

Chapter 2

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, 1949 [1904]: 57).

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 what Weber denies. 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 multifarious manifestations (e.g., Koshul, 2005). More than that, disenchantment undermines the authority of religion and science alike, which is why it is not without irony that Weber's methodological writings have so often been disconnected from his account of disenchantment in the religious realm (see, e.g., Bendix, 1960: xlviii).

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 plunged sociology itself into a crisis, central to which were controversies about whether or not meaning can be solidly and reliably grounded 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'. Precisely because of this, the discipline that Auguste Comte, the godfather of positivism, had once dubbed 'the queen of the sciences', has 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 itself since the 1960s.

2. Max Weber and the Disenchantment of the World

2.1. From Religion to Science?

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" (idem: 139).

These two shifts combined do however not constitute the displacement of religion by science, but rather that 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, typically situated at the boundary of nature and society (e.g., 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 it gives rise to, there is no way that science can replace religion.

Under the influence of Enlightenment thought the notion of a displacement of religion by science has nonetheless become central to both modern self-understandings 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 a ‘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 radically transcendent and residing in a world of his own, a radical dualism that precluded magical coercion and manipulation of the divine (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 worlds that ancient Judaism had introduced long ago, yet

had been 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 [1904/05]: 105).

Whereas the sacred could according to Puritanical Protestants 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 itself, 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’, it could henceforth 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* (2014 [1904]) 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 argument 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, 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 in effect 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 discourse disguised as science drove himself into a moralistic position. For his analysis is informed by a 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 limiting itself to a strictly logical and empirical analysis of phenomena that are as such treated as basically meaningless; ‘fake’ science is science that re-enchants the world by pretensions of being capable of endowing these same phenomena with scientifically informed, ‘objective’ and ‘true’ meaning.

This distinction between ‘real’ and ‘fake’ science should hence 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, which 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.

Weber’s notion that one cannot draw moral lessons about how the world ‘ought to be’ from scientific knowledge about how it actually ‘is’, informs his 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. 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 (logical, empirical) grounds.

The full complexity of Weber's plea to keep 'ought' separate from 'is' resides in the circumstance that he simultaneously points out that social-scientific research inevitably mixes up facts and values. This is because 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. Weber hence understands the conduct of research as just another variety of meaningful action that can be opened up for 'verstehen' by scrutinizing value-informed 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 who deny this role of value-laden normativity in the research 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 Weberian notion of 'truth' hence entails what one might call 'truth, lowercase t' (a representation of social reality that is morally selective and hence one-sided, yet empirically informed), which as such needs to be distinguished from the positivist notion of 'Truth, capital T' (an objective representation of social reality that is as such binding for everyone).

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 tend to foreground the latter, typically in sections that aim to point out 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. Yet, Weber firmly rejects

the positivist pretension that social reality can be intellectually represented as it ‘really’ is, because intellectually arbitrary values determine the data to be collected and analyzed in the first place. Denying the resulting one-sidedness and partiality of intellectual representations of social reality by presenting the latter as ‘social reality as it really is’, and hence as binding to everyone, thus comes down to making value judgments disguised as science, which entails an abuse of science to legislate meaning and 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). The empirical dimension is always open to scientific critique, because the key issue here 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, however, because the selected point of view cannot be justified or critiqued on scientific grounds. It 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 among sociologists of the presence and political consequences of such intellectually arbitrary moral points of view in sociological research that plunged the discipline into a crisis in the 1960s.

3. The Crisis of Sociology

3.1. Introductory Skirmishes

In the midst of World War II, long before he 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 identify as ‘social problems’ or ‘social pathology’ and infers the “type of social person who (...) is evaluated as ‘adjusted’” in the writings of the “social pathologists” whose professional ideology he here studies (idem: 180). This leads Mills 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” (idem: 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 ‘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 here hence identifies the same two dimensions that Weber had distinguished before him. The first is explicit and empirical: it pertains to factual social circumstances; the second is implicit and moral: it endows these 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 dimension of sociological analysis points out what the facts at stake ‘mean’. Mills here hence echoes Weber’s argument about the role of ‘value-relatedness’ in sociological research, i.e., about how sociological claims about social reality are rooted in value positions that cannot be ‘scientifically proven’ to be ‘preferable to’ or ‘better than’ other ones.

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.

3.2. Two Presidential Addresses

Some of those who pointed out the sheer impossibility of a strictly neutral, objective and impartial analysis of social life were sociologists with firm reputations who were very much part of the sociological establishment. Arguably 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" (idem: 199), an ideology that serves personal and institutional professional interests and transforms critical intellectuals into docile professionals (idem: 206-207). The subtlety of Weber's complex analysis, 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" (idem: 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" (idem: 212). Indeed, if we raise the question of how sociological knowledge is made – "really made rather than as publicly reported" (idem: 212) –, the role of the values of the sociologist in steering the process cannot and should not be denied, Gouldner observes with Weber: "To do otherwise is to usher in an era of spiritless technicians (...) who will be useful only because they can be used" (idem: 212).

A few years later, in his own presidential address 'Whose Side Are We On?' for the same *Society for the Study of Social Problems*, Howard Becker 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" (idem: 245). While sociological research is hence always and inevitably one-sided and partial, Becker argues, charges of political bias against sociologists are not made indiscriminately. They are most likely in situations where a 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” (idem: 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” (idem: 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. Sociology is by implication not capable either of authoritatively sorting competing truth claims by participants in social life into ‘valid’ and ‘invalid’ ones. 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 arguments that directly critiqued sociological positivism to the center of sociological attention. Works that more indirectly reinforced 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* (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).

3.3. *Discontents about Positivist Sociology*

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 had announced it in the book to which it owes its name, i.e., *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1970; see also Cole, 2001). In his attempt to explain the intellectual conflicts in 1960s sociology, Gouldner follows the same logic as Weber and Mills before him, i.e., by pointing out the significance of a theory's 'infrastructure' or 'sub-theory', which consists of untestable and morally charged assumptions that lie hidden in its metaphysical underbelly. Examples are 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, whether society is basically a set of collectively shared definitions of the situation or rather consists of power relationships and inequality between social groups.

While notions like these cannot be tested empirically, they do play a decisive role in both the selection of research problems and the acceptance and rejection of theories as valid or invalid, Gouldner holds. For decisions about the latter, he maintains, are not simply determined by a theory's (in)congruence with the empirical findings, but rather by (in)congruence between the metaphysical assumptions that underlie it and the metaphysical assumptions embraced by the sociologist who needs to decide on 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 their underlying metaphysical infrastructure. Much like Weber and Mills before him, then, Gouldner points out the significance of metaphysical ideas that remain implicit and hidden underneath, i.e., ideas that have unmistakably informed a sociological study, yet cannot be evaluated on strictly scientific grounds. "The 'truth' of a theory", as he put it in a later work, "does not boil down to its reliability but also involves the nature of its selective perspective on the world" (Gouldner, 1973a: 427).

Gouldner uses this theory to explain the intellectual discontents in sociology at the time, not least among its junior members. He attributes these 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 (see also Cole, 1975). It is indeed no coincidence that in counter-cultural circles back then ‘The System’ was considered the arch enemy and 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 constituted the principal cause of the intellectual malaise of the 1960s. This also explains the principal intellectual responses to the crisis, which consisted of an increased interest in conflict theories on the one hand and a shift towards non-positivist approaches that foregrounded the cultural imagination, attributions of meaning and (inter)subjectivity on the other. 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” (idem: 90) and to disclose or discover “abstracted universals” (idem: 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” (idem: 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 as such acknowledges that meaning can never be any more ‘real’ or ‘grounded’ than what human beings make of it, which is why it has since the 1960s critiqued positivist pretensions of being able to unearth the ‘real’ and ‘objective’ meaning of social phenomena.

4. Sociology about Culture: Contesting the Meaning of Meaning

4.1. Cultural Sociology

Cultural sociology, one of the most influential intellectual responses to the crisis of sociology, singles out precisely this as its object: not a social reality that is allegedly ‘more fundamental’ than culture and meaning, but humanly constructed meaning and culture as such. Its massively increased popularity can be inferred quite simply from the membership numbers of the respective sections of the American, European and International Sociological Associations. Even though cultural sociology has obviously not been able to displace the positivist quest for knowledge about a ‘more fundamental’ social reality, these sections nowadays outnumber most, if not all, other sections of these associations. Dismissing the positivist quest for knowledge that is superior to lay cultural understandings of the world, so knowledge that can be used to evaluate the latter’s accuracy and rationality, cultural sociology instead defines precisely these cultural understandings as sociology’s proper object. It as such dismisses the notion that sociologists are capable of unearthing anything ‘deeper’ or ‘more fundamental’ than the latter and sidesteps the question of how ‘rational’, ‘reasonable’, and ‘true’ these cultural understandings actually are.

It is hardly coincidental that the cultural turn in sociology started off as a critique of intellectually awkward positivist understandings of social problems and deviant behavior (Cole, 1975). It is not coincidental either that symbolic interactionists were among the first advocates of a cultural-sociological 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. 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 observation that lay definitions of social problems do not necessarily coincide with those by professional sociologists. There are no difficulties as long as the two parties agree that social phenomena are either “normal social conditions” or “manifest social problems,” defined as “objective

social conditions identified by problem definers as at odds with social values” (Merton, 1971: 806). Problems emerge if the two parties disagree, however. For if professional sociologists identify social problems, while the participants in social life themselves do not, Merton identifies “latent social problems”, i.e., “conditions also at odds with values current in society, but (...) not generally recognized as being so” (idem: 806). The other way around, if the relevant social actors discern a social problem, while the professional sociologist does not, Merton speaks of a ‘spurious’ social problem. ‘Spurious’ and ‘latent’ social problems do as such refer to situations defined by the sociologist as “much ado about nothing” and “no ado about something”, which implies that in both cases “the sociologists’ definition, being based on objective evidence, takes precedence” (Spector and Kitsuse, 1977: 36; italics deleted; DH).

Privileging scientific expertise and subordinating lay cultural understandings, the positivist approach to social problems hawked by Merton thus understands the identification of social problems as ultimately a technical issue. This is precisely why Spector and Kitsuse propose an alternative, constructivist approach that exclusively addresses how actors culturally ‘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” (idem: 75).

Spector and Kitsuse’s book quickly became “the touchstone for the new constructionist approach” (Best, 2002: 701) in the sociology of social problems, with students of social problems starting 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 used to be social problems in the past 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. Another example is the circumstance that back in the 1950s homosexuality rather than homophobia tended to be seen as a social problem, while meanwhile the reverse has become the case.² What has changed here is not so much ‘objective’ social conditions, but rather their cultural ‘coding’ as legitimate or not.

The constructionism hawked by Spector and Kitsuse has informed successful new research programs that no longer portray particular social conditions as wrong, immoral or reprehensible, but 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, because it dismisses the positivist notion that sociologists can ‘discover’ on strictly scientific grounds whether or not a state of affairs ‘really’ constitutes a social problem, i.e., whether there is ‘much ado about nothing’ or ‘no ado about something.’

Jeffrey Alexander and colleagues at Yale University’s Center for Cultural Sociology (CCS) have been among the most fervent advocates of cultural sociology in recent decades, similarly arguing for a foregrounding of cultural understandings of the world. Dubbing their favored approach ‘the strong program in cultural sociology’, they similarly deny that cultural meaning can have a ‘more fundamental’ meaning that transcends the cultural understandings of those concerned – a ‘meaning of meaning’ to be established by professional sociologists on strictly technical, neutral and ‘objective’ grounds. Examples of such sociological accounts of ‘real’ meaning are portrayals of culture 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 mere ‘side issue’, a “‘soft’, not really independent variable” and to discard the positivist 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 and Smith, 2003: 13).³

Such a cultural sociology limits itself to the empirical study of meaning and stays away from claims about ‘the meaning of meaning’, something sociologists have traditionally done on the basis of alleged knowledge about a ‘more fundamental’ social reality ‘beyond’ or ‘underneath’ the realm of culture. The most obvious example is arguably the Marxist pretension of being able to distinguish between ‘true’ and ‘false’ class consciousness, according to which workers with other than leftist political sympathies have simply got it wrong because the latter are incompatible with their ‘real’ or ‘true’ class interests. This positivist pretension of being able to identify in an intellectually authoritative fashion the rationality of the beliefs, understandings, and behaviors of the participants in social life, and in effect to scientifically ground a morality that can and should replace the latter if found

wanting, transforms sociology into a sort of secular religion (see, e.g., Seidman, 1994: 19-53).

Marxism is however just the tip of the iceberg. For the early, positivist Durkheim of *The Division of Labor in Society* (1964 [1893]) relies on exactly the same logic as Marx to argue that, contrary to Marx's assertion, industrial conflict and class struggle are not at all 'normal', but actually 'abnormal' and 'pathological'. For the 'normal' state of affairs according to Durkheim is rather one of 'organic solidarity', i.e., peaceful collaboration between labor and capital, which is precisely 'normal' because it is consistent with how things 'really' are. For even though the participants in social life themselves often misunderstand this, Durkheim maintains, labor and capital are 'essentially' mutually dependent and do as such have a joint interest in bringing modern industrialism to bloom. Despite their contrasting accounts of modernity, then, both Marx and Durkheim derive their evaluations of what is 'normal' and what is 'abnormal', what is 'good' and what is 'bad', from an alleged superior scientific insight in the nature of a 'more profound' social reality situated 'beyond' or 'underneath' the realm of culture (Houtman, 2003: 3-9). In doing so, they both re-enchant rather than disenchant the world, engaging in value judgments disguised as scientific facts.

4.2. Postmodern Sociology: Culture, Power and Inequality

Since the intellectual turbulence of the 1960s and 1970s, this sort of re-enchanting positivism has lost much of its former traction, while cultural sociology's refusal to invoke a social realm that is 'deeper' or 'more fundamental' than culture makes it ill-suited as an alternative politically engaged sociology. Indeed, sociologists with 'realist' research agendas have again and again reproached their constructivist colleagues for their alleged political insignificance and impotence of coming up with policy proposals. Environmental sociologists Riley Dunlap and William Catton, for instance, critique constructivists for "treating global environmental change (...) as a social construction" because this "discourages investigation of the social causes, consequences and amelioration of global environmental problems," which according to them "seems particularly unwise in the case of global environmental change" (quoted by Burningham and Cooper, 1999, who defend constructivism against these admonitions).

New non-realist accounts of culture have meanwhile emerged to escape cultural sociology's political deadlock. These typically fly under the banner of 'postmodern sociology' and do in countries like the United Kingdom overlap with the field of cultural

studies (Inglis, 2007). Such a postmodern sociology dismisses both positivist invocations of a 'more fundamental' social reality and cultural sociology's moral and political agnosticism. Building, among others, on Frankfurt-School critical theory (e.g., Horkheimer and Adorno, 1979 [1944]; Marcuse, 1964; see for overviews: Bottomore, 1984; Jay, 1973), it engages in a double critique of actually existing society and sociology itself.

Postmodern sociology does in effect not end the entanglement of science and politics, but accepts it as inevitable and even desirable, arguing that sociology neither can nor should be 'objective' and 'neutral'. It as such lays of the cloak of scientificity to put an end to politics masquerading as science and welcomes political engagement with marginalized groups (defined in terms of class, gender, race, sexuality, or whatever). In the process it also critiques sociology's role in consolidating the subordinate and deviant status of minority groups and sustaining social inequalities in power and privilege. It does so by 'deconstructing' sociological knowledge claims, i.e., exposing the hidden morally loaded cultural binaries that underlie them, and by pointing out the latter's 'performativity', i.e., their real-world consequences for power and inequality. Differences between men and women, for instance, are understood here as created and sustained performatively on the basis of cultural notions of what it means to be 'a man' or 'a woman' (Butler, 1990). Whereas gender is here as such understood as a 'simulacrum' in the sense of Baudrillard (1976), i.e., 'a copy without an original', the positivist pretension of being capable of mirroring the social world as it 'really' is, is conceived as a powerful cultural force that creates and sustains social injustices.

This critical stance *vis-à-vis* the societal *status quo* and positivist sociology alike is informed by imaginary, utopian social worlds that have got rid of the social injustices that plague actually existing society. Non-existing social worlds that are fruits of the cultural imagination here in effect take precedence over actually existing ones, with the former informing critiques of the latter. Needless to say, this reliance on the cultural imagination in giving sociology a critical political voice differs strikingly from positivist invocations of a 'more fundamental' social reality that is invisible to laypersons, yet observable by the professionally trained sociological eye. This pivotal role of the cultural imagination is indeed precisely why this type of postmodern sociology is profoundly Romanticist in Gouldner's terms.

The work of Steven Seidman (1994), postmodern social theorist and LGBT studies pundit alike, constitutes a case in point. He argues that sociological truth claims have always and inevitably been infused with moral narratives about the world in which people find themselves and he refuses to construe this as a threat to sociology's scientificity. Rather to the

contrary: such moral narratives about the world, Seidman maintains, are – and always have been – the only valuable thing that sociology has to offer, so that purging sociology of them will only bring the discipline closer to the point where it has nothing worthwhile to say anymore.⁴ Therefore, Seidman feels, sociologists should move in precisely the opposite direction. They should give up “the false promise of science to achieve objective and universal knowledge” in favor of “our role as storytellers or social critics” (idem: 3). The value of sociology according to Seidman, in short, lies not so much in the scientific quest for unshakable ‘truths’ about society, but rather in telling moral stories about it – moral stories that matter more than methodology, facts and proof and that cannot be defended on strictly scientific grounds. This obviously leaves professional sociologists without good arguments to claim the right to moral story-telling exclusively for themselves. Indeed, even more than professional sociologists, Seidman 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 postmodern notion that sociological knowledge is inevitably political and performative constitutes a major break with positivist sociology, which is why postmodern sociology understands itself as a *Sociology after the Crisis* (Lemert, 1995), i.e., a sociology that has discarded and overcome positivist binaries like those between ‘truth’ and ‘belief’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘culture’, ‘expert sociologist’ and ‘layperson’. Such a sociology disenchants the discipline by doing away with positivist pretensions of being able to ‘objectively’ and ‘neutrally’ represent social reality ‘as it really is’, i.e., to ‘demonstrate’ what social conditions ‘really’ mean. No such thing as ‘true’ meaning can ever exist in this postmodern understanding of sociology: there is nothing more ‘fundamental’ than the contrasting and incompatible understandings of prevailing movements, groups and actors.

5. Shallowness and Profundity in Contemporary Sociology

Sociologists, to summarize the foregoing, have become skeptical about the possibility of providing authoritative answers to the question that has in their discipline always accompanied that of ‘what is the case?’, i.e., ‘what lies behind it?’ (Luhmann and Fuchs, 1994). Particularly students of culture deny that sociologists can ‘discover’ the ‘meaning of

meaning' by exposing 'what lies behind' people's understandings of the world. Yet, others feel that a critical and socially and politically engaged sociology cannot do without solid scientific insight into a social reality 'more fundamental' than culture. The disenchantment of sociology has in effect pushed disagreements about shallowness and profundity in sociology to the center of debate.⁵

For one thing, many sociologists have raised concerns that postmodern politicization may herald the end of the discipline as a legitimate scientific endeavor. Under the telling title 'The Promise of Positivism' Jonathan Turner (1992) has for instance defended the intellectual heritage of Auguste Comte against "the smug cynicism, relativism, and solipsism that has infected sociological theorizing these days" (idem: 156-157; see Black, 2000, and Collins, 1992, for similar discontents), even though he is aware that his plea is "somewhat unfashionable these days" (idem: 156). Under the dramatic title *The Decomposition of Sociology* (1993) Irving Louis Horowitz, equally pessimistic, recounts how the postmodern turn poses a threat to scientific sociology. In his understanding, "the new subjectivists" (idem: 49) – "ideologists masked as sociologists" (idem: 12) – are destroying scientific sociology under the guidance of "the dogma of liberation sociology" (ibid:12). He does not even 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" (idem: 6). What these commentators fail to note, however, is how a similar shift away from solid and profound social foundations has come to permeate mainstream quantitative sociology.

A first telling development is the tendency to reduce sociology to mere statistics, with increasing numbers of research articles no longer aiming to uncover 'fundamental', 'underlying' explanatory mechanisms. The resulting articles typically boast main titles like 'Effects of A, B, and C on D', 'How Do A and B Affect C?', 'A: The Effects of B and C', or a variation on this theme; subtitles that refer to either large datasets and/or advanced statistical methods; and conclusions that point out that some independent variables have significant effects on the dependent one, some positive and some negative, while others do not. Studies of this type do no longer provide insight into underlying explanatory mechanisms by testing sociological theories, but mere information about statistical relationships. Perhaps it goes too far to state that such information is completely irrelevant, but it is clear that sociologists have traditionally denied this the status of sociological knowledge.

More than half a century ago this was indeed the message of Robert Merton's classical positivist roadmap towards a scientific sociology – a roadmap that as such appears to have meanwhile lost much of its former traction. For Merton formulated his plea for

‘directed’ research, i.e., research aimed at uncovering fundamental underlying mechanisms by systematically testing sociological theories, 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). This positivist understanding of sociological research makes much of the difference between “sociological theory” and “an isolated proposition summarizing observed uniformities of relationships between two or more variables” (idem: 66). Merton dubs empirical regularities of the latter type ‘empirical generalizations’ (idem: 66) and points out that they do not so much *answer* sociological questions, but merely *raise* them. This is because such relationships between variables are from a theoretical point of view mere data that call for sociological-theoretical explanation, which is precisely why *statistical explanation* should not be confused with *sociological-theoretical explanation*. What studies about ‘relationships between variables’ provide, in short, is not sociological-theoretical insight into underlying explanatory mechanisms, but merely data that call for sociological-theoretical explanation.⁶

Intellectual discontents about such shifts into the shallowness of the empirical-statistical surface do meanwhile invoke pleas for an analytic sociology that echo Merton’s classical arguments. Hedström and Bearman (2011: 5-6), for instance, argue for the need of a “mechanism-based explanatory strategy [which] differs in important respects from the explanatory principles used in mainstream sociology, where the emphasis rather is on statistical associations.” This plea for a renewed profundity in mainstream sociological research demonstrates that Merton’s positivist optimism about the possibility of discovering the ‘meaning’ of relationships between variables has all but vanished. It also demonstrates, however, how his ideas are nowadays invoked in critical response to an abundance of superficial quantitative studies that explain nothing but statistical variance.

Concerns about shallowness and profundity in sociology have however not only come to permeate mainstream quantitative sociological research, but have also increased interest in biology – in genes, hormones and the brain. This entails a shift away from the quest for a ‘deeper’ or ‘more fundamental’ *social* reality to replace the latter by a more profound *biological* reality, conceived as ‘more profound’ precisely because it is not social, but biological. Consider the book *Crisis in Sociology: The Need for Darwin* (Lopreato and Crippen, 1999), which argues that classical sociologists like Marx, Durkheim and Spencer already identified the struggle for biological survival as central to social life. Yet, the authors

argue, later generations of sociologists have neglected this elementary insight, which has precluded the much-needed biological turn in sociology to instead extradite the discipline to postmodern relativism and politicization.

Contrary to what the skepticism of Lopreato and Crippen suggests, however, such a sociological turn to biology is meanwhile well under way. For nowadays book titles like *Social Stratification and Socioeconomic Inequality* offer something very different from what sociologists would have expected back in the 1960s and 1970s. 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* have meanwhile published articles with titles such as, ‘A Biosocial Model of Status in Face-to-Face Primate Groups’ (Mazur, 1985) and ‘Marriage, Divorce, and Male Testosterone’ (Mazur and Michalek, 1998). Even sociology of religion is not immune to the biological turn, as Rodney Stark now maintains that the lesser religiosity of men is not attributable to gender-specific cultural socialization, but to hormonal differences between the sexes (2002; Miller and Stark, 2002).

6. Conclusion: How the Queen of the Sciences Lost Her Throne

Sociologists have typically understood the disenchantment of the world as eroding firmly grounded religious meaning, but the process has also done much to dethrone their own discipline, once proclaimed the proud queen of the sciences. Sociology has been robbed of much of its former status of scientificity, epistemic authority, and confidence of being capable of ‘discovering’ on strictly scientific grounds what social phenomena ‘really’ mean. Cultural sociologists, postmodern sociologists, and quite a few researchers within the discipline’s quantitative mainstream, have meanwhile abandoned invocations of ‘more fundamental’, ‘underlying’ social realities to solidly ground intellectual meaning.

Despite their differences and mutual disagreements, cultural sociology, postmodern sociology, and theory-less quantitative sociology are without exception disenchanting sociologies, informed by a shared understanding that “the world’s processes (...) simply ‘are’ and ‘happen’ but no longer signify anything,” as Weber has succinctly defined

disenchantment (1978 [1921]: 506). This shared skepticism about promises of ‘real’, solidly grounded meaning entails the sociological equivalent of relativist understandings of religious pluralism, exemplified by the turn to spirituality (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005).

Disenchantment has as such had basically identical consequences in the realms of religion and sociology: it has harmed sociology’s scientific authority as much as the authority of religion. The other way around, the explanatory mechanisms that analytical sociology is after turn it into the sociological equivalent of religious fundamentalism’s quest for secure foundations in the face of irredeemable pluralism (Roeland et al., 2010).

The process of disenchantment has issued sociology with new and divisive conflicts about shallowness and profundity, even to the extent that those who identify with one particular style of sociology may meanwhile have become more interested in adjoining disciplines than in the work of ‘other’ sociologists. Analytical sociologists who long for solid and secure foundations, for instance, may find it hard to resist the temptations of biology, neuroscience, and the like, while the humanities are beckoning to cultural sociologists and postmodernists. The discipline of sociology thus faces the risk of being torn apart alongside the very cleavage that it once promised to bridge, i.e., the one between the sciences and the humanities (Lepenies, 1988).

Notes

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² This is of course not to suggest that either this labelling of homosexuality in the 1950s or that of homophobia today has ever been uncontested. Given prevailing conditions of moral, religious and political pluralism back then as well as today, contestations about construals of social problems are indeed inevitable from a cultural-sociological point of view.

³ 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 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). Other cultural sociologists, e.g., Colin Campbell in the United Kingdom (1987, 2007) and the author of this chapter (e.g., Houtman and Achterberg, 2016), rather seek their principal inspiration from Weber’s classical cultural sociology, which like in the case of Durkheim (1965 [1912]) coincides with his sociology of religion (Weber, 1963 [1922]).

⁴ One may wonder, for instance, why precisely Marx, Weber and Durkheim have become sociology’s three founding fathers. May this be because each of their sociologies resonates with one of the three modern ideologies? The fit is obviously imperfect, but it nonetheless seems not too far-fetched to maintain that the fate of the dispossessed working class in modern capitalist society is the principal concern of both Marx and socialism; that the fate of the individual in a rationalized and bureaucratized modern society is the principal concern of both Weber and liberalism; and that the fate of community in modern industrial society is the principal concern of both Durkheim and conservatism. The appeal of sociology’s three founding fathers may as such indeed be not so much attributable to their research findings, but rather to their more general and morally charged narratives about modernity.

⁵ Understandings of what counts as ‘shallow’ and ‘profound’ obviously differ across sociological-theoretical identities. Positivist sociologists who aim for knowledge about a social reality beyond culture do precisely because of that understand cultural sociology as ‘shallow’. Cultural sociologists themselves, however, rather define their trade as ‘profound’, pointing out that social actors act out cultural scripts they are not even aware of (Alexander, 2003: 3-9) or that it is ultimately cultural worldviews that determine whether and how media messages affect their receivers (e.g., Houtman and Achterberg, 2016; Tromp and Achterberg in this volume). Indeed, various chapters in Hedström and Bearman’s handbook about analytical sociology (2011) discuss how cultural mechanisms like beliefs, norms, and trust can account for empirically established patterns.

⁶ 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

that 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.

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