



Walden; or, Life in the Woods by Henry David Thoreau

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placement. Data for the same cohort observed at different periods do not show a trend toward more mobility. Increasing relative mobility for cohorts, in turn, is explained by educational expansion. The puzzle then becomes why later cohorts in Britain, a country that also experienced educational expansion, did not show more mobility. This would be the case since in Germany the effect of origin on destination is lower at higher levels of education, whereas things are not like that in Britain. But Breen and Luijkx leave this puzzle as a matter for further research.

Karl Ulrich Mayer and Silke Aisenbrey's paper goes beyond that of Breen and Luijkx. Mayer is the German sociologist who recognized that questions of the type "How much father-son class mobility is there in the population of country x at time y ?" are rather poor, who popped the pertinent question, and who collected appropriate data. A question about mobility always should invoke two points in time, and the hidden point in the poor question stands for quite different points in time, since the observed people differ in age. Mayer set out in the early 1980s to collect occupational histories for cohorts born in 1920 and for later ones. Against this background, it is remarkable that Breen and Luijkx seem to code persons currently without a job after their last job. That decision forecloses the "special issue" of whether early retirement differs for cohorts. By comparing for various cohorts the origins of persons with their class at age 27 and at age 35, Mayer and Aisenbrey show that the trend toward more father-son and father-daughter relative class mobility reversed with the early 1960s cohort. They too leave this puzzle for further research. Mayer and Aisenbrey say that their chapter provides variations on the theme of mobility. This metaphor misleads. The theme of the generation of mobility sociologists to which Breen and Luijkx belong contains false notes, and readers should know.

Walden; or, Life in the Woods. By Henry David Thoreau. Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1854. Pp. 357.

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The emergence of a fully theorized environmental sociology after 2015 brought *Walden* briefly into sociological prominence. But its semiautobiographical framework and allusive density made it ill-suited to a discipline with one foot in the scientific study of society, even if the other foot was firmly placed in Thoreau's home turf—the normative understanding of social life. Worse yet, the endless riches of Thoreau's journals proved an inescapable temptation to discover "what *Walden* really

* Another review from 2048 to share with *AJS* readers.—*Ed.*

means,” reinforcing the book’s status as fixed literary classic rather than open social theory.

Yet *Walden* has much broader sociological relevance than we have usually thought. Of course, it is a central work for environmental sociology. But to its theory of man/environment relations it adds theories of consumption, social relations, space-time, and action. Ostensibly autobiographical, it is nonetheless a sociological classic.

It is ironic that Thoreau’s sociological relevance should be urged by one who is neither an American nor a landsman. But sociological canons are usually made by foreigners. It was after all Americans who started the vogue for Durkheim and Weber, just as they would later for Foucault and Habermas. And conversely it took Europeans and Asians to release the theoretical core of the Chicago school from the trammels of its self-veneration.

Walden is a short text, but a long read—a paradox not at first apparent. One revels in its simple aphorisms for many pages before realizing that everything in it—from metaphor and paragraph to topic and chapter—is designed by a complex and even devious mind. Thoreau writes very self-consciously—sometimes annoyingly so. Allusions abound. Indeed, the counterpoint of themes and references and arguments becomes at times overwhelming. For Thoreau does not write in rigorous abstractions, be they macrosociological or metatheoretical or even phenomenological. There is no list of concepts, no polemic with predecessors: no formal propositions or clearcut definitions. He simply bushwhacks through the intellectual underbrush that lies between his own particularities and what is universal in the human project. That is the very definition of theory, and if one of Thoreau’s paradoxical conclusions is that our particularities cannot be (indeed should not be) escaped, we are all the wiser for having made the journey, scratches and all.

As schoolchildren learn, *Walden* presents Thoreau’s reflections on two years spent living in a small cabin he built by a pond in Concord, Massachusetts, on land owned by his friend and mentor, the essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson. It begins with a review of the classical problems of social theory by means of reflections on Thoreau’s cabin-building and settlement. We see all the stuff of social life: eating, drinking, talking, reading, and working, and beyond them the fundamentals of valuing, acting, and feeling. Love alone escapes, as it escaped—except in one essay and one brief moment—Henry David Thoreau himself.

The book then works through the annual cycle, from summer planting in the bean field to autumn moon and harvest, to the frozen pond in winter (whose ice literally supports Thoreau’s elaborately “scientific” investigation of its depths), and finally to the return of spring. “Thus was my first year’s life in the woods completed, and the second year was similar to it,” Thoreau tells us, managing in one characteristically dense sentence to paraphrase the Bible (AV Matt. 22:39), emphasize cyclical temporality, and deftly misrepresent his own activity. He has never told

the reader that his main work in two years at Walden was to write or edit three book-length manuscripts, including the first draft (there were seven total) of *Walden* itself. Nor are we much aware that during his two Walden years he was at one point jailed for civil disobedience and at another took a two week trip to locate and climb Maine's dramatic rooftop, Mount Katahdin.

Any reading must begin with the most familiar Thoreau—the Thoreau who placed man in nature. Walden's nature is not the Enlightenment's nature: sublime, awesome, and inscrutable, a challenge to human daring and an omnipotent boundary to human power. Thoreau was not John Franklin, who sailed to icy immortality in the Northwest Passage only a month before Thoreau moved to Walden Pond. He did not seek the Northwest Passage; he sought himself. Like Petrarch and Augustine before him, he found humans to be the most puzzling and profound works of nature.

Thoreau's embedding of humanity in nature is clearest not in his arguments but in his choice of metaphors. Throughout the book nature is described in human/social metaphors and vice versa. In the brilliant chapter "Sounds," the morning train leaves "a train of clouds stretching far behind and higher and higher, going to heaven while the cars are going to Boston," while a few pages later "the whippoorwills chanted their vespers for half an hour." The whole chapter "Solitude" argues that nature provides authentic society, while shortly afterward "The Village" describes Concord as a beast with vital organs, defines news as a grain consumed by "worthies" with "sound digestive organs," and identifies gossip as "whatever was in the wind" (precisely the same words Thoreau had used for his own ecstatic listening to nature in the opening pages of the book). "Brute Neighbors" allegorizes local fauna—an ant war occupies several pages—and "The Pond in Winter" uses the dimensions of frozen Walden to discuss human ethics. By contrast, "Former Inhabitants" treats bygone locals as passing animals, and in "Visitors" a Canadian woodchopper becomes a (much admired) "animal man."

This melding of the human and the natural rejects the common view that Thoreau aims to exchange society for nature. Rather, he wants to embrace the natural: to collaborate with nature, since we are ourselves natural beings. Not for Thoreau the model (capitalist) farm, "a great grease-spot, redolent of manures and buttermilk. Under a high state of cultivation, being manured with the hearts and brains of men." He prefers an unmediated, noncommercial encounter with the physical and biological world around us. In sociology, we have seldom theorized such an encounter. There have been various beginnings; the turn-of-the-century debate about gender essentialism, the 19th-century obsession with instincts, the reductionist frivolities of cognitive neuroscience. And of course there are the earnest arguments of more recent environmental sociology. But we still await a truly general theory of man in nature to complement our theories of man in society.

While Thoreau's insertion of man in nature shapes his theory of society

decisively, we must recognize here two very different readings of that theory. In the 19th- and 20th-century reading, Thoreau withdrew from society to nature, thereby reducing society to its ultimate unit, the individual. For such readers, Thoreau rejected not only capitalism and commerce, but indeed everyday social life itself. The more modern reading has noted that Thoreau left Walden without regret after two years. In later life, he would never forsake the natural world, but neither did he hide in it from future challenges. On this reading, Thoreau at the pond represents not so much an individual as he does the whole of human society itself. He seeks the essentials not only of personal life in nature, but indeed of social life in nature.

These essentials are set forth in the early chapters. Political economy is, to be sure, mercilessly parodied (“while [the poor student] is reading Adam Smith, Ricardo, and Say, he runs his father in debt irretrievably”). But at the same time Thoreau considers the basics of food, shelter, and barter as forthrightly as did Smith himself. Indeed, Thoreau’s hymn to the railroad and its commerce (in “Sounds”) is every bit as extravagant as anything in Smith. The railroad is a comet, a rising sun. The ripped sails it carries to the papermaker are “proof sheets that need no correction,” their condition telling “the history of the storms they have weathered.” Commerce, he tells us, is “unexpectedly confident and serene, alert, adventurous, and unworried.” Indeed, commercial men may be among the “strong and valiant natures” that Thoreau thinks have no need to read *Walden*, because they already live as Thoreau would have us live: deliberately rather than habitually, in the present rather than in the future.

In his systematic shedding of what he feels to be the inessentials of social life, Thoreau seems akin to Rousseau, the Romantics, and the other world rejecters. But the book’s narrative is more subtle. It does begin with detachment from everyday society: from the burden of property, from the slavery of divided labor, from the dominance of clock time, from the endless sway of fashion and opinion. (And, it must be noted, from women; there is a fog of misogyny in the early chapters that burns off slowly as Thoreau warms to his task.) But after this detachment, Thoreau parts company with the Romantics, whose ecstasies never ripened into the rigors of subsistence living.

For the shedding of inessentials leaves life—both individual and social—founded on necessities: on the one hand, the necessities of daily life—manual labor, exercise, preparation of food; on the other, the necessities of spiritual life—contemplation of the natural world (and of “natural” human artifacts like the railroad) coupled with reading of the classics, of descriptive writing, and of philosophical reflection. By refounding life in daily and spiritual necessities, we can finally see nature for itself, without mediation, in its full complexity. This vision in turn enables a refounding of the self (and, by implication, of society). This self refounded on essentials can return safely to the quotidian world, for it can see reality

through the veils of cant and hypocrisy. More important, it can enact reality itself.

There is for Thoreau a considerable heroism to this enactment, and the theme of heroism and nobility, strong in the opening pages (where it is tied to the misogyny—one can read *Walden* as a first essay in the 19th-century reinterpretation of masculinity), runs through the book like a flowing stream. Yet in the end, curiously, the hero is man the dreamer—the artist of Kouroo who strives after perfection, the woodsman who leaves the wood lest he fall into the slough of habit. Thoreau may have admired the captains of capitalism who had no need of *Walden*. But the artist is his ideal.

Like many great books (the Bible is a good example), *Walden* is obsessed with place and time. It takes its name from a particular place, and the book itself is full of places: the woods, the groves, the village, the ponds and bays. It is also full of links between those places: the railroad track, the turnpike, the paths, the river. Everything in *Walden* is situated, placed. Indeed, this complexity of place is another device linking man and nature, for Thoreau maps nature by his constant analogies to human geography.

But Thoreau's interwoven geography pales beside his multilayered temporality. *Walden* runs on many times. These include linear times—the Walden sojourn itself, the life course of the individual, the long pattern of human history (seen in the cellar holes around Walden as well as in the much longer endurance of the classics), and beyond all these the vast course of geological and astronomical time. They include also cyclical times—the day, the week, the year, and the irregular rise and fall not only of the pond itself, but also of commercial establishments, of societies, and of peoples. In the midst of all this flow, however, the book focuses intensely on mere *being*, in which time does not pass at all. Indeed, to dwell in the present is to live at the intersection of the linear and the cyclical, “at the still point of the turning world.”

All of these temporalities are run together. For example, the life course is identified with the round of seasons in the book's very design: Walden begins with the censorious certainty of youth, and passes through work and maturity to its end in the calm of wisdom. “I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there,” Thoreau tells us calmly in the epilogue. For suddenly the idyll is over. “There is an incessant influx of novelty in the world, and yet we tolerate incredible dulness.” To stay at Walden would be to risk that dulness, “a cabin passage”; Thoreau wants to be “before the mast, and on the deck of the world.” (The pun on “cabin” is typical Thoreau; one can easily miss it, whereas the reference to Dana's *Two Years before the Mast* leaps out to all who have read sea literature.)

Beyond these themes of essentials and of space and time lies Thoreau's central theme for sociologists: his idea of action. Much is written of Weber's analysis of action. But Talcott Parsons would have done better to read Thoreau, who invites us to reflect on what exactly it is to “live deliberately.” What Thoreau leaves behind in Concord are his routines.

He wishes to intend everything that he does, and to do this he must leave his habits and even his past experience behind, as he will leave his woodland habits behind in the last pages of *Walden*. There is (that is, there ought to be) no one set of necessities; there is only the necessity of finding a new present and living in it fully and deliberately. This is true liberation. Although he read so much in the literatures of the East, Thoreau does not follow that literature in its pervasive commitment to inaction, much less to that suppression of desire central to Buddhism (although he does speak of “the inexpressible satisfaction of food in which appetite [has] no share”). He remains committed to a contemplative life, but he would not always contemplate the same things. He has a wish for new experience.

It is an obsession with Thoreau that such experience be authentic, that it should involve only the necessities of the self, not false needs implanted by others nor action undertaken to please others nor mediation through any collective will. It is this point that makes Thoreau hard as sociology; few have seemed more insistently individualist. Thoreau’s idea of sociability is sitting with a visiting fisherman and not speaking (“Visitors”). Indeed language itself is a problem. He much appreciates the Canadian woodchopper who cannot put his thoughts into words; so much the better, thinks Thoreau, for then those thoughts are unbetrayed.

Thoreau’s theme here is that for which Habermas would later become famous. It is not that Thoreau values society little. Rather the reverse. Society, he tells us, is too cheap. We should be more careful of it. Thoreau, that is, wants social life to be like the natural world, to be authentic. He presumes authenticity in nature itself and speaks throughout of the naturalness of certain human things: of architecture, of persons, of farms, of the very pond itself.

Yet we who read him can see that such “naturalness” is not really “natural.” “The Ponds” hymns Walden’s purity and its place in the endless round of nature. These we too can see in the pond. But Walden is after all an insignificant kettle pond, the remnant of a melting block of glacier whose sand and gravel impurities became the porous bottom that Thoreau so admires. So when Thoreau tells us that “a lake . . . is earth’s eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature,” we begin to part company with him. We see that he is Don Quixote and that Walden, however tiny and plain, is his Dulcinea. Walden’s nature in all its purity and depth and complexity, above all in its rich symbolic panoply, is in fact the willed creation of Henry David Thoreau.

And in this vision is society complete. Throughout the book, nature is itself a society: from ant wars to avian religious services to “piscine murder” to Waldensian pickerel. Thoreau is as much an outsider to societies of animals, plants, and inanimate nature as he is to the society of men. Yet nature, to Thoreau, is an honest society, and in that sense an ideal for the human one riven by deceptions and follies. In both kinds of societies, Thoreau admires the deliberate actor: the animal that does what

it must, the pond that is what it is, the visitor who fishes in companionable silence. Even in commerce, he admires the bold and straightforward.

Yet what is the aim of this action without illusion and deception, this contact with the necessities and realities? On this, Thoreau is much less clear. He is essentially contemplative, and his aim, in the end, is merely to see both nature and society for what they are. He knew full well—as sociologists should know—that seeing society for what it is inevitably means judging it. But in *Walden* at least, his moral program is completely negative: simplify life, shed illusions, minimize consumption, ignore fashion, and so on. These are the themes so many have taken from him. But his hymn to commerce suggests that he didn't really believe this program. So also does the fact that he leaves Walden to return to the larger world. Indeed, one can imagine Thoreau writing a book like *Walden* about human society. *Hard Times*, *North and South*, and *Madame Bovary*—all appearing within a year or two of *Walden* and none of them read by Thoreau—could all be taken as similarly single-minded meditations on the “natural” life of humans.

As sociologists we are among the many inheritors of that literary tradition. And our aim, like Thoreau's, is to see (social) life as it really is, to truly see it. This ties us to Thoreau's program of “looking things in the eye,” of disillusionment (disenchantment was Weber's word). But it also ties us to his view of that project as heroic and in some sense noble. And Thoreau ultimately turns the theme of disillusionment on its head; for him, seeing things as they are leads to reenchantment. The deliberateness with which Thoreau went to the woods, renouncing human illusion, becomes a deliberate imagination (i.e., a choice of illusion): “If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.” For of course, even in the woods, we remain in society, the larger society of nature and the universe of which we are an insignificant—but to ourselves very interesting—part. Indeed, Thoreau leaves us not as the stoic and disillusioned Roman farmer of the opening pages, but as the Quixote in love with his own dream of a beautiful pond. “If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost. That is where they should be. Now put foundations under them.” No better place to look for foundation stone than in *Walden*. Read it. You will not be disappointed.