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The Disenchantment of the World and the Crisis of Sociology How the Queen of the Sciences Lost Her Throne

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The fate of an epoch which has eaten of the tree of knowledge is that it must know that we cannot learn the meaning of the world from the results of its analysis (Max Weber)

1. Introduction

Max Weber's theory of the disenchantment of the world may be one of the best known classical sociological theories, it is also one of the most poorly understood ones, even among professional sociologists. More often than not it has been interpreted as a theory of religion becoming increasingly displaced by science, which is ironically precisely the theory that Weber critiques. For his argument is rather that science cannot replace religion, because unlike the latter it cannot legitimately proclaim the 'real' meaning of the world and its manifestations (e.g., Koshul, 2005). Disenchantment in effect undermines the authority of religion and science alike, which is why it is not without irony that Weber's methodological writings have often been

disconnected from his writings about disenchantment in the religious realm (see, e.g., Bendix, 1960: xlviii).

Weber's theory of disenchantment does hence not necessarily direct the sociological gaze towards the religious realm. Indeed, to see the process of disenchantment in action, sociologists do not even need to look beyond the boundaries of their own discipline. For half a century ago the process of disenchantment plunged sociology itself into a crisis that it has not been able to resolve until the present day. Central to this crisis was, and hence still is, a controversy about whether or not it is possible to solidly and reliably ground meaning beyond the human imagination. Those who deny this, and their numbers have waxed since the 1960s, hold that meaning can only be humanly 'made' and not scientifically 'discovered'.

The discipline that Auguste Comte, the godfather of positivism, had once dubbed 'the queen of the sciences', has in effect lost much of its former status of scientificity and epistemic authority since the 1960s. In what follows, I first discuss how according to Weber the disenchantment of the world does not only harm the authority of religion, but that of science, too. I then demonstrate that this is precisely what has happened to sociology since the 1960s.

2. Max Weber and the Disenchantment of the World

2.1. Introduction

The standard interpretation of Weber's theory of the disenchantment of the world distinguishes two interrelated shifts. On the one hand it refers to an erosion of belief in supernatural powers, so that magic, myth and mystery lose their plausibility and religion loses its former social significance. On the other hand, it refers to the increased role of science and knowledge in the modern world and of the technology that can be based on it. This interpretation basically follows the logic outlined in 'Science as a Vocation': "The disenchantment of the world (...) means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can,

in principle, master all things by calculation” (1948 [1919]: 139). Scientific knowledge about causal chains between empirical phenomena, Weber here suggests, can be applied in an instrumental fashion and the technology that results from this constitutes a powerful alternative for magical practices: “One need no longer have recourse to magical means to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculation perform the service” (p. 139).

These two shifts combined do however not constitute a displacement of religion by science, but of magic by scientifically-informed technology. For as the motto above this chapter testifies, Weber is quite explicit about the fact that science, unlike religion cannot legitimately proclaim the ‘real’ meaning of the world and its manifestations. In his understanding, then, it is vital to distinguish magic from religion. Whereas religion points out how to attain salvation from suffering, legislating what believers should do and abstain from, so what is ‘good’ and what is ‘bad’, magic does not address such metaphysical issues of meaning. It rather constitutes a type of instrumental action, aimed at solving practical everyday problems that are typically situated at the boundary of nature and society (e.g., cases of illness, infertility, crop failures, natural disasters). The implication of this distinction between religion and magic is that while magic can be replaced and superseded by science, more specially by the technologies to which it gives rise, there is no way that science can replace religion.

Nonetheless, under the influence of Enlightenment thought the notion of a displacement of religion by science has become central to the modern self-image and the positivist tradition in sociology. According to this understanding ‘they’, the ‘savages’, the ‘pre-moderns’, believed in all sorts of supernatural entities that do not ‘really’ exist. ‘We’, ‘civilized moderns’, on the other hand, are no longer superstitious believers but embrace a rational scientific outlook that no longer takes supernatural entities, miracles, myth and magic seriously. This can most clearly be seen from Comte’s classical positivism, according to which societies develop from a ‘theological’ to a ‘positive’/‘scientific’ stage with an intermediary ‘metaphysical’ stage in between. In such a positivist narrative, humanity increasingly liberates itself

from religion, tradition, and belief, all conceived as sources of ignorance, tutelage and irrationality. Such a theory of modernization should hence not be confused with Weber's theory of the disenchantment of the world.

2.2. Disenchantment and Religion

It is indeed telling that Weber does not even identify the origins of the process of disenchantment with the rise of modern science. It is rather the other way around: processes of disenchantment in the religious realm have set the stage for the rise of modern science in the age of the Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. More specifically, Weber situates the initial beginnings of the disenchantment of the world in the rise of Judaism in what we now call the Middle East. Then and there, one single God rose to power, more or less by chance, i.e., due to incessant wars with other tribes in the area. This single remaining God, Jahweh, was conceived as the person-like creator of the universe, and in effect seen as preceding the latter rather than being immanently present in it. Jahweh was hence construed as being radically transcendent and residing in a world of his own, a radical dualism which precluded the possibility of his magical coercion and manipulation (see about this: Berger, 1967: 105-125).

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, initially a reform movement within the Catholic church, radicalized this historically unique anti-magical Judaic monotheism. Aimed at purging religion of magic and belief in immanently present supernatural spirits, forces and powers, Protestantism further deepened the dualist distinction between the human and the divine worlds, introduced by ancient Judaism long ago, but relativized and kept at bay by Catholicism for many long centuries. Precisely because of its rejection of the belief that the divine could be found within the world itself, rather than being radically divorced from it, Weber considered the Protestant Reformation a major second step in the unfolding historical drama of disenchantment: "That great historic process in the development of religion, the elimination of magic from the world which had begun with the old Hebrew prophets and (...) had repudiated all magical means to salvation

as superstition and sin, came here to its logical conclusion” (Weber, 1978: 105).

Whereas the sacred could according to protestants, especially the more orthodox and puritanical ones among them, not be found in the world itself, the latter became void of sacrality and meaning. Meaning could in effect no longer be found in the world, but only bestowed upon it by human beings, e.g., by devout protestants acting out God’s commandments. The Reformation hence not only made God more transcendent than he had ever been before, but in the process also robbed the world of its meaning. Transformed into a mere soulless and meaningless ‘thing’, the world could then be unscrupulously opened up for scientific analysis and technological intervention. The disenchantment of the world, in short, is not simply caused by the rise of modern science, but rooted in long-term processes of religious change that ultimately stimulated the rise of modern science which only after that took over as a major independent driver of disenchantment.

2.2. *Disenchantment and Science*

At this point Weber’s *Wissenschaftslehre* becomes important for his analysis of disenchantment. Addressing the question of whether and how science actually furthers the disenchantment of the world, Weber intertwines normative, logical and empirical analysis into a complex analysis that has often been misinterpreted. On the one hand, Weber points out that science does not necessarily disenchant the world, precisely because as religion’s alleged superior successor it constitutes an appealing tool for re-endowing the world with solidly grounded meaning. On the other hand, he firmly rejects such attempts to scientifically re-enchant the world as intellectually immature and illegitimate. Weber thus conceives of science as both the principal disenchanting force in the modern world and a powerful source of re-enchantment. On the one hand, he maintains that science reduces the world to a mere meaningless series of causal chains, while on the other hand being aware how often this disenchanted notion of science clashed with intellectual pretensions of being able to ‘objectively’ ascertain what

things 'really' or 'actually' mean – whether they are 'normal' or 'abnormal', 'good' or 'bad', 'beautiful' or 'ugly'.

Science is for Weber hence as much the great 'disenchanter' as the great 're-enchanter' of the modern age. He himself firmly pleads for the former, disenchanting, variety of science, which for him hence constitutes more of a normative ideal than a representation of academic reality. He ridicules "big children (...) found in the natural sciences" who still believe "that the findings of astronomy, biology, physics, or chemistry could teach us anything about the meaning of the world" (Weber, 1948 [1919]: 142) and he chastises the so-called *Kathedersozialisten* in the social sciences, socialist university professors who mixed up social-scientific analysis and socialist politics. Paradoxically and ironically, though ultimately inevitably, then, Weber's desire to salvage social science from moralistic and normative discourse forces drove himself into a moralistic position. For his analysis is basically informed by a debatable and morally charged binary distinction between what one may call 'real' science and 'fake' science (obviously not labels Weber uses himself). 'Real' science in Weber's understanding is science that disenchants the world by critiquing and deconstructing misguided notions of 'true' meaning; 'fake' science is science that re-enchants the world by means of pretensions of scientifically informed, 'objective' and 'true' meaning.

It is important to underscore that this distinction between 'real' and 'fake' science should not be confused with a moral rejection of ('irrational') ideas that cannot be proven true in favor of ('rational') scientific insights. Rather to the contrary: for Weber the confinement of 'real' science to strictly logical and empirical analysis of how the world 'is', is first of all a way to deny science's superiority over morality. For him, science on the one hand and religion and morality on the other are simply incommensurable in the sense that they are radically different and cannot be reduced to each other, so that they are ultimately equally legitimate. Weber's position on this issue hence differs sharply from the positivist position that regards ideas that cannot be proven true (like religious beliefs or utopian political ideals) as inferior to scientific knowledge. For Weber, it is not so much ideas that

cannot be proven true that are rejected as inferior, but rather normative ideas that falsely wear the cloak of science.

This notion that one neither draw moral lessons about how the world 'ought to be' from scientific knowledge about how it actually 'is', nor the other way around, informs Weber's well-known ethical imperative of value neutrality. The latter maintains that there is no scientifically (logically, empirically) justifiable path from research findings to their moral evaluation, nor the other way around. Whether states of affairs uncovered by a scientific study are 'good' or 'bad' from a moral point of view, whether they need to be accepted, applauded, cherished, combatted or demolished, is for Weber certainly not an insignificant issue (indeed, to the contrary), but it is an issue that cannot be decided on intellectual (empirical, logical) grounds.

The complexity of Weber's plea to keep 'ought' separate from 'is' resides in the fact that it is informed by the fact that social-scientific research inevitably mixes up facts and values. This is because most researchers consider most of what can potentially be known as either irrelevant or uninteresting, so that the research problem that a researcher chooses to address can never be taken for granted. This is why Weber understands the conduct of research as a particular variety of meaningful action that can be opened up for 'verstehen' by scrutinizing the value-derived motives of researchers. This leads him to focus on the very first step in the research process, a step that precedes the narrowly defined realm of what we nowadays call 'methodology': that of the selection of a research problem by a researcher that as such precedes data collection and data analysis. Weber's point is that in making this selection researchers inevitably rely on values and that there is nothing wrong with that, because it is the only way to arrive at knowledge that is considered worthwhile.

For Weber, there is however something seriously wrong with researchers denying the value-laden normativity of this selection process. This is because such a denial results in the false claim that one's research findings constitute an 'objective' representation of social reality as it 'really' is, i.e., that one's findings are binding to everyone. This is another way of saying that Weber's notion of 'truth' is more modest than its positivist

counterpart. 'Truth' for Weber cannot refer to objective representation, because it inevitably entails subjective selection. The distinction can be clarified by distinguishing between a positivist 'Truth, capital T' (i.e., an objective representation of social reality that is as such binding to everyone) and a Weberian 'truth, lowercase t' (i.e., a representation of social reality that is morally selective and hence one-sided, yet empirically informed).

Despite the logical link between the factual inevitability of 'value relatedness' (*Wertbeziehung*) and the ethical demand for 'value neutrality' (*Wertungsfreiheit*) on the part of researchers, sociology textbooks typically foreground the former, usually in sections aimed at convincing the reader that sociology constitutes a real science ("sociology is a science because it is about facts and not about moral evaluations"). 'Value relatedness' (*Wertbeziehung*) on the other hand ("facts do not represent reality as it 'really' is and hence do not speak for themselves either") is typically treated only stepmotherly, arguably because it is more difficult to reconcile with positivist understandings of sociology.

For Weber, to summarize the foregoing, the notion that intellectual representations of social reality can represent reality as it 'really' is, is untenable. This is so because research is inevitably informed by intellectually arbitrary values that determine the type of data to be collected and analyzed. Denying the one-sidedness and partiality of intellectual representations of social reality by presenting them as 'reality as it really is', and hence as binding to everyone, thus comes down to an abuse of science to legislate meaning and to re-enchant the world.

Weber in effect argues that social-scientific claims about the world consist of two different layers, dimensions or aspects, that need to be carefully distinguished. The first is an empirical one ('the facts') and the second a moral one (the viewpoint that declares these rather than other facts to be important and meaningful). While the empirical dimension is open to scientific critique, because it is about whether – given the selected one-sided point of view – the researcher has her facts straight, i.e., has not made methodological mistakes, debate about the moral dimension cannot be scientific, because the selected point of view cannot be justified or critiqued

on scientific grounds. The latter can only be the target of moral (political, religious...) critiques that are ultimately merely a matter of (moral) taste. It was precisely the increased awareness of the presence and moral and political consequences of such intellectually arbitrary moral underbellies that plunged sociology into a crisis in the 1960s.

3. The Crisis of Sociology

3.2. Introduction

In the midst of World War II, long before he firmly established himself as one of sociology's principal critics from within (Mills, 1959), C. Wright Mills (1943) published an article in the flagship journal *American Journal of Sociology* that foreshadowed the intellectual turmoil that would break out in the 1960s. His article explores the social circumstances that sociologists tend to identify as 'social problems' and infers the "type of social person who (...) is evaluated as 'adjusted'" in the writings of these "social pathologists", whose professional ideology he studies (Mills, 1943: 180). His analysis brings him to the conclusion that "the ideally adjusted man of the social pathologists is 'socialized'", more specifically understood as "the opposite of 'selfish'". "The adjusted man conforms to middle-class morality and motives and 'participates' in the gradual progress of respectable institutions", he observes, to conclude that "The less abstract the traits and fulfilled 'needs' of 'the adjusted man' are, the more they gravitate toward the norms of independent middle-class persons verbally living out Protestant ideals in the small towns of America" (1943: 180).

Mills' abundant use of quotation marks is telling. What he aims to bring across is the elementary fact that claims about '(un)adjustedness' are inevitably informed by an implicit, unacknowledged and unquestioned norm that is far from 'neutral', 'objective' and 'strictly scientifically informed'. '(Un)adjustedness', he elaborates, is always relative to a set of norms, in this case those of mainstream White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) New England culture. Sociological claims about 'social problems', 'social

pathology' and 'adjustedness', in short, are not neutral scientific observations, but basically morally charged claims about good and evil, i.e., about what 'ought to be' rather than about what actually 'is'.

Mills hence identifies two levels of analysis that need to be carefully distinguished from each other. The first is explicit and empirical: it pertains to factual social circumstances. The second is implicit and moral: it endows these factual social circumstances with meaning by selecting them as significant and worthy of attention and by morally coding them as either 'good' or 'bad'. This second, moral level of sociological analysis hence explains what the facts at stake actually 'mean'. Mills here echoes Weber's position about the role of 'value-relatedness' in sociological research. For according to Weber, too, sociological claims about social reality are rooted in value positions that cannot be 'scientifically proven' to be 'preferable to' or 'better than' other possible value positions. Nonetheless, a value positions bring only particular types of facts into focus as 'relevant', while simultaneously maneuvering others out of sight.

Mills' analysis foreshadows the 'crisis of sociology' that would break out in the 1960s. The heart of the matter was that by then many sociologists started doubting whether their discipline was as 'really' scientific as it had traditionally been taken to be – whether at a closer and more critical look sociologists could really ascertain on strictly intellectual grounds what things 'really', 'actually', or 'objectively' meant. Sociological positivism in effect came under fire, with critics aiming to disenchant sociology by relativizing the epistemological status with which positivism had endowed it.

3.3. *Two Presidential Addresses*

Some of those who pointed out the sheer impossibility of a strictly neutral, objective and impartial analysis of social life were sociologists with firm reputations who were very much part of the sociological establishment. Perhaps most influential were articles by Alvin Gouldner (1962) and Howard Becker (1967), based on their respective presidential addresses at annual meetings of the *Society for the Study of Social Problems*. The fact that these

voices came from within the sociological establishment itself may indeed explain why they became as influential as they did.

In an article with a subtitle that leaves little to the intellectual imagination ('The Myth of a Value-Free Sociology') Gouldner portrays established sociological beliefs about value-free sociology as not much more than a self-serving "group myth" (p. 199), an ideology that serves personal and institutional professional interests and transforms critical intellectuals into docile professionals (p. 206-207). The subtlety of Weber's analysis of the complex relationship between values and science, Gouldner maintains, has in the process degenerated into "a hollow catechism, a password, and a good excuse for no longer thinking seriously, (...) the trivial token of professional respectability, the caste mark of the decorous, (...) the gentleman's promise that boats will not be rocked" (p. 201). Such moral and intellectual complacency, Gouldner observes, differs markedly from Weber's account of the issue, which aimed to acknowledge the possibility and significance of science and rationality without sacrificing the autonomy of human moral intuitions. Weber's aim was after all to protect both realms from succumbing to each other, to "adjudicate the tensions between (...) reason and faith, between knowledge and feeling, between classicism and romanticism, between the head and the heart" (p. 212). Indeed, Gouldner observes with Weber, if we raise the question of how sociology is actually made ("really made rather than as publicly reported", p. 212), the role of the values of the sociologist in steering the process cannot and should not be denied: "To do otherwise is to usher in an era of spiritless technicians (...) who will be useful only because they can be used" (p. 212).

A few years later, in his own presidential address for the same *Society for the Study of Social Problems*, 'Whose Side Are We On?', Becker picks up the same issue and agrees with Gouldner on the key issues. There is no way that sociology can be strictly neutral or objective: "(...) it is not possible and, therefore, (...) the question is not whether we should take sides, since we inevitably will, but rather whose side we are on" (Becker, 1967: 239). This is so, because no such thing exists as what postmodernists later on would come to call a 'God's eye view' or a 'view from nowhere': "We must always

look at the matter from someone's point of view" (p. 245). While sociological research is hence always and inevitably one-sided and partial, Becker argues, the charge of political bias is not made indiscriminately. It is most likely to occur in situations where the researcher studies a situation from the point of view of a subordinate group. This is because in these instances the sociologist fails to take for granted what Becker dubs the 'hierarchy of credibility', a belief system that defines the points of view of subordinate groups (laymen rather than professionals, students rather than professors, patients rather than doctors) as less legitimate, less adequate and less informed than those of powerful superordinate groups: "As sociologists we provoke the charge of bias, in ourselves and others, by refusing to give credence and deference to an established status order, in which knowledge of truth and the right to be heard are not equally distributed" (p. 241-242). Although there are no compelling intellectual grounds to adopt the perspective favored by powerful social groups, then, "The sociologist who favors officialdom will be spared the accusation of bias" (p. 243).

Becker's point is basically identical to Weber's, Mills', and Gouldner's: sociology cannot be a strictly neutral or objective endeavor, because intellectually arbitrary values and sympathies do inevitably steer the research process so as to make research one-sided and biased. None of these sociologists, then, believes that sociology can unearth the 'real' meaning of a situation to subsequently use that insight to determine the adequacy of the competing claims and perspectives of the participants in social life. As postmodern sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1987) would put it twenty years later on: the sociologist cannot play the role of the 'legislator' who legislates 'true' and universally binding meaning, but only that of the 'interpreter', who can show what the world looks like from the perspectives of others.

The intellectual climate of the 1960s did not just bring works to the center of sociological attention that explicitly critiqued sociological positivism. Works that indirectly reinforced the intellectual discontents about positivism were equally favorably received and had a similarly huge impact. One example was Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social*

Construction of Reality (1966), which argues that society is ultimately rooted in nothing 'deeper' or 'more fundamental' than people's shared cultural understandings. Another example is Thomas Kuhn's equally influential *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* (1970), in which he applied a similar type of argument to science itself. The book popularized the notion that taken-for-granted and hardly empirically testable 'paradigms', sets of implicit and general assumptions about the world, play a major role in steering empirical research and in explaining what research findings actually mean. Kuhn's book moreover provided an understanding of scientific change in terms of 'scientific revolutions' that entailed paradigmatic shifts that were only indirectly informed by empirical research findings. Indeed, many a sociologist back in the 1960s interpreted the state of the discipline in precisely these terms, i.e., as an outbreak of a 'scientific revolution' that aimed to replace the positivist paradigm by one that relativized sociology's epistemic authority (e.g., Friedrichs, 1970).

3.4. *Discontents about Positivist Sociology*

Sociological attempts at disenchanting sociology by critiquing and demolishing positivism plunged the discipline into a crisis that had already been broken out by the time Alvin Gouldner announced it in the book to which it owes its name, i.e., *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1970). In his attempt to explain the intellectual conflicts in 1960s sociology, Gouldner follows the same logic as Weber and Mills before him, framing the issue in terms of a theory's 'infrastructure' or 'sub-theory': the metaphysical assumptions and sentiments that can according to Gouldner be found in the underbellies of all sociological theories. Much like Kuhn's (1970) paradigms the latter are empirically untestable. Examples would be beliefs about whether change is more or less normal than stability, whether society consists of an arena of competing groups or rather constitutes a more or less ordered system, whether society is basically a set of collectively shared definitions of the situation or rather consists of relationships of power and dependence between social groups.

While notions like these cannot be tested empirically, they do play a decisive role in the selection of research problems and in the acceptance and rejection of theories, Gouldner holds. For decisions about the latter, he maintains, are not simply determined by the (in)congruence between the tested theory and the empirical findings, but rather by the (in)congruence between the metaphysical assumptions that inform the tested theory and the metaphysical assumptions that the theory's evaluator embraces. Gouldner here hence transforms the matter of 'truth' from a metaphysical to a pragmatic issue: accepting or rejecting sociological theories is not simply an issue of weighing the empirical evidence, but rather of felt affinities with the underlying infrastructure. Much like Weber and Mills before him, then, Gouldner directs the sociological gaze towards what cannot be empirically tested and lies hidden underneath, i.e., the worldview that endows research findings with significance and meaning. "The 'truth' of a theory", as he put it in a later work (Gouldner, 1973a: 427), "does not boil down to its reliability but also involves the nature of its selective perspective on the world".

Gouldner uses this theory to explain the intellectual discontents in sociology, especially among its junior members. He attributes their discontents to the new spirit of the times, which he felt had become increasingly incompatible with the up until then dominant theoretical infrastructure of structural functionalism. The functionalist emphasis on order, unity and evolutionary change, Gouldner holds, had grown drastically out of tune with the new spirit of the times, carried by a young generation that demanded more freedom, more democracy, and more room for self-expression – less 'system' in short. It is indeed no coincidence that in counter-cultural circles back then 'The System' was considered the arch enemy and the root of all problems (Houtman et al., 2011: 1-24; Roeland et al., 2012).

According to Gouldner this incongruence between the newly emerged political climate and the theoretical infrastructure of the old theories constitutes the principal cause of the intellectual malaise of the 1960s. This also explains the directions of the intellectual responses to the crisis. These responses consisted on the one hand of an increased interest in conflict

theories and on the other hand of a shift towards non-positivist approaches that foregrounded agency, meaning and (inter)subjectivity. In a later work Gouldner (1973b) discusses the latter shift as one from a “Classicist” to a “Romanticist” sociological style. The Classicist style entails “the Objectivistic modernism of the Enlightenment” which aims to “free reason from superstition” (p. 90) and to disclose or discover “abstracted universals” (p. 96), i.e., fundamental underlying principles that explain the workings of the social world. The Romanticist style, on the other hand, foregrounds the multifarious products of the human cultural imagination, understanding “man (...) not merely as a creature that can discover the world, but also as one who can create new meanings and values, and can thus change himself and fundamentally transform his world, rather than unearth, recover, or ‘mirror’ an essentially unchanging world order” (p. 88).

Social reality, this Romanticist style of sociology postulates, needs to be understood as the outcome of cultural processes of meaning making by the participants in social life themselves (see also De la Fuente, 2007). This Romanticism, characterized by the notion that meaning can never be any more ‘real’ or ‘grounded’ than what human beings make of it, has since the 1960s increasingly substituted the positivist pretension of being able to unearth the ‘real’ and ‘objective’ meaning of social phenomena. This then, was increasingly singled out as the proper object of sociology: not a social reality that is allegedly ‘more fundamental’ than culture and meaning, but humanly constructed meaning and culture itself.

4. Sociological Rejections of Positivism and Their Directions

4.2. Sociology after Positivism

Two ideal-typical responses to intellectual discontents about sociological positivism can be distinguished. They are both still around today and have indeed both gained popularity since the 1960s, even though they have obviously not been able to displace (neo-)positivism. They both reject the positivist pretension of being able to discover sociological knowledge about a

‘more fundamental’ social reality – knowledge that is held to be superior to lay understandings and that can in effect be deployed to scrutinize the degree to which the latter are rational or misinformed. I call these two sociological dismissals of positivism ‘critical sociology’ and ‘cultural sociology’. While they have a rejection of sociological positivism in common and aim for a disenchantment of sociology, there are also marked differences between the two, as we will see.

Needless to say, my aim in this chapter is not to defend one or the other alternative for positivism, or even to critique classicist-positivist sociology. My aim is nothing more or less than demonstrating how the disenchantment of the world has also played out within sociology itself and has harmed its scientific authority, more specifically the credibility of its pretension of being able to ‘discover’ on strictly scientific grounds what social phenomena ‘really’ mean.

4.2. Critical Sociology

The first response to the intellectual malaise of the 1960s, critical sociology, bluntly acknowledges that sociology cannot be objective and it does not care much about that either. With this label I refer not only to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (e.g., Horkheimer & Adorno, 1979 [1944]; Marcuse, 1964; see for overviews: Bottomore, 1984; Jay, 1973), but also to other strains of sociology that simultaneously critique actually existing society and a sociology that endows the latter with legitimacy and staying power. As such, the problem of positivism as understood by critical theory is not so much that sociology cannot be neutral or objective, but rather that sociologists have traditionally upheld this false illusion. In the eyes of critical sociologists positivist sociology entails a concealed moral politics that falsely and insincerely masquerades as science. The solution to that problem is in effect understood as laying of the false cloak of neutral and objective science, being honest and open about one’s political engagements and affinities, and taking sides with marginalized minority groups (typically defined in terms of class, gender, race, sexuality, or whatever).

Critical sociology as such sets itself apart from other types of sociology by means of its doubly critical stance towards both the societal *status quo* and a positivist sociology that endows the latter with legitimacy. It favors a Marxian-like unity of theory and practice, which entails the ambition to simultaneously study society and change it for the better. It in effect does not end the entanglement of science and politics that it accuses positivist sociology of. Its point is rather that such an entanglement is inevitable and cannot be avoided, so that engaging in politics and moralizing about society under the false cloak of 'objective' and 'neutral' science is insincere and dishonest. Besides being open and explicit about its political engagements critical sociology opts for a substantially different type of politics. The aim is not to protect, legitimize and naturalize the *status quo* with all the injustices it entails, but rather to take sides with subordinate and victimized groups.

As to critical sociology's critical stance towards sociology, it aims to expose hidden essentialist assumptions in research as creating or maintaining power and privilege and in effect consolidating the subordinate and deviant statuses of minority groups. This on the one hand entails a taste for what postmodernists would later on come to call 'deconstruction', i.e., the exposition of the hidden morally loaded binaries that underlie sociological knowledge claims. On the other hand it emphasizes the performativity of the resulting sociological knowledge, i.e., the real-world consequences of these underlying binaries that are not as 'neutral' and 'objective' as they pretend to be. An example would be Judith Butler's (1990) work about gender and performativity, which analyzes gender as a simulacrum in the sense of Baudrillard (1976), 'a copy without an original'. Cultural differences between men and women are here understood as not somehow rooted in a realm more fundamental than the human imagination. They are instead understood as 'performed' on the basis of cultural notions of what it means to be 'a man' or 'a woman' – notions that sociologists can as such not take for granted. For suggesting that cultural differences between men and women entail more than outcomes of the cultural imagination would make sociologists complicit in lending undeserved and harmful credibility to the notion that such differences are actually 'natural'.

In this understanding, then, positivist sociology does not simply study the world and mirror it in its truth claims, but in doing so also legitimizes and shapes it, including all of its prejudices, stereotypes and injustices.

The critical stance towards the societal *status quo* in these circles is informed by utopian non-existing societies that have done away with actually existing injustices. So that which does not exist here becomes ultimately more important than what does, which is precisely why this type of sociology is profoundly Romanticist in Gouldner's terms: the cultural imagination takes precedence. The work of Steven Seidman (1994), postmodern social theorist and gay activist alike, constitutes a case in point. Echoing Mills and Gouldner, he argues that sociological claims about social life are inevitably informed by morally charged narratives about society. He differs from the typical non-critical sociologist in that he does not construe this as a threat to sociology's scientificity. Rather to the contrary: according to Seidman this has been the case since the discipline's classical beginnings, and more than that: it constitutes the most valuable thing sociology has to offer. If we would expel moral narratives from sociology, he maintains, there would be nothing worthwhile left. For that reason, he feels, sociologists should give up "the false promise of science to achieve objective and universal knowledge" in favor of "our role as storytellers or social critics" (1994: 3).

The value of sociology according to Seidman hence lies not so much in establishing empirical observations about society, but rather in allowing all sorts of groups to narrate their moral stories about society, informed as they are by their own particular experiences. Again, there is a continuity here with Weber's *Wissenschaftslehre* and with Gouldner's ideas about sub-theory and theoretical infrastructure, and with Becker's notion that sociological research cannot help but being informed by a one-sided point of view that has major consequences for the reception of the research in question. For what according to Seidman matters more than methodology, facts and proof is the morality that lies underneath and that cannot be defended on strictly scientific grounds.

Seidman's emphasis on the centrality of moral story telling as what sociology is (and always has been) about dissolves positivist hierarchical distinctions like those between 'truth' and 'belief', 'knowledge' and 'culture', 'expert sociologist' and 'layperson'. Laypersons as much as experts are here understood as sociologists, simply because there are no good reasons to reserve the right to tell moral stories about society to professional sociologists. Seidman especially understands so-called 'new social movements' like the women's movement, the gay and lesbian movement, and the black lives matter movement as "new subjects of knowledge" that produce "new knowledges" that critique "the dominant knowledges (...) as reflecting the standpoint and interests of White Europeans, men, and heterosexuals" (Seidman 1994: 235).

The critical-sociological notion that sociological knowledge cannot help but be political and performative constitutes a major break with positivist sociology. It aims to disenchant sociology by doing away with the pretension of being able to 'objectively' and 'neutrally' represent social reality, i.e., to 'demonstrate' what social conditions 'really' mean. No such thing as 'true' meaning exists in this understanding: there is nothing more fundamental than the contrasting understandings of truth of prevailing movements, groups and actors.

4.3. Cultural Sociology

The second response to the crisis of sociology aimed for the discipline's disenchantment in a different way than by openly admitting that what is inevitably political is actually political rather than scientific, and being similarly open about one's political sympathies, engagements and aims. Cultural sociology does so by re-focusing the sociological gaze upon attributions of meaning by the participants in social life while discarding the basically political issue of whether or not the latter are rational, reasonable, true, morally reprehensible, etcetera. The cultural understandings of social groups are here hence transformed into the 'proper' object of a sociology that rejects the notion that sociology can unearth anything 'deeper' or 'more fundamental' than this.

It is hardly coincidental that the cultural turn in sociology happened first of all as a critique of the awkward positivist understandings of social problems and deviant behavior. It is not coincidental either that symbolic interactionists who studied social life and sociological research as processes of attributing meaning to the world were the first to propose an alternative approach. Howard Becker, already discussed above, is one influential example. Herbert Blumer (1971: 298), who underscored that “social problems are fundamentally products of a process of collective definition instead of existing independently as a set of objective social arrangements with an intrinsic makeup” is another (Blumer, 1971: 298). Their critiques of objectivist notions of ‘social problems’ and ‘deviant behavior’ were soon elaborated by others, most notably Spector and Kitsuse (1977), who in their book *Constructing Social Problems* (1977) provided not only a well-informed critique of the positivist approach to social problems, but also a cultural-sociological alternative.

Spector and Kitsuse (1977) explain the problems of the conventional positivist approach by means of a critical interrogation of Robert Merton’s suggestion that members’ definitions of social problems do not necessarily coincide with the definition by the professional sociologist. Indeed, besides “manifest social problems”, “objective social conditions identified by problem definers as at odds with social values”, Merton (1971: 806) also distinguishes “latent” ones, “conditions also at odds with values current in society, but (...) not generally recognized as being so”. As long as laypersons and sociologists agree that a social phenomenon is either a (“manifest”) social problem or not (“normal social condition”), there are no big difficulties. Problems do emerge, however, if professional sociologists and the participants in social life disagree, because in Merton’s understanding then “the sociologists’ definition, being based on objective evidence, takes precedence” (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977: 36). Merton after all uses the notion of “latent” social problems to refer to instances where the professional sociologist identifies a social problem, while the participants in social life do not. In this case a (“latent”) social problem is nonetheless held to exist. The same goes for the alternative incongruent combination of a “spurious” social

problem: participants in social life discern a social problem, but professional sociologists know better.

The positivist approach to social problems hawked by Merton, in short, privileges scientific expertise and subordinates lay understandings. It does so by conceiving of “spurious” and “latent” social problems as referring to situations of respectively “much ado about nothing” and “no ado about something” (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977: 36; italics removed; DH). The identification of social problems is here hence understood as a basically technical matter, to be successfully accomplished only by means of professional sociological expertise. Spector and Kitsuse point out that this completely sidetracks and neglects what sets ‘social problems’ apart from ‘normal social conditions’, i.e., the fact that only the former are defined as at odds with dearly held moral and political values. They therefore propose an alternative, constructivist sociological approach to social problems that addresses actors’ cultural definition processes aimed at coding social conditions as morally unacceptable, and hence as social problems. In this constructionist approach social problems are hence not so much identified with ‘social conditions’ but rather with “the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions” (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977: 75).

Spector and Kitsuse’s book quickly became “the touchstone for the new constructionist approach” (Best, 2002: 701) in the sociology of social problems. Students of social problems hence started to acknowledge the blunt fact that “(...) there is no necessary relationship between the measurable characteristics of any given condition or the people in it and a definition of that conditions as troublesome” (Loseke, 2003: 9). Indeed, unlike positivist accounts of social problems, the new constructivist approach is capable of explaining why phenomena that were social problems in the past (e.g., homosexuality) later on ceased to be treated as such, while the other way around phenomena that used to be accepted as mere (‘natural’, ‘inevitable’) facts of life later on came to be understood as social problems. Hitting misbehaving children as part of a strict upbringing, dismissing young working women as soon as they get married, and smoking

in public transport are three obvious examples. What has changed in these examples is not so much 'objective' social conditions, but rather the latter's cultural 'coding' as legitimate or not.

The constructionism hawked by Spector and Kitsuse has informed successful new research programs that no longer aim to portray particular social conditions as wrong, immoral or reprehensible, but to study which groups of citizens do or do not label these conditions as wrong, immoral or reprehensible for what reasons (e.g., Best, 1995). Such constructionist research effectively pushes sociology from its epistemological throne. For it denies that sociologists can apply technical means to arrive at professional knowledge that is radically different from, and superior to, lay understandings of the world – knowledge that can as such be used to critique and correct the latter by pointing out that they are either “much ado about nothing” or “no ado about something”.

Jeffrey Alexander and colleagues at Yale University have similarly argued for the need to sociologically foreground lay cultural understandings of the world. Dubbing their favored approach 'the strong program in cultural sociology', they critique traditional sociological treatments of culture (identified as 'sociology of culture') as conceiving of culture as a mere 'side issue'. In doing so, they dismiss the notion that cultural meaning itself may have meanings that somehow transcend the understandings of those concerned, and that professional sociologists can technically and objectively identify such 'meaning of meaning', or what cultural meaning 'really' means. Examples are portrayals of cultural meaning as “the wagging tail of social power, as resistance to hegemony, disguised governmentality, organizational isomorphism, cultural capital, or symbolic politics' (Alexander, 2010: 283). Moving away from such reductionism, these cultural sociologists aim to liberate the cultural factor from its subaltern status as a “soft', not really independent variable” and to discard the notion that “explanatory power lies in the study of the 'hard' variables of social structure, such that structured sets of meanings become superstructures and ideologies driven by these more 'real' and tangible social forces' (Alexander & Smith, 2003: 13).

For these Yale sociologists the classical work of Durkheim provides a major source of inspiration. This is obviously not the early, positivist Durkheim, as traditionally foregrounded in introductory sociological textbooks – the Durkheim of the division of labor (1964 [1893]), of social facts (1964 [1895]) and of suicide rates (1951 [1897]). It is rather the late cultural-sociological and anthropological Durkheim of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1965 [1912]), who understands societies, ‘primitive’ and modern alike, as given meaning by means of binary cultural distinctions between the sacred and the profane (both understood more generally than in the conventional, strictly religious sense). Other cultural sociologists, e.g., Colin Campbell in the United Kingdom (1987, 2007) and the author of this chapter (e.g., Houtman & Achterberg, 2016), rather seek their principal inspiration from Weber’s classical cultural sociology, which as in the case of Durkheim (1965 [1912]) coincides with his sociology of religion (Weber, 1963 [1922]).

5. Sociology Since the 1960s: Fragmentation and Dissolution

Critical sociologists who have turned to cultural studies and postmodernism understand their new trade as a *Sociology After the Crisis* (Lemert, 1995), a sociology that has dissolved traditional distinctions like those between ‘facts’ and ‘moral evaluations’ and between ‘science’ and ‘politics’. Many other sociologists meanwhile feel that the politicization all this entails heralds the end of the discipline as a legitimate scientific endeavor (e.g., Black, 2000; Cole, 2001). Under the telling title ‘The Promise of Positivism’ Jonathan Turner (1992) for instance defends the intellectual heritage of Auguste Comte against “the smug cynicism, relativism, and solipsism that has infected sociological theorizing these days” (ibid.: 156-7; see also Collins, 1992, for similar discontents), even though he is aware that his plea is “somewhat unfashionable these days” (ibid.: 156). Irving Louis Horowitz, equally pessimistic, recounts the decline of a scientific sociology under the dramatic title *The Decomposition of Sociology* (1993). As far as Horowitz is

concerned, “the new subjectivists” (ibid.: 49) – “ideologists masked as sociologists” (ibid.: 12) – are destroying scientific sociology with “the dogma of liberation sociology” (ibid.:12) as their guidebook. He does not believe that the tide can be turned anymore and fears that his book “will simply be one more last will and testament to the death of a tradition” (ibid.: 6).

Despite the harshness of Horowitz’s critique of the politicization of sociology, he certainly does not stand alone in his verdict. Indeed, issues of political engagement and detachment constitute major points of tension and disagreement between sociologists and cultural studies scholars. While sociologists find the latter’s political moralism intellectually awkward and feel that it detracts from the quality of social-scientific work, cultural studies scholars pride themselves on their political engagement and dismiss sociological ideals of detachment and neutrality as naïve and misinformed scientism (see, e.g., Inglis, 2007).

It is interesting to note how due to his focus on the politicization of sociology that he dislikes so much, Horowitz overlooks significant changes in mainstream quantitative sociology that entail a similar shift away from the notion that sociologists can ‘discover’ a ‘more fundamental’ social reality. For in these circles, too, the conviction that sociologists can discover fundamental social mechanisms that account for empirically established regularities has waned. The ambition to disenchant sociology, i.e., to purge it of metaphysical claims mistaken for ‘truth’ does hence not remain confined to critical and cultural sociology. More specifically, mainstream quantitative sociology features at least two telling changes that epitomize the same ambition. The first is the flight away from the notion that sociological research should aim for the systematic testing of theories and the second is the increased interest in biology – genes, hormones and brains – in these circles.

A first striking tendency is the reduction of sociology to mere statistics, which has steered the discipline away from ideals of theory testing. In his plea for ‘directed’ research, i.e., research aimed at testing theories, Merton still formulated these ideals back in the 1960s as follows: “The notion of directed research implies that (...) empirical inquiry is so

organized that if and when empirical uniformities are discovered, they have direct consequences for a theoretic system. In so far as the research is directed, the rationale of findings is set forth before the findings are obtained” (1968: 149-150). Although apparently overlooked by most sociologists, this practice that is so central to the road map of a positivist sociology appears to have become increasingly exceptional.¹ For increasing numbers of research articles appear to no longer aim at systematic theory testing, but rather to merely use theories as excuses for establishing relationships between variables. The resulting articles (ominous title: ‘Effects of A, B, and C on D’) do not test sociological theories, but address research questions of the type, ‘What are the effects of A, B and C on D?’ (conclusion: ‘Some of these variables have effects on D, others do not’).

Studies of this type hence no longer aim for insight into the tenability of sociological theories, but merely provide information about statistical relationships between variables. Now it would go too far to state that such information is completely trivial and irrelevant, but it is clear that it should not be mistaken for sociological knowledge. Indeed, half a century ago Merton (1968: 66) sharply distinguished between “sociological theory” and “an isolated proposition summarizing observed uniformities of relationships between two or more variables”. He does so, of course, because empirical regularities of this type – Merton (1968: 66) dubs them “empirical generalizations” – do not *answer* sociological questions, but just *raise* them. Just consider why later generations of sociologists have bestowed Durkheim’s analysis of egoistic suicide (1964 [1893]) with an exemplary status. This is not because Durkheim had ‘discovered’ that suicide rates were higher in Protestant areas than in Catholic ones, because this had already been observed by others. Durkheim’s analysis owes its exemplary status to the fact that he brought forward (and tested as well as he could) a new and explicitly sociological theory to account for this already established empirical regularity. Relationships between variables, in other words, are

¹ I deliberately write “appears to have”, because I have not conducted empirical research that supports this claim. Needless to say, such research can be conducted without much difficulty.

just data that call for sociological-theoretical interpretation and explanation, which is precisely why statistical explanation should not be confused with sociological explanation. What studies of the abovementioned type provide, in short, is not sociological-theoretical insight, but just data.

A second case in point that suggests disenchantment in quantitative mainstream sociology is the increased interest in biology – genes, hormones and brains – in mainstream quantitative sociology. For this interest also entails a shift away from the notion that sociologists can ‘discover’ a ‘deeper’ or ‘more fundamental’ social reality that can explain what observed empirical patterns ‘really mean’. The awkward notion of a more fundamental social reality is here however replaced by that of a more fundamental biological reality, conceived as more solid and more real than social reality, precisely because it is not social, but biological. Consider the book *Crisis in Sociology: The Need for Darwin* (Lopreato & Crippen, 1999), which argues that even classical sociologists like Marx, Durkheim and Spencer already identified the struggle for biological survival as central to social life. Later generations of sociologists, the authors argue, have however neglected this elementary insight, which has precluded the much-needed biological turn in sociology to extradite the discipline to postmodern relativism and politicization.

Despite the skepticism of Lopreato and Crippen, it is quite clear that the turn to biology is meanwhile well under way. For titles like *Social Stratification and Socioeconomic Inequality* may nowadays offer something very different from what sociologists back in the 1960s and 1970s could have imagined. The book consists of two volumes, *A Comparative Biosocial Analysis* (Ellis, 1993) and *Reproductive and Interpersonal Aspects of Dominance and Status* (Ellis, 1994). Typical chapter titles include ‘A Biosocial Theory of Social Stratification: An Alternative to Functional Theory and Conflict Theory’, ‘Social Stratification, Testosterone, and Male Sexuality’, and ‘The High and Mighty among Man and Beast: How Universal Is the Relationship between Height (or Body Size) and Social Status?’ Established journals such as *Social Forces* meanwhile publish articles with titles like ‘A Biosocial Model of Status in Face-to-Face Primate Groups’

(Mazur, 1985) and 'Marriage, Divorce, and Male Testosterone' (Mazur & Michalek, 1998). Even sociology of religion is not immune to the biological turn, as Rodney Stark (2002; Miller & Stark, 2002) claims that the lesser religiosity of men is not attributable to gender-specific cultural socialization, but to hormonal differences between the sexes.

Whereas sociologists have typically understood the disenchantment of the world as eroding firmly grounded religious meaning, it has also dethroned sociology, the erstwhile queen of the sciences. Just like the Protestant Reformation left the world without meaning, the turn away from positivism has robbed sociology of the capacity to discover the 'real' meaning of social life. Disenchantment has hence had the same outcome in both realms, i.e., an awareness that "the world's processes (...) simply 'are' and 'happen' but no longer signify anything" (Weber, 1978 [1921]: 506).

6. The End of Sociology?

Sociologists have never been able to satisfactorily solve the crisis of their discipline. Already in full swing when Gouldner (1970) announced it, it is nowadays in fact even deeper than ever before. Despite the occasional book that laments the sorry state of the discipline, the debates that raged fiercely in the 1960s and 1970s have meanwhile largely faded away. The current situation rather features a shared understanding that there is no way to resolve the intellectual crisis, simply because these 'other' sociologists, who do not fully understand what sociology is 'really' about, will not go away. The result is widespread resignation and intellectual apathy, epitomized by a tendency to flock together with like-minded others to celebrate the type of sociology one favors as 'the real thing'.

On the one hand we find, despite their differences, critical and cultural sociology, which both denounce the possibility of ascertaining 'the meaning of meaning' on strictly scientific grounds. On the other hand we find a neo-positivism that meanwhile similarly shies away from essentialist speculations about a social reality that is more fundamental than culture.

The fact that these two positions are nowadays deeply alienated from each other is not without irony. For despite their differences they both pursue the same aim, i.e., disenchanting sociology by wiping out metaphysical speculations about a 'more fundamental' social reality.

Yet even without open conflict the tensions and conflicts are clearly there and sociology appears to be slowly falling apart and dissolving. The various factions feel less affinity with those 'other' sociologists, who do not fully understand what sociology is 'really' about, than with colleagues in other fields or disciplines. Neo-positivists find it increasingly difficult to resist the temptations of biology, neuroscience, and the like, while the cultural studies are beckoning to constructivists, postmodernists and cultural sociologists. Once promising to bridge the gap between the sciences and the humanities – sociology as a 'third culture' (Lepenies, 1988) –, the discipline is hence falling apart alongside this very cleavage. The disenchantment of the world has clearly not only harmed religion, then, but sociology itself, too. Once proclaimed the proud queen of the sciences by Comte, the discipline may in the long run not even be able to survive.

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