service to the Commanders, the elite of the regime). She is among the first group of Handmaids, and must be resocialized at the Rachel and Leah Reeducation Center before assuming her duties in the household of the Commander and his wife. Because the regime was established so recently—ostensibly to increase the Caucasian birth rate—Offred still has vivid memories of her past as a librarian, wife, mother, and feminist born in the early 1960s.

Atwood shows us the efforts of Gilead's elite to establish and maintain a new social order including new culture, class system, gender ideologies, gender roles, and methods of social control. "New" is not quite the right word, however, because many Gileadean practices were familiar in other times and places. The *Tale* is essentially Offred's account of becoming and being a Handmaid, of power relations in a society where power is concentrated in the Commanders' hands, of fear and uncertainty, and of resistance to oppression.

STRUCTURE OF THE COURSE

I have used *The Handmaid's Tale* most frequently in Introductory Sociology, typically in classes of 40 to 50, but also with as many as 75 students. I set aside the final two weeks of the semester to read and discuss the novel. Because of its placement at the end of the semester, students have had 12 weeks to

begin developing the critical and analytic skills and the sociological imagination necessary to read the novel as more than entertainment. Moreover, rapport has been established; thus students who claim to dislike SF, who find it difficult, or who are uncomfortable in mixing fiction with sociology can be coaxed more easily through their resistance. Nonetheless, I urge students to begin reading the novel much earlier in the semester. Several typically do so, find it enjoyable, and communicate this to their classmates. Inevitably, quite a few read the book two (or more) times during the semester and benefit from the additional time to reflect.

I prepare students for reading novels sociologically by handing out orientation questions (Appendix A). The intent is to make sure they understand the story and to prepare them for discussing selected concepts and themes.

GENERAL THEMES

I use *The Handmaid's Tale* to address three themes broadly conceptualized as history (especially the tension between historical continuity and social change), gender, and the tension between freedom and control (or individuality and conformity).

I begin discussion of the actual novel by reading parts of Chapters 1 and 2 aloud in class. Who's "we"? Who are the Aunts? Where is the story taking place? Where are the gymnasium and the bedroom that are described? Why does the bedroom window open only partly? This procedure forces students to attend to detail and to interrogate the text, and allows all of us to savor the language.

Straightforward clarification of (proximate, immediate) setting (the gymnasium, the bedroom) leads to a lecture on actual and fictional historical context and on narrative structure. I brief students on Atwood's background (especially as a Canadian writer) and on her major works, themes, and perspectives (especially feminism). I also point out the final chapter in the novel, titled "Historical Notes on the Handmaid's Tale," and ask students to read this before reading the rest of the novel and again at the end. The chapter situates the Republic of Gilead in its (fictional) historical context. What, where,

and when is "pre-Gilead"? How do we know? What clues does Atwood give us? When and where is the story taking place? Again, how do we know? This knowledge requires an understanding and a discussion of events described in the story and a search for evidence. More important, these questions lead to a discussion of social change, from the particular—How did we get from "here" (pre-Gilead) to "there" (Gilead)?—to the general—How do societies change?

In considering how they know where and when the story takes place, students are encouraged to give free rein to resemblances that they initially think are simply their personal "gut" reactions. I point out that good writing (or good art) doesn't happen by accident and that Margaret Atwood intended readers to see similarities between "imaginary" Gilead, pre-Gilead, and our "real world." We focus on her statement: "There is nothing in *The Handmaid's Tale*, with the exception of maybe one scene, that has not happened at some point in history...I didn't invent a lot..." (in Davidson 1986:24). Even Introductory Sociology students with only a crude sense of history (and most have more than that) recognize real-life parallels to Gilead rituals, events, and social arrangements. One student wrote, "I could not help but think of Nazi Germany or past revolutionary societies in Russia or China. Many of the same tactics employed in Gilead were utilized by these regimes as well..."

This response reflects one of the difficulties in using SF: students draw parallels more easily to other societies than to our own. To force the recognition of similarity, I stubbornly refuse to move to a new topic until students describe parallels between Gilead and the contemporary United States. This tactic is typically unnecessary, however, because students draw each other out. For example, a student once proposed that the leaders of Gilead *must* be aliens (literally from another planet) because Gilead was so different from what she knew as social life. I had only to ask "What do others think of that?" before her classmates convinced her, using sociological concepts and principles, that the Gilead regime was

human, earthly, and (in some ways) not unlike contemporary society.

In class and in their final essays, students point out parallels between the resocialization of Handmaids in the Reeducation Center and education in U.S. schools, between the sex and class stratification of Gilead and that of our own society, between Gilead's control of women's reproduction and our own battles over reproductive rights, between the activities of Gilead's police (the Angels and the Eyes) and our CIA and FBI, between Gilead's restrictions on and use of language and "doublespeak" in the U.S. media.

In addition to the themes of history and social change, I pursue two others—gender and the tension between freedom and control (or individuality and conformity, agency and structure)—by asking students to write on the following question: "If forced to choose between being a Handmaid, a Martha, or a Commander's Wife, which would you choose and why?" Handmaids are women whose primary function is reproduction and whose ostensible high status is largely symbolic; they have no authority in the household or the society. Marthas are domestic servants. Commander's Wives exercise authority over other women in the household.

I use this question and the patterns that emerge from students' written responses as the basis for class discussion. Having prepared their answers in advance, students are more able and more willing to engage in discussion. We discuss the rationale for particular choices as well as the three patterns that consistently emerge when we tabulate students' responses. First, students object to the limited choices. ("The key word in this exercise is 'forced.'" "I am facing what would technically be labeled an avoidance-avoidance conflict. Meaning, I must make a choice between 2 very unattractive goals.") Students object especially to choosing from among the primary roles for women. Why can't they choose to be Commanders or Guardians? By identifying with a female character, they vicariously experience the gender stratification in Gilead, and they resent being compelled to select from the lower ranks.

The students' actual choices constitute the second pattern. Very rarely do they "choose" to be Handmaids.² They divide (usually along gender lines) between choosing Martha (female students) and Commander's Wife (male students).

The third pattern consists of students' rationale for their choices. Students justify choices on the basis of familiarity and attachments. Familiarity means that the chosen role is the one requiring the least strenuous transition, but, what is most familiar for women (Martha) is not most familiar for men (Commander's Wife). Students are frequently surprised to witness the far-reaching impact of differential socialization and gender roles. Women (many of whom are parents and nontraditional students) report that they, like the Marthas, already clean house, care for children, and perform other household tasks. Men report that the freedom of movement, the power and authority, and the opportunities for leisure and interaction available to Commander's Wives appeal to them. Although these things also appeal to some women students, many see the role of Commander's Wife as boring and nonessential; she is expendable. Though they don't say so, I suspect this expendable quality is particularly threatening to women already lacking privileges of gender and class.

The other rationale rests on attachments. For most students the choice is accomplished by process of elimination; they quickly eliminate the Handmaid role. Occasionally this step rests on a desire for bodily integrity (they despise the Ceremony in which the Handmaid has sex with her Commander in the presence of the Wife). More often, however, students fear the Handmaids' isolation and loneliness. They know the importance of attachments in social relations.

² The proportion of students choosing the Handmaid option has increased slightly since spring 1993. This change coincided with the release of the movie *Indecent Proposal*, starring Robert Redford, Demi Moore, and Woody Harrelson. In the film, Redford offers a million dollars to sleep with Moore for one night. My guess is that students who have seen this film see parallels in the "deal" between Commanders, Wives, and Handmaids and can begin to consider what their own "price" might be for violating their own ethical or moral standards.

In these discussions I frequently find myself playing devil's advocate, espousing Gilead ideology and trying (unsuccessfully) to convince students that being a Handmaid is a high honor. When this happens, students are able to identify rhetoric and ideology. They can point out the contradictions between what Gilead says and what Gilead does, between the values and principles a culture espouses and the difficulties of putting them into practice. Sure, students say, Gilead claims to give Handmaids status, but they have no power, no autonomy, no property—not even their own names. We discuss dimensions of stratification, Weber and Marx, and status inconsistency. Students see that similar complexities characterize contemporary society. Armed with empirical evidence on stratification, inequality, and mobility, and having practiced on fiction, students are able to analyze stereotypes, ideals, and ideology (democracy, opportunity, meritocracy, liberty, justice) even after the semester ends.

CONCEPTS

This novel works for me because it touches on three of the themes that I view as central to Introductory Sociology. Even in the absence of agreement on fundamental themes, however, *The Handmaid's Tale* and other science fiction can bring to life important sociological concepts and can help develop analytical thinking. Here I address two of these concepts: institutions and social control.³

Institutions. Introductory students often reify social institutions and (although they claim plenty of free will exists everywhere else) deny the ongoing social construction of institutions. They lose sight of institutions as collective solutions to societal "problems." I use a question that a student raised the first time I taught the novel to focus attention on institutions as human-made social arrangements.

The student asked why the Gilead regime chose to "solve" the problem of declining Caucasian births by creating Hand-

maids. Why, she asked, didn't they choose other ways to increase the Caucasian population? I ask this question regularly and urge students to consider alternative means that a society could use to reproduce itself and/or increase its birth rate. Among the functional alternatives that students suggest are immigration, technology such as in-vitro fertilization or fertility drugs, and a group of fertile men analogous to the pool of Handmaids. After generating a list of alternatives, we reason through why Gilead chose the Handmaid alternative and not the others. Students then see how institutions are related to values and ideology and to other institutions such as religion and polity, how institutions such as the family are socially created and variable, and how the distribution of power shapes and is reinforced by particular social arrangements.

Social control. The "foreignness" that many students sense when they read this novel comes from the obvious and direct ways in which behavior, especially of the Handmaids, is controlled. All that control appalls them—the wings on the headdresses for limiting vision, the passes to go shopping, the standard greetings and conversation between Handmaids, the mandatory visits to doctors, the required Ceremony, the Eyes everywhere. The students (at least temporarily) are grateful for all their taken-for-granted freedoms.

They begin to question the extent of their own freedom, however, when we examine in detail how behavior (and perceptions, attitudes, and feelings) are controlled informally. In the various rituals described by Atwood (testifying, salvaging, and particucution),⁴ students see the implications of symbolic interactionist theories and experiments by Asch, Milgram, and Zimbardo. By final examination time, many realize that all societies and social groups limit freedom but that they do so in differ-

³ The orientation questions in Appendix A and the sample essay questions in Appendix B suggest other concepts and topics prominent in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

⁴ Testifying is integral to the resocialization of Handmaids in the Reeducation Center. Handmaids "confess" their (real or imagined) "sins", and other handmaids chant "Your fault! Your fault!" The ultimate aim is to make Handmaids resent their previous freedoms and to be grateful for their new role and status. Salvaging is public hanging. In a particucution, Handmaids are given license to attack and kill an "enemy."

ent ways. One student confessed, "The issue for me was the nagging question 'How unlikely is this to happen?'" Another, citing computerized tax returns, credit cards, toll passes, direct deposits, ATMs, and the like (his list contained 12 items), wrote, "All [of these] presently control our money.... Are these conveniences or a form of social control?... Will we become so free of the burdens of everyday life that we become enslaved by our freedom?"

CONCLUSION

Using SF with introductory students entails some difficulties. Some students resist because they have never read SF; others because they have read it and disliked it. Many are familiar only with stereotypes of pulp sci-fi. I use two strategies for overcoming this initial resistance. First, I depend on their trust (which I've cultivated all semester) that I wouldn't assign material unless it were worthwhile. Also, and more important, I choose novels that are naturalistic and thus accessible to introductory students.

A second potential difficulty is that students' inability to understand the story may interfere with their ability to analyze it. Orientation questions, an opening lecture on the basic narrative, and a willingness to respectfully entertain even "silly" questions on plot or character all facilitate understanding and lay the groundwork for analysis.

Introductory Sociology often leaves students pessimistic, paralyzed, and/or enraged and in need of "debriefing." Davis (1992) suggests a number of strategies, including the use of film and humor, to respond to these "climates." Science fiction such as *The Handmaid's Tale* is another way to address this issue. Because of generic conventions and because they are social and cultural products, novels always "yield detailed information about culture." As fiction, however, they also leave room for speculation and multiple interpretations. Although the novel depicts a dystopia, the conclusion is sufficiently ambiguous to allow students to interpret it optimistically. They may see that people (Offred, Nick, the Commander, Serena Joy) in apparently oppressive circumstances are creative agents with the potential

for resistance. Students also view the publication of books such as *The Handmaid's Tale* as a "wake-up call" that illustrates one undeniable difference between our society and Gilead's dystopia: in Gilead, books and magazines have been destroyed, and reading is prohibited to all except the Commanders.

I have elaborated on *The Handmaid's Tale* to illustrate the potential for using SF in teaching introductory sociology. Because SF does not represent actual people, places, or events, students can distance themselves temporarily. Sometimes in spite of themselves, however, students start to care about the characters and the story. This nascent attachment is the predictable result of SF's "true but not real" form.

Future-oriented fiction obviously cannot be mimetic in the Platonic sense of reproducing the sensuous appearance of things, since the future does not yet exist; but it can be mimetic in the Aristotelian sense of representing the essential features, the fundamental processes of the experienced world (Sanders 1979:146).

Thus, SF provides as much knowledge and is as useful a tool as any realistic fiction or other realistic but nontraditional material.

Most students report in open-ended evaluations that they enjoyed the novel, that it made them think, that it brought concepts to life, and that it raised many questions. From my subsequent experience with some of these students, I am optimistic that raising questions is a significant first step in guiding the development of a "sociological imagination" among undergraduates.

APPENDIX A. ORIENTATION QUESTIONS: *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

1. Note the names of the women. What does Offred mean?
2. Why has the number of births declined?
3. How was the initial pool of Handmaids created?
4. Describe the resocialization of the Handmaids. What happens in the Reeducation Center and why?
5. When and where do the events Offred describes take place?
6. What are the attitudes of the other women toward the Handmaids?

7. In Gilead, status and power are unequally distributed. Be familiar with the following groups and the various kinds of power, control, and influence available to each: Marthas, Aunts, Handmaids, Commander's Wives, Eyes, Angels, Commanders, and Guardians.
8. Each group also has an "Achilles' heel." What are the weak spots or vulnerabilities of each group?
9. The professor at the Twelfth Symposium says, "As we know from the study of history, no new system can impose itself upon a previous one without incorporating many of the elements to be found in the latter..." (p. 386). What are some of the elements of "the old social fabric" that the new regime incorporated?
10. What benefits does the Gilead regime promise women? What are the costs for women? Think about the distinction between "freedom from" and "freedom to." Which do you prefer? Why?
11. How does the partial transcript of the "Twelfth Symposium" fit in? What does it add to our understanding of the novel?
12. What does deviance in this society consist of? How does Gilead attempt to control its members and how is deviance treated when control fails?
13. Be familiar with the following rituals: Testifying, Looking at the Wall, Birth Day events, Salvaging, Prayvaganza, Particution. What happens? Who is involved? What is the ostensible (manifest, or instrumental) purpose? What other (latent, symbolic) functions does the event serve?

APPENDIX B. SAMPLE ESSAY QUESTIONS

Stratification. Describe the stratification system in Gilead and the consequences of one's position in this system for life chances.

Social control. All societies control their members, though this control takes a variety of different forms. Write an essay describing some of the forms of direct and indirect social control that are used (used by whom?) in Gilead to keep Handmaids in line. Explain why societies don't rely exclusively on direct methods of control, and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the different forms of control.

Symbols, functionalist analysis. Write an essay discussing how the Gilead regime uses rituals to control various groups of people. Describe the meaning of some of the rituals and discuss their manifest and latent functions.

Symbolic interaction, freedom and constraint. Joel Charon has written, "Freedom goes back to a simple but very profound theme: language, thinking, and selfhood are basic to freedom, and all of these are socially derived qualities," (*Ten Questions* 1992:150). Write an essay discussing how Gilead both makes possible and restricts freedom through control of language, thinking, and selfhood.

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