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 full 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 since the 1960s in effect lost much of its former status of scienticity and epistemic authority. 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 instrumentally applied as technology, which 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 of 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 specifically 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 alike. 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' one 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, then further 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 deepened the dualist distinction between the human and the divine world, 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, the latter became void of sacrality and meaning. Meaning could in effect only bestowed upon it externally, e.g., by God, or by devout protestants acting out His 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.

2.3. *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 arguments 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 at scientifically re-enchanting 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, but on the other hand he is acutely aware how often this disenchanted notion of science clashes 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 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.

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. Indeed, for Weber 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 (such as 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 can neither draw moral lessons about how the world 'ought to be' from scientific knowledge about how it actually 'is', 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 full complexity of Weber's plea to keep 'ought' separate from 'is' resides in the fact that he simultaneously holds that values inevitably steer the research process. They do so by pointing out what is worth studying, i.e., by defining the social phenomena that are deemed relevant, pointing out which variables need to be included in the study. So for Weber, 'facts' are not simply 'found' or 'discovered', because even before that they have been defined as 'relevant' or 'significant' on the basis of values that are arbitrary from an intellectual point of view. This is why a set of research findings cannot be taken to be morally binding for all: those who do not accept the values that have given rise to them may well disagree that the obtained 'facts' are the only (or even most) relevant ones.

It is not too difficult, for instance, to demonstrate scientifically that condom use protects against HIV/AIDS, but it is quite another thing to conclude from this that people ought to use condoms. This is because there are also good reasons not to use condoms, e.g., because most men and women agree that sex without condoms provides more sexual pleasure; because (especially in non-western settings) women may not be in a position to insist on condom use if men define such as incompatible with prevailing norms of masculinity; etc. In other words, a desire to prevent contracting HIV/AIDS is not the only factor that affects condom use, so that banning these other factors from a study of condom use serve to make this study a

one-sided simplification of a more complex social reality. Those who do not accept the moral point of view that informs this simplification, i.e., that sexuality needs to be studied as a potential danger rather than as (also) a source of pleasure) cannot be morally expected to accept the study's apparent 'policy implications'. In other words: drawing 'policy implications' from a study is not a technical, strictly intellectual endeavor, but inevitably involves the imposition of values that cannot be defended on strictly scientific grounds.

To sum up, every study is informed by a value position that defines what exactly the research problem is (Weber calls this *value relatedness*), so that a study's findings cannot be taken to be morally binding for those who dismiss this very value position. This is why the step from 'is' to 'ought' cannot be taken on strictly intellectual grounds: doing so would entail the claim that what has been demonstrated does not only 'exist', but has also been shown to be 'good' or 'bad', perhaps so good or so bad that it justifies policy measures. This is the capstone of Weber's doctrine of *value neutrality*: researchers should stick to the facts and should not moralize about them. Weber's complex analysis of the relationship between science and values can hence be summarized by concluding that researchers should keep facts and values apart (*value neutrality*), precisely because facts are inevitably rooted in values (*value relatedness*).

Weber in effect understands the conduct of research as just another 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 selecting a research problem, which as such precedes data collection and data analysis. 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 who deny this value-laden 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. This can be clarified by distinguishing a positivist notion of 'Truth, capital T' (i.e., an objective representation of social reality that is as such binding for everyone) from a Weberian notion of 'truth, lowercase t' (i.e., a representation of social reality that is morally selective and hence one-sided, yet empirically valid).

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 latter, 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 do not reveal 'meaning' either") is typically treated only stepmotherly, arguably because it is more difficult to reconcile with positivist understandings of sociology. For Weber, 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 this one-sidedness and partiality by presenting an intellectual representation of social reality as 'social reality as it really is', and hence suggesting that it is binding to everyone, thus comes down to abuse of science for legislating meaning and re-enchanting 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 that provides them with meaning). While the empirical dimension is always 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 an increased awareness of the presence and consequences of such intellectually arbitrary values in sociological research that plunged the discipline into a crisis in the 1960s – a crisis that sparked intellectual attempts to disenchant sociology.

3. The Crisis of Sociology

3.1.   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 professional ideology of what he calls the "social pathologists", i.e., sociologists who study "social problems" in the hope of contributing to their solution. Mills (1943: 180) focuses his analysis on the types of circumstances these sociologists identify as either 'social problems' or 'normal' conditions and on the "type of social person who (…) is evaluated as 'adjusted'". This leads him to conclude that "the ideally adjusted man of the social pathologists is 'socialized'", 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, middle-class, 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., claims 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 analysis as such explains what the facts at stake actually 'mean' and hence echoes Weber's analysis of the role of 'value-relatedness' in sociological research: this type of meaning cannot be binding to all, because it is contingent on acceptance of the underlying value position.

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 'truly' scientific as most sociologists had traditionally taken it 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 epistemic status with which positivism had endowed it.

3.2. Two Presidential Addresses

Some of those who pointed out the sheer impossibility of a strictly neutral, objective and impartial analysis of social life 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, like Weber before him, Gouldner addresses the question of how sociology is actually made – "really made rather than as publicly reported" (p. 212) –, pointing out that the whole process is steered by values: "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, Howard Becker, in his own presidential address for the same *Society for the Study of Social Problems*, 'Whose Side Are We On?', takes up the same problem 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 reasons 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 to ultimately make research one-sided and biased. None of these sociologists, then, believes that sociology can unearth the 'real' meaning of a situation to subsequently determine the validity of the competing claims and perspectives of the participants in social life. As postmodern sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1987) would put it twenty years later: 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 Revolutions* (1962), 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. Many a sociologist back in the 1960s moreover read Kuhn's book as suggesting that fundamental scientific change required a 'scientific revolution' and interpreted the state of the discipline in precisely these terms, i.e., as a 'scientific revolution' in progress, aimed at replacing the positivist paradigm by one that relativized sociology's epistemic authority (e.g., Friedrichs, 1970).

3.3. 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). The book proposes an explanation for the intellectual conflicts in 1960s sociology by calling attention for the role played by theoretical 'infrastructures' or 'sub-theories', i.e., metaphysical assumptions and sentiments, in accepting or dismissing sociological theories. Much like Kuhn's (1962) 'paradigms' Gouldner understands these theoretical 'infrastructures' or 'sub-theories' as underlying every single sociological theory, yet being empirically untestable. Examples would be beliefs about whether change is less or more normal than stability, whether society consists of an arena of competing groups or rather constitutes a more or less ordered system, or whether society is basically a set of collectively shared meanings or rather consists of relationships of power and dependence between social groups.

Gouldner holds that 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. The latter, he maintains, is not simply determined by the correspondence between a theory and the empirical findings, but rather by the congruence or incongruence between the metaphysical assumptions that underlie a theory and the metaphysical assumptions embraced by those who evaluate its empirical validity. Gouldner here hence transforms the matter of 'truth' from a metaphysical into a pragmatic issue: accepting or rejecting sociological theories is not simply an issue of weighing the empirical evidence, but rather of felt affinities with these theories' underlying infrastructure. "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 in the 1960s, 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 virtually all problems, not least alienation and loss of freedom (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 foreground 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).

4. Sociological Rejections of Positivist Enchantment and Their Directions

The crisis of sociology has indeed sparked influential attempts at disenchanting the discipline by wiping out intellectual pretensions of being able to scientifically 'discover' what social reality is 'really' like and what things 'really' mean. Because providing a full overview is neither possible nor useful, I limit myself to three broad, ideal-typical intellectual movements in sociology that have all become increasingly popular and influential since the 1970s. I argue that while they are very different from each other, that indeed those who embrace one of them tend to be suspicious of (if not openly hostile to) the two others, they nonetheless have one thing in common: a marked ambition of retreating from the positivist notion that sociology can 'discover' scientifically what social reality is 'really' like and what things 'really' mean. I call these three movements respectively 'neo-positivist quantitative sociology', 'critical sociology' and 'cultural sociology'. My aim is not to defend or critique either of them, or even the type of

classicist-positivist sociology that they are trying to disenchant, but just to demonstrate how the disenchantment of the world has dissolved much of sociology's former epistemic authority, i.e., its pretension of being able to 'discover' on strictly scientific grounds what social phenomena 'really are' and 'really mean'.

4.1. Neo-positivist Quantitative Sociology
While the struggles against its positivist heritage have without doubt made sociology more diverse, many (perhaps most) contemporary sociologists (admirers, practitioners and critics alike) consider neo-positivist quantitative sociology as the discipline's new intellectual mainstream. This type of sociology has been constructed on the ruins of its functionalist-positivist predecessor, which had been critiqued for disguising moral discourse as science and precisely because of that sparked intellectual ambitions of disenchanting the discipline by purging it of the belief that sociologists can 'discover' fundamental, underlying social mechanisms that account for empirically established regularities. These ambitions have led to a flight away from ambitions of uncovering such fundamental social mechanisms and to a markedly increased interest in the explanatory potential of biology.

A first striking tendency is the reduction of sociology to not much more than the deployment of statistics to document relationships between variables. This has steered the discipline away from ideals of engaging in consecutive stages of theory (re)construction and theory testing, as Robert Merton had propagated before in his plea for 'directed' research: "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). This practice, which used to be central to the road map of functionalist-positivist sociology, appears to have become quite exceptional

nowadays.[1] For increasing numbers of research articles appear to merely use theories as excuses for establishing relationships between variables. The resulting articles address research questions of the type, 'What are the effects of A, B and C on D?' (ominous title: 'Effects of A, B, and C on D').

Empirical studies of this type no longer aim to attain insight into fundamental social mechanisms that can account for observed relationships between variables, but merely provide information about the latter's existence. Now it would obviously 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-theoretical knowledge about underlying social mechanisms. Indeed, Robert Merton (1968: 66) sharply distinguished between "sociological theory" on the one hand and "an isolated proposition summarizing observed uniformities of relationships between two or more variables" on the other. For such relationships, Merton (1968: 66) dubs them "empirical generalizations", do not so much *answer* sociological questions, but merely *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 mere data calling 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 offer, in short, is not sociological-theoretical explanation, but data that call for such explanation – data that invite theory construction and theory testing. The point is that relationships between variables appear to have become

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[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.

important in and of themselves rather than as means of assessing the validity of theories about more fundamental social mechanisms that may account for them. In other words, quantitative sociological research increasingly avoids the question of what observed patterns, regularities or correlations 'mean', i.e., what they tell us about the existence and operation of more fundamental, underlying social mechanisms. Relations between variables have hence become increasingly meaningless, which is precisely what the disenchantment of the world is all about.

A second case in point is the increased interest in biology – genes, hormones and brains – in mainstream quantitative sociology. This also indicates ambitions of disenchantment, because this also entails a shift away from ambitions of obtaining knowledge about a more fundamental social reality. In this case this is hence not a shift to the correlational surface, but to a biological reality that is taken to be more solid, real and fundamental than social life. Consider the book *Crisis in Sociology: The Need for Darwin* (Lopreato & Crippen, 1999), which argues that 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 neglected this elementary insight, which has precluded a much-needed biological turn in sociology. Despite their skepticism about this, precisely such a turn towards biology is meanwhile well under way.

Book 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.

In neo-positivist quantitative sociology, in short, the positivist notion that sociology can and should lay bare a social reality that is more fundamental than culture has lost much of its former traction.

4.2. Critical Sociology

A second influential response to the intellectual malaise of the 1960s, critical sociology, bluntly acknowledges that sociology cannot be objective and does not care about that either. With the label 'critical sociology', 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 postmodern sociology and large parts of the field of cultural studies that in countries like the UK is hard to distinguish from sociology (e.g., Inglis, 2007). What these strains of sociology all have in common is a doubly critical stance vis-à-vis both the societal *status quo* and a positivist sociology that endows the latter with legitimacy and staying power. They critique the injustices of actually existing society alongside sociology's dismal role in creating, naturalizing, and legitimating these injustices under the guise of strictly 'objective' and 'neutral' research.

Critical sociology favors a Marxian-like unity of theory and practice, which entails the ambition to simultaneously study society and change it for the better. It does in effect not end the entanglement of science and politics that it accuses positivist sociology of, but commits itself to a decidedly leftist and emancipatory politics. What needs to be avoided in this understanding is the protection, legitimation and naturalization of the *status quo* with all the injustices it entails, and what needs to be done is taking sides with marginalized, excluded and victimized groups. In doing so, critical sociology critiques the notion that sociology and politics can be separated as a myth that facilitates moralizing about society under the false cloak of 'objective'

and 'neutral' science (e.g., Seidman, 1994). To put an end to such dishonesty, critical sociologists argue, sociologists need to lay of the false cloak of neutral and objective science, be honest and open about their political engagements and commitments, and take sides with marginalized minority groups (typically defined in terms of class, gender, race, sexuality, or whatever).

Critical sociology aims to expose how essentialist assumptions lead sociologists to create, protect or legitimize structures of power and privilege and in effect consolidate the subordinate and deviant status of minority groups. This on the one hand entails a taste for what postmodernists call 'deconstruction', i.e., exposing the hidden and morally loaded binaries that underlie sociological knowledge claims. It on the other hand emphasizes the performative consequences of the resulting sociological knowledge claims, i.e., how they naturalize, maintain and legitimate the world's injustices and inequalities. Critical sociology thus maintains that positivist sociology does not so much study the world and mirror it in its truth claims, but rather legitimizes and shapes it, including all of its prejudices, stereotypes and injustices.

Sociological research that uncritically adopts hegemonic understandings of gender, to cite the most obvious example, does for instance not so much study social reality but rather performatively produces and affirms it. Representations of gender, cultural ideas about what it means to be a man ('masculinity') or woman ('femininity') are hence not understood as rooted in a realm that is more fundamental than the cultural imagination. In critical-sociological understanding gender cannot be more than a 'performance' that mimics 'a copy without an original', as Judith Butler (1990) puts it – a 'simulacrum' in the sense of Jean Baudrillard (1976). The essentialist assumption that masculinity and femininity are grounded more solidly and deeper than in the cultural imagination makes sociologists complicit in lending undeserved and harmful credibility to the notion that such differences are actually 'natural'. As Seidman puts it: "There is no reason to believe that a middle-class southern heterosexual Methodist woman will share a common experience or even common gender

interests with a northern working-class Jewish lesbian. It is equally naïve to assume that whatever gender commonalities they do share will override their divergent interests and values" (Seidman, 1991: 141-142)

The critical stance towards the societal *status quo* in these circles is basically informed by imagined, currently 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 and utopian: the cultural imagination here takes precedence over mapping social reality 'as it really is'. The work of Steven Seidman (1994), postmodern social theorist and authority in the field of gay and lesbian studies alike, constitutes a case in point. 'Moral story telling', Seidman maintains, has been sociology's principal mission and its most valuable contribution to society since its earliest classical beginnings. Rather than aiming for empirically valid claims about how society 'really' is, then, Seidman maintains that precisely that which is not 'scientific', but 'moral' and 'political' needs to be foregrounded to prevent sociology from losing its societal significance. Sociologists, he feels, should give up "the false promise of science to achieve objective and universal knowledge" in favor of "our role as storytellers or social critics" (Seidman, 1994: 3). The other way around, embarking on a quest for scienticity by expelling moral narrative from sociology threatens to leave the discipline without anything valuable to offer and as such likely heralds its bankruptcy.

4.3. Cultural Sociology

A third response to the crisis of sociology, cultural sociology, aims to disenchant the discipline in a different way, i.e., not by dismissing the distinction between science and politics as a modern myth, but by re-directing the sociological gaze toward attributions of meaning by the participants in social life themselves, while disregarding the issue of whether or not the latter are rational, reasonable, true, morally reprehensible, etcetera. As with 'critical sociology' above I conceive of 'cultural sociology' broadly, indeed more broadly than the work by Jeffrey Alexander and

colleagues at Yale University's *Center for Cultural Sociology (CCS)*. For it is especially these sociologists who have forcefully argued for the need to develop a Durkheimian 'cultural sociology' that sets itself apart from a positivist 'sociology of culture' that explains culture from an allegedly 'more fundamental' social reality. 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 like Durkheim's (1965 [1912]) largely coincides with his sociology of religion (Weber, 1963 [1922]). Even more influential, and here understood as central to cultural sociology, is the rise of constructivism (or constructionism) from the 1970s onwards. To explain how cultural sociology differs from mainstream quantitative sociology and critical sociology, I briefly elaborate on Yale cultural sociology and constructivism.

Dubbing their favored approach 'the strong program in cultural sociology', Alexander and colleagues critique traditional positivist treatments of culture (identified as 'sociology of culture') as construing it as basically a 'side issue' and as falsely pretending that professional sociologists can technically and objectively identify the 'real' or 'actual' meaning of empirically established cultural meaning. 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, the Yale 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 the 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 constructing meaning on the basis of binary cultural distinctions between the sacred and the profane (understood more generally than in the conventional, strictly religious sense). Cultural meaning is here hence defined as the 'proper' object of a cultural sociology that rejects the notion that sociology can unearth anything 'deeper' or 'more fundamental' than this.

The same logic is central to constructionism, which constituted one of the first and most visible manifestations of what later on came to be called the 'cultural turn in sociology' (Friedland & Mohr, 2004). It is hardly coincidental that this cultural turn happened first of all as a critique of positivist understandings of social problems and deviant behavior (e.g., Douglas & Waksler, 1982; Spector & Kitsuse, 1977). It is not coincidental either that symbolic interactionists who studied social life in terms of processes of attributing meaning to the world were the first to propose an alternative, more culturally sensitive approach. Howard Becker, already discussed above, is one influential example and another is 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". Their critiques of positivist accounts of 'social problems' and 'deviant behavior' were soon elaborated by others, most notably Spector and Kitsuse (1977), who in their book *Constructing Social Problems* provided not only a well-informed critique of the positivist approach to social problems, but also a cultural-sociological alternative (see also Douglas & Waksler, 1982).

Constructivists accuse the positivist approach to social problems hawked by Robert Merton (1971) as privileging scientific expertise and subordinating lay cultural 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). Identifying social problems is here hence understood as a basically technical matter that requires professional sociological expertise. Spector and Kitsuse point out that this 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 values. They therefore propose an alternative, constructivist sociological approach to social problems, central to which are the processes in which social actors 'code' 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 started acknowledging 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 (e.g, homophobia). Other examples would be beating children as part of a strict upbringing, firing working young women as soon as they get married, and smoking in public transport. What has changed in all these instances is not so much 'objective' social conditions, but rather the latter's cultural 'coding' as legitimate or not. These changes in cultural coding have since the 1980s come to occupy a central place in the study of social problems (e.g., Best, 1995).

5. Conclusion

Whereas sociologists have typically understood the disenchantment of the world as the erosion of religion, the process has also done much to push sociology from its epistemic throne. Just like the Protestant Reformation left the world without meaning, the sociological turn away from positivist speculations about a social reality more fundamental than empirically observable patterns has robbed the discipline of its capacity to discover the 'real' meaning of social life. Disenchantment has thus had the same outcome in religion and in sociology, i.e., an awareness that "the world's processes (...) simply 'are' and 'happen' but no longer signify anything" (Weber, 1978 [1921]: 506). For despite their obvious differences the three intellectual movements discussed above share a denial that sociology can produce knowledge about a 'more fundamental' social reality – knowledge that is superior to lay understandings of the world, in the sense that it can legitimately evaluate the latter's empirical validity.

Postmodern sociologist Steven Seidman is more explicit about this than most of his colleagues. For his plea for sociology as 'moral story telling' radically dissolves hierarchical positivist distinctions like those between 'truth' and 'belief', 'knowledge' and 'culture', 'expert sociologist' and 'layperson'. Those traditionally referred to by sociologists as 'laypersons' become fellow sociologists here, simply because there are no good reasons to reserve the right to narrate moral stories about society to professional, academic sociologists. Central among the "new subjects of knowledge", Seidman believes, are the so-called 'new social movements' like the women's movement, the gay and lesbian movement, and the black lives matter movement. These movements bring forth "new knowledges" that entail sociological critiques of "the dominant knowledges (...) as reflecting the standpoint and interests of White Europeans, men, and heterosexuals" (Seidman 1994: 235).

Critical sociologists, often engaged in cultural studies and postmodernism, understand their 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 entailed by all this 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 guided by "the dogma of liberation sociology" (ibid:12). 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).

It can indeed hardly be denied that contemporary sociology is more divided than ever and that marked tensions, frictions and conflicts exist between the three movements discussed above, despite their common ambition of purging sociology of the positivist notion of 'neutral' and 'objective' knowledge about a 'more fundamental' social reality. While neo-positivist quantitative sociologists strongly foreground statistical methods and empirical proof, for instance, cultural and critical sociologists typically dismiss their work as theoretically superficial and lacking intellectual depth and/or political significance. The other way around neo-positivist quantitative sociologists dismiss much of the work of their critical and cultural-sociological counterparts as vague and speculative and (in case of critical sociology) as overly normative and political.

Critical and cultural sociologists moreover disagree sharply about the virtues of intellectual detachment, neutrality and political engagement on the one hand and the merits of understanding culture in terms of power and inequality on the other. Sherwood et al. (1993: 375) critique cultural studies scholars from a cultural-sociological point of view, for instance, for their

understanding of culture by reference to structures of power and inequality: "The question (...) should not be how to demystify culture by showing that it 'really' represents something else, but rather how culture allows contemporary actors continually to remystify their social worlds". Critical sociologists defend their trade against such charges (e.g., Jones, 2016) and in their turn chastise cultural sociologists for their false pretensions of objectivity and neutrality, their political naïveté and their lack of political engagement. So while many cultural sociologists (much like sociologists generally) find political moralism in social-scientific work awkward, embarrassing and beside the point, cultural studies scholars pride themselves on their political engagement and dismiss ideals of detachment and neutrality as naïve, misinformed and scientistic (e.g., Inglis, 2007).

Already in full swing when Gouldner (1970) announced it, sociologists have never been able to satisfactorily solve the crisis of their discipline and publications about its alarming state have continued to appear (e.g., Black, 2000; Cole, 2001; Collins, 1992; Horowitz, 1993; Lopreato & Crippen, 1999; Turner, 1992). The open conflicts that raged in the 1960s and 1970s have meanwhile given way to resignation and apathy, epitomized by tendencies of flocking together with like-minded others to celebrate the type of sociology one personally favors as 'the real thing'. Needless to say, this is not without irony, because despite their differences and disagreements the three movements discussed above all 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 intellectual tensions persist. Often the various factions feel less affinity with those 'other' sociologists, who do not seem to understand what sociology is 'really' about, than with colleagues in other disciplines. Horowitz (1993), for instance, suggests that those who feel annoyed by sociology's politicization have started to relocate to adjacent fields that appear more supportive of serious scientific research, like criminology, demography, management studies, organization studies, and business administration. Still others seek collaboration with fields like biology, neuroscience, and the like, also seen as more strictly scientific than

contemporary sociology. The cultural studies, on the other hand, continue beckoning to sociologists who have had enough of sociology's lack of political engagement and persistent quest for strict scienticity (Seidman, 1996).

Once promising to bridge the gap between the sciences and the humanities – sociology as a 'third culture' (Lepenies, 1988) –, sociology meanwhile appears to be falling apart alongside this very cleavage, which has widened in the past half century due to attempts at disenchanting the discipline. The disenchantment of the world has in effect not only harmed the authority of religion, but also that of sociology itself. Once proclaimed the proud queen of the sciences, sociology has fallen from its epistemic throne and may in the long run not even be able to survive.

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