

# On Interpretation

Sociology for Interpreters of Natural and Cultural History  
Revised Edition



Edited by  
Gary E. Machlis & Donald R. Field

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*To Grant Sharpe  
Colleague, friend, and teacher;  
a pioneer in interpretation  
who led the way  
to a new appreciation  
and understanding  
of our natural and cultural heritage*

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## PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION

When *On Interpretation* was first published in 1984, we noted the relative newness of the application of sociology and studies of human behavior to interpretation. We called for a partnership between social scientists and interpreters, in the belief that the results would have significant public benefits. In the intervening years, this partnership between academic discipline and profession has been strengthened. What has emerged is a better understanding of how and why people use parks, museums, and historic sites.

Yet the task is far from finished. The challenges that face interpreters in the last decade of the twentieth century suggest a critical need to reexamine the usefulness of the sociological perspective to interpretation. Several changes are fundamental.

First, communication technologies are revolutionizing the ways people interact: we are developing an electronic tradition that competes with the oral and the written. This communication revolution fuels a second fundamental change: the juxtaposition of cultures that identifies the "postmodern" world. All aspects of culture—art, food, music, politics—are increasingly a mixture of tastes, genres, styles, and meanings. The result is a bewildering and liberating cultural diversity, and a challenge to the status quo.

A third and significant change is the emergence of a global perspective to environmental issues. Scientific data are accumulating, and public awareness is growing, that the ecological health of the planet is the result of interdependent acts taken by nations, communities, and individuals. "Think globally, act locally" is slowly becoming a mainstream strategy for environmental action.

These trends challenge the way interpretation is practiced, and increase its importance and relevance to modern society. Clearly, interpreters need to better understand their clientele. Yet a "sociology of interpretation," which we argued for in the first edition, has

not fully matured as a field of inquiry. The number of studies remains low relative to the diversity of settings in which interpretation takes place. Advances in theorycritical in asking the right questions and gaining useful answers have not occurred.

For these reasons, we have prepared a revised edition of *On Interpretation*. Almost all the original chapters are included, essentially unchanged, so readers can view them in the context that they were written. Sensitivities and styles have changed (perhaps for the better), but rather than update the material to follow current usage we have remained with the original texts. We have added new chapters to reflect the trends described above especially the cultural pluralism and global perspective that are emerging as key themes of the 1990s.

Within each of the three sections that comprise the book, the material has been reorganized in chronological order. Thus, readers can evaluate for themselves how this partnership between sociology and interpretation has progressed. The conclusion has been extensively revised to reflect an evolution in our thinking as to how a sociology for interpreters of natural and cultural history might develop.

Jo Alexander of Oregon State University Press first encouraged us to consider a second edition of *On Interpretation*; we are grateful for her enthusiastic support and efficient, thoughtful editing. As before, Joan Klingler has provided valuable assistance in preparing the manuscript. Jeannie Harvey skillfully helped in locating references, clarifying facts, and helping to complete the revision.

GARY E. MACHLIS  
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TWIN PEAKS INN  
MOSCOW, IDAHO  
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## INTRODUCTION

At first glance, sociology and interpretation may seem strange bedfellows. Interpreters have long been intimate with the natural sciences—biology, geology, botany, ecology, and so forth. These sciences, especially biology and geology, have provided information for countless interpretive programs, from beach walks illustrating ecological principles to exhibits describing the theory of plate tectonics. Interpreters have also been intimate with the humanities—art, music, literature, philosophy, and history. Both natural science and the humanities provide the facts and, in many cases, the inspiration for interpretation.

What about the social sciences, of which sociology is only one? Social because they deal with relations between people, and science because they adhere to the scientific method, these disciplines have not often been directly applied to interpretation. Yet they offer a critical third kind of knowledge: insight into the human context of interpretive activities, facts about the interpreter and audience, and inspiration for the process of interpretation.

## The Ideology of Interpretation

Interpretation is largely a service for visitors to parks, wildlife refuges, museums, zoos, aquariums and other such leisure places. Its practical objectives are straightforward: to assist the visitor, to accomplish management goals, and to promote public understanding and appreciation (Sharpe 1982). Its techniques reflect the range of communication media, from simple storytelling to complex computerized visual displays.

Interpretation's *essence*, if we may borrow from Freeman Tilden, is much more difficult to describe. What is its role in society? What is its method—how does one *do* interpretation? What is its vocation, its central purpose? To answer these questions, we turn to Tilden as a central figure in interpretation's development.

Freeman Tilden was born in 1884, worked at his father's small-town newspaper, and then served as a reporter on papers in Boston, Charleston, South Carolina, and New York City. He then began a literary career, writing fiction for magazines, theater, and radio. At the age of 59 he again changed careers and began work for the National Park Service. Tilden wrote several books on interpretation,



among them *The National Parks*, *The Fifth Essence*, and *Interpreting Our Heritage*, first published in 1957. He died in 1980. *Interpreting Our Heritage* has remained a classic work widely acclaimed as expressing the "ideology" of interpretation.

Tilden saw interpretation as a new kind of public service, one that had "recently come into our cultural world." Sporadically practiced by great teachers, explorer-naturalists, scientists, and others, interpretation had simply been part of their role as educators. From 1915 to the 1940s, the increasing popularity of interpretive activities among park visitors and its usefulness to management agencies brought it to the foreground. Organizations from the National Park Service to local museums recognized interpretation formally and established interpretive positions, responsibilities, policies, training programs, and so forth. In sociological terms, interpretation had been institutionalized. Tilden considered this a novel development.

We are clearly engaged in a new kind of group education based upon a systematic kind of preservation and use of national cultural resources. The scope of this activity has no counterpart in older nations or other times (1977:9).

The institutionalization of interpretation required that some agreement be reached as to its *method*. As sociologists use the term, method differs from technique; it refers to underlying principles rather than devices, skills, or practices. To Tilden, the method of interpretation was to reveal "a larger truth that lies behind any statement of fact." An interpreter could not simply recite the facts; the facts had to reveal a larger concept. Tilden elaborated in *Interpreting Our Heritage*, suggesting principles that still claim a consensus among interpreters.

If "the work of revealing" was interpretation's method, its vocation revealed a higher purpose. Tilden was neither ambiguous nor objective; there is a moral quality to his admonition that interpretation is for the enrichment of the human mind and spirit.

The appeal for a renaissance of the appreciation of Beauty in the abstract and in its particular aspects must not be allowed to falter. It is vital to our moral growth. It is a program of education. Perhaps

it is truer to say that it is a program of re-education, for we have always known, in our innermost recesses, our dependence upon Beauty for the courage to face the problems of life. We have let ourselves forget. *It is the duty of the interpreter to jog our memories* (emphasis added; 1977:115).

The audience is critical to interpretation, and Tilden saw that appealing to the public's interest was a necessary part of the interpreter's craft. He also knew that understanding visitors and their backgrounds was essential to the interpretive method.

The visitor is unlikely to respond unless what you have to tell, or to show, touches his [sic] personal experience, thoughts, hopes, way of life, social position, or whatever else. If you cannot connect his ego (I use that word in an inoffensive sense) with the chain of revelation, he may not quit you physically, but you have lost his interest (1977:13).

Tilden realized that social conditions influenced interpretation's effectiveness, arguing that tourists are limited by time, "absorptive capacity," and money. Yet he shied away from any kind of analytical or systematic approach to understanding visitors. Uncharacteristically, he did not call for a foundation of empirical facts or for research on visitors.

A roster of the reasons why people visit parks, museums, historic houses and similar preserves, though a fascinating excursion into human psychology, need not detain us here . . . I go upon the assumption therefore that whatever their reasons for coming, the visitors are there (1977:11).

In part, Tilden's stance may have been due to the lack of factual information about park visitors. *Interpreting Our Heritage* was written a year before a federal commission was appointed by President Eisenhower to gather such data for the first time. Little was known about the public to be served, other than the personal experience gained by each interpreter.

Now, twenty-five years later, an immense amount of information is available to the interpreter. Studies that deal with visitors to parks, environmental education, interpretation, and leisure number in the hundreds. There is on the one hand a valuable information base, and on the other an increasing "need to know." How can sociology help?

## What is Sociology?

The social sciences include a range of disciplines, from anthropology to psychology. Among them, sociology focuses on the interactions among members of society. The sociologist asks: How do we behave with and toward one another? How do we organize ourselves? What meanings do we attach to the things we do?

Perhaps one of the most cogent and careful descriptions of sociology comes from the work of Max Weber (1864-1920). Weber's ideas have remained central to sociological theory and practice, and he has been called the "as yet unsurpassed master of the science of social analysis." To Weber, the fundamental value or essence of sociology is its reliance on the scientific method. The sociologist should examine how people behave in the real world and not be detoured by personal biases. Facts are to be used in testing clearly stated hypotheses. Sociology deals with what *is* rather than what *ought to be* or *might be*. Such a task demands that the sociologist distance himself or herself from the subject of interest, to be a "disenchanted observer."

Yet at the same time, studying human behavior requires the sociologist to develop special skills in analyzing what is observed. Peter Berger has written:

While Weber was undoubtedly committed to the scientific rationality of the modern West, he had a distinctive understanding of what this meant for the study of human affairs: human phenomena don't speak for themselves; they must be interpreted (1981:10).

This idea, that social action must be interpreted, is at the core of a Weberian approach to sociology. Weber notes:

The term "sociology" is open to many different interpretations. In the context used here it shall mean that science which aims at the interpretive understanding of social behavior in order to gain an explanation of its causes, its courses and its effects (quoted in Freund 1968:93)

Hence, the sociologist is faced with not only predicting how we behave, but providing a deeper understanding as to why we behave as we do. This is partly because the importance of social behavior lies in its "meaningfulness to others." Let us take hiking for example.

Two hikers may accidentally collide on a narrow trail; it is only when they ignore each other, apologize, or argue that social behavior begins. To Weber, the meaning of such social acts may vary; the collision may not be accidental, but an act of anger, or flirtation. The sociologist must go beyond simply reporting an event and probe its meaning.

To sociologically understand our hikers' collision, we must first gather a variety of empirical facts: Who was involved? What were their backgrounds? What occurred prior to and after the incident? At the same time, the sociologist must objectively begin to probe for meanings. We might learn about other hiking encounters, looking for a pattern of behavior leading up to each collision. We might ask why the hikers did not avoid each other, or whether it is customary to collide in such situations.

By continually using empirical facts to generate understanding and then testing such understanding against more facts, the sociologist moves toward a scientific knowledge of human behavior. That is, simply, the vocation of sociology.

If the vocation of sociology is to interpret social interaction scientifically, its application has been equally broad and far-reaching. Sociologists have studied complex organizations—corporations, bureaucracies, churches, armies, factories, hospitals, and so forth. They have studied special events—pilgrimages, wars, holidays, riots—and details of everyday behavior in public parks, at school, at home, and on the job. Sociologists have examined the behavior of small groups, families, communities, nations, social classes, and civilizations. Sociology has been applied to understanding the problems of inequality, public health, racism, sexism, poverty, environmental pollution, delinquency; the list could easily go on. The intent of this book is to illustrate still another application—sociology's usefulness to interpretation.

## Sociology and Interpretation

So we return to our original question concerning interpretation as it is practiced in parks, preserves, museums, and similar settings: how can sociology help? Sociology can aid interpreters' understanding of their clientele. Imagine a newly developed nature center or