The literary author as a sociologist? *Among French Peasants* by August Strindberg

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In his account of the early history of sociology, *Between Literature and Science*, Wolf Lepenies describes how the relationship between literature and social science has changed over time. While sociology and literature today constitute two distinct genres, with very little interaction or overlap, the situation was different in the 1800s. A social scientist was supposed to write well, and authors of fiction were often very interested in society, to the point of sometimes viewing themselves as social scientists.

As examples of authors who viewed their literary work also as a form of social science, Lepenies (1988) mentions Balzac and Zola. Balzac originally wanted to call *Comédie Humaine* for *Etudes Sociales*, and Zola once described his novels as a form of 'sociologie pratique' (pp. 4–7).

In this short essay, I want to discuss a work that belongs to a related category, but one that Lepenies does not discuss. It consists of works in social science that have been written by literary authors. Two famous examples from this type of genre are Chekhov’s study of prisoners in *Sakhalin Island* (1894) and Jack London’s account of the London poor in *The People of the Abyss* (1903). Less known, but equally interesting, I will argue, is August Strindberg’s *Among French Peasants: Subjective Travel Notes* (*Bland franska bönder: Subjektiva reseskildringar*; 1889).

These types of works are interesting to sociologists for a number of reasons. One is mainly historical and has to do with the way that they relate to the social science of their time. A related question is if this type of studies can be regarded as studies in sociology today. There is finally the most important question of all: can they teach us something today?

Before addressing these issues at some length, I will say something about how Strindberg came to write *Among French Peasants* and what its contents are. The main reason for quickly describing its contents is that Strindberg’s study has not been translated into English (while translations into French and German exist).

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Preparing for the work

One can say that: August Strindberg (1849–1912) had prepared for his study of the French peasants in several different ways. In order to produce a good study of the social science type, Strindberg believed, you first of all have to carry out some preliminary and exploratory work. Strindberg's term for this was 'prestudy' (förstudie).

In the case of Strindberg, preparing himself for this particular study meant that he carefully tried to study any statistical as well as historical material that he could find about the peasants in France.

Strindberg had also prepared his study by locating and engaging a collaborator. Originally, he had several candidates in mind, including the well-known painter Carl Larsson. The person he ended up with, however, was someone called Gustaf Steffen (1864–1929), who in 1903 would become the first professor of sociology in Sweden.

In the early 1880s, Steffen was a young man with a burning interest in socialism and social science. Strindberg assigned him a number of practical tasks in the planned study, including being in charge of taking photographs. Once their field work had gone on for some time, however, Strindberg got upset with Steffen, heaped him with abuse, and fired him.

In studying the French peasants, Strindberg could also draw on some of the skills he had acquired before he decided to become an author. While we today view Strindberg primarily as a literary author and dramatist, by the early 1880s, he had written considerably more in his capacity as a journalist, a historian and an ethnographer.

As a journalist, Strindberg had had the opportunity to visit a number of different people and institutions, especially in Stockholm. The increasing use of the interview in newspaper circles – a novelty at the time – no doubt suited Strindberg well. His sharp sense of observation was also shaped as well as stimulated by this type of work.

By the time that Strindberg decided to carry out a study of the French peasants, he had also written several works in what he called 'cultural history' (kulturhistoria), which today can be described as an early form of ethnology, with some history mixed into it. The most important of these works was a massive tome, in which the reader gets to follow the culture of the Swedes over a period of a thousand years, covering such topics as clothing, food, childhood and illness (Swedish Life or Svenskt liv, 1881–1882).

Finally, Strindberg was by the fall of 1886 very good in French since he by now had lived in France or the French-speaking parts of Europe for a few years. Once he had decided on studying peasants, he had also made a conscious effort to teach himself different dialects so that he could conduct interviews with peasants without any problems.

By the mid-1880s, he was also well read in the social science literature of his time. Through various authors, he had assimilated a social science view of the world as well as a social science vocabulary ('upper class', 'underclass', 'institution', etc.). He had carefully studied Tocqueville, Rousseau and Montesquieu, all of whom are today seen as precursors of sociology. He had also read the works of 'sociologists', such as Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer.

At the time there only existed one professorship in sociology in the world, and it was held by someone called Charles Letourneau in Paris. Letourneau defined sociology as ethnography with an evolutionary bent. His major work in sociology – La sociologie
d'après l'ethnographie (1880) – was reviewed by Strindberg in 1884 for the Swedish journal Tiden. In Strindberg’s view, this was a cardinal work and should be translated into Swedish. [A.C.]

Strindberg had also prepared himself for his study in a few other ways. One is difficult to specify but nonetheless important; and it has to do with the way he saw himself. What I am referring to is Strindberg’s (2007) characterization of himself as a ‘reality person’ (verklighetsmänniska; p. 80).

And finally, Strindberg had for some time come to believe that too much attention was devoted to what was going on in the cities in Europe, compared to the countryside where the great majority of the population lived. In the early 1880s, he had drawn up a plan for a giant comparative study of European peasants, not only those in France but also in Switzerland, Italy, Austria and so on.

This study was never carried out, and after his French study, Strindberg gave up on his project of The Peasant in Europe. Nonetheless, he entered his study in France with an eye that had been sharpened by his knowledge of peasants in a number of other countries.

**Among French Peasants: A quick summary**

Strindberg’s book is about 200 pages long and divided into three parts. In the first of these, the author presents a typical French village. In Part 2 (which is the longest), Strindberg gives an account of the actual research he carried out. And in Part 3, he summarized his findings. Strindberg’s overall question was whether the small peasants in France were about to disappear and be replaced by giant agricultural units. His finding was that they were not.

In the first part – ‘Peasant Life in a French Village’ – Strindberg presents his impressions from having lived for some time in a place called Grez-sur-Loing in the 1880s. The reader is introduced to the main institutions of the village, from work and family, to the role of religion and education. Drawing on interviews and what we today would call participant observation, Strindberg describes what a wedding was like, what the inside of the average house looked like, the local bar and so on.

The second part – ‘Interviews and Autopsies’ – was seen by Strindberg as the heart of his book. While he had carefully prepared for his work on the French peasants, he was of the opinion that it was only through ‘studies in vivis’ – getting information yourself of what is going on – that he would be able to get his most important material (Strindberg, 1985: 79). While there are some things that you can study in advance, and then confirm through field work (‘autopsy’), there are some things that you can only truly learn about by being there yourself and seeing how things are in reality: studies in vivis.

The way that Strindberg and Steffen went about their studies was to travel through much of France and acquire their information in the process. They did this by railroad, and the whole trip took about 3 weeks (30 September to 19 October 1886). Strindberg and Steffen travelled in third class, so they could talk to ordinary people. They also often stopped along the route, for shorter or longer forays into the countryside.
During these stops, as well as while they were travelling, especially, Strindberg took the opportunity whenever he could to interview people. He had also developed a capacity to carefully inspect and study the landscape from the train.

To help him remember, he took notes, made drawings and in other ways tried to absorb everything he saw and heard. According to a friend, Strindberg had ‘a memory as a phonograph’ (Echholm, 1985: 197).

Strindberg presented his studies in vivis in the second part of Among French Peasants, and he did so in the form of portraits of the regions that he had travelled through. Chapter 1 is called Franch-Comté; Chapter 2, Champagne; and so on. In his descriptions of these landscapes, Strindberg not only discusses the people, their houses and the like but also comments on the fauna, the animals and the quality of the soil. The result was a mixture of sociology, ethnography and landscape descriptions that is unique in many respects.

In the last and concluding part of the book, Strindberg returns to the question that he had raised in the beginning, and confirms that the evolution in French agriculture is (still) moving in the direction of small peasant plots, rather than giant agricultural units. Strindberg reiterates his belief that the countryside is much more important than the city. The study ends in a somewhat uninspiring manner, and the reader gets a sense that Strindberg at this point just wanted the study to be over with.

Is Strindberg’s work a study in sociology?

This question can be answered in two ways: was Among French Peasants a study of sociology, as this term was understood at the time, and would we consider it a study in sociology today?

The answer to the first question should in my opinion be ‘yes’. The term ‘sociology’ was at the time understood in a different way from what it is today. In Europe – in France as well as in Sweden – the term was amorphous and had a number of meanings, of which the two most important were Comte’s positivistic notion of sociology and Spencer’s view of sociology as the study of social evolution. There was also sometimes a link between ethnography and sociology.

Strindberg’s work fits nicely into this type of discourse: there are scientific laws, he believed, that account for the evolution of society, and this evolution can best be described with the help of ethnography and other social data. But note that there also exists one quality that makes Among French Peasants truly pioneering in sociology. This is that it was based on field research, not library research, as was the norm among sociologists at the time.

Strindberg, in contrast to all of the famous sociologists before World War I – Durkheim, Simmel, Weber, Sumner and so on – went himself into the field and collected his data. It was not till The Polish Peasant (1918–1920) by Thomas and Znaniecki that a major sociological work based on field research was published.

Strindberg’s Among French Peasants and Some Dates in Early Sociology

1839 Comte introduces the word ‘sociology’ (sociologie)

1873 Herbert Spencer, Study of Sociology
1876 W.G. Sumner teaches the first course in sociology in the United States

1883 Lester Ward, *Dynamic Sociology*

1885 Charles Letourneau becomes the first professor of sociology, at l’Ecole d’anthropologie de Paris

1887 Georg Simmel teaches the first course in sociology in Germany

1889 August Strindberg, *Among French Peasants*

1892 The first (graduate) department of sociology opens at the University of Chicago

1894 Emile Durkheim, *Division of Labor in Society*

Would Strindberg’s study also be seen as a study in sociology today? It is possible to argue for as well as against this view, as long as one has the modern notion of sociology in mind. If you, however, use a broader definition, there is no doubt about the answer. Using a broader definition of sociology, I suggest, would also make it easier for us to benefit from the many interesting insights that can be found in the works from the early period of social science.

**What can we learn from Strindberg’s study today?**

It is possible to go through *Among French Peasants* side by side and point out how Strindberg looks at status, class, gender, lifestyle and similar sociological categories that we use today. While there is some merit to an exercise of this type – it would, for example, provide us with many vivid and telling examples – it nonetheless strikes me as not very interesting. The reason for this is that you start from what we already know, and simply use Strindberg’s study (or some other literary work) as an illustration of this.

To proceed in this way also fails to do justice to the truly original and even pioneering qualities of Strindberg’s study. The question you want to ask, of literary works and a study like *Among French Peasants*, is to my mind a different one, namely, how can they help us to improve today’s sociology?

In the spirit of this argument, I will conclude this essay by briefly presenting a few topics on which I think Strindberg has something to teach us today.

1. **Write well and avoid ‘Scientific Language’**

Strindberg was a brilliant stylist and extremely sensitive to language. While he was convinced of the need for science, including social science, he also felt that the language of science was deadening.

While Strindberg did not suggest a solution to this problem, he put his finger on an important topic. In a letter to Steffen, he wrote,

I did not want to write in a scientific way = in a thick-headed way. You know that I have written in a scientific way, but no-one can read it. The style, the color, everything is lost when I write in this way. The whole thing becomes dry as dust and incoherent.

*(Ekholm, 1985: 199)*
#2. Use new technology to invent new methods

Strindberg tried to use new technology in novel and innovative ways to get a better handle on his topic. One example of this is that he brought along a camera on his French trip, something that had never occurred to the sociologists of his time.

Strindberg used his camera in two ways (all the pictures have been lost). One of these was to document something. But he also experimented with taking pictures from the train while it was in full motion (ögonblicksfotografier). Exactly what he tried to accomplish through this is not clear, and all of the pictures from the trip have unfortunately been lost. It seems that he was trying to create some kind of visual statistics that could help him to capture the general nature of what he was studying (*totalimpression*; Strindberg, 1985: 120–21).

One of the points of using the railroad, as well as rushing through so much of France during such a short time period, was precisely to get a sense for what things were like in general. When you stand in a train which is moving at full speed, you can literally see how the landscape, the houses and so on reveal their common structure or ‘type’, as Strindberg put it (*typ*; Strindberg, 1985: 80).

#3. Use but also question statistics

Strindberg had been trained in simple forms of probability theory and reading statistical tables when he worked for an insurance company in Stockholm. From his historical and ethnographic research, he was also familiar with some simple forms of descriptive statistics.

As a result, Strindberg was convinced that statistics was important to the study of society. But he also felt that it had its limitations; and throughout his book, he often mocks the pedantic use of statistics. One of its limitations, he also thought, was that statistics ignored the uniqueness of things and reduced them to false averages. ‘The reader deserves getting a better picture of my impressions than *false generalizations*, because science means generalizations and these are false’, as he wrote in a letter to Steffen (Ekholm, 1985: 199).

#4. All studies need a prestudy

Strindberg should clearly be given his due for having done field work at a time when all the important sociologists only did library work or used information that others had gathered together through simple forms of questionnaires. Strindberg went out into the reality he wanted to study and talked to people.

But note that he did not start his research by diving into field work. Instead, he carefully prepared for the actual research by going through a process he called ‘prestudy’ (*förstudie*). In the case of the French peasant, this meant studying whatever statistics and historical material he could find. In the preface to *Among French Peasants*, Strindberg says that by the time he was ready to do his field work, he had ‘an excellent library with literature on the situation of the peasants’ (Strindberg, 1985: 20). He also importantly added, ‘That I don’t have any opinions at this stage, no arcuamum, is a great merit’.
Besides library research of the type that has just been described, Strindberg had also engaged in some preparatory field work. He had done this by studying the peasants in Italy in for 2 weeks. When Strindberg in the fall of 1886 started his field research in France, he was in a good situation: he knew what he wanted to study; he had a thorough knowledge of his topic; but he did not know what he would find.

Note
1. Just as there may be some interest in looking at sociological studies by literary authors (author-sociologists), one may want to study literary works by sociologists (sociologist-authors). Examples of the latter would include such contemporary sociologists such as Frank Parkin and Richard Sennett.

References