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The Disenchantment of the World and the Authority 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

The authority of sociology is no longer what it used to be. The discipline has lost much of its former confidence of being able to authoritatively reveal the truth about human society – the 'real' truth, solidly and reliably grounded beyond the cultural imagination. As a result culture is no longer conceived as a realm of 'perceptions' amenable to correction by epistemologically superior sociological knowledge about how things 'really' stand, but has come to be understood as part and parcel of social life and as such in need of serious research attention. Due to this 'cultural turn' sociology has ended up in a position that is strikingly similar to the one secularization theory has always envisaged for religion, i.e., as lacking any special authority beyond its own realm.

This reconstruction of sociology is an outcome of the crisis the discipline plunged into half a century ago, due to major controversies about whether it could actually live up to its scientific pretensions. All things considered it is puzzling that this so-called 'crisis of sociology' (Gouldner 1970) came as a shock and a surprise to so many sociologists back then. For half a century earlier Max Weber had already extensively discussed the issues at stake in his *Wissenschaftslehre* (2014 [1904]). More often than not, however, sociologists have interpreted Weber's analysis of the relationship between facts and values, or more generally between science and culture, as sustaining a positivist scientific outlook – an interpretation informed by the neglect of the intimate link between Weber's philosophy of science and his theory about disenchantment (e.g., Bendix 1960, xlviii).

While Weber's theory of disenchantment is one of the best known classical sociological theories, it is indeed 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 position that Weber critiques. His argument is rather that due to its boundedness to the scientific 'truth imperative' (Goudsblom 1980) science *cannot* replace religion, because unlike the latter it cannot legitimately proclaim the 'real' meaning of the world and its multifarious manifestations, confined as it is to strictly logical and empirical analysis. In what follows I argue that the 'crisis of sociology' half a century ago did indeed spark such ambitions of disenchanting sociology, so that sociologists do not even need to look beyond the confines of their own discipline to see the process of disenchantment in full action. The process has meanwhile eroded much of the former epistemic authority of the discipline that Auguste Comte, godfather of positivism, once dubbed 'the queen of the sciences'.

2. Max Weber and the Disenchantment of the World

2.1. From Religion to Science?

The standard interpretation of Weber's theory of disenchantment distinguishes two interrelated shifts. On the one hand it is seen as referring 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 is typically taken to refer to an increased role in the modern world of scientific knowledge and technologies 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 cannot 'discover' 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 does instead entail 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 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 modern self-understandings 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 in which there is no place for supernatural entities, miracles, myth and magic. 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 disenchantment.

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 disenchantment 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 radically transcendent and residing in a world of his own, a 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 immanently present supernatural spirits, forces and powers, Protestantism deepened the gap between the human world and the supernatural one, which Catholicism had kept at bay for many long centuries. Precisely because of its rejection of the belief that the divine could be found within the world itself, 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 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 did in the process also rob the world of meaning. Transformed into a mere soulless and meaningless 'thing', it could henceforth be unscrupulously opened up for scientific analysis and technological intervention.

Disenchantment, 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 disenchantment, 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 dismisses such attempts at re-enchanting the world through science as illegitimate and intellectually immature. 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 is for him in effect more of a normative ideal than a representation of academic reality. He ridicules "big children (…) found in the natural sciences" who 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 banish moralistic discourse disguised as science drove himself into a moralistic position. For his analysis is informed by a morally charged 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 not be confused with the notion that ('irrational') ideas that cannot be proven true are inferior to ('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 can as such not be reduced to each other, so that they are ultimately equally legitimate. For Weber, it is not ideas that cannot be proven true that are rejected as inferior, but normative ideas that falsely wear

the cloak of science. This position thus differs sharply from the positivist one, according to which religious beliefs, utopian political ideals, and the like are inferior to scientific knowledge.

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 justifiable path from research findings to their moral evaluation. Whether states of affairs uncovered by science 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 choses 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 highlights the very first step in the research process, the selection of a research problem. This precedes the narrowly defined realm of what we nowadays call 'methodology', i.e., choosing a research design, data collection and data analysis. Weber's point is that the selection of a research problem is inevitably informed by values and that there is nothing wrong with that, because this is the only way to produce 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, so that one's findings are binding to everyone. Weber's notion of 'truth' is as such 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' entails what one might call 'truth, lowercase t', a representation of social reality that is morally selective and hence one-sided, yet empirically informed. Such a modest understanding of truth 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 of 'value neutrality' (*Wertungsfreiheit*) made on researchers, sociology textbooks tend to downplay the former and foreground the latter. This typically occurs in (sections of) chapters that aim to bring across the point that sociology constitutes a real science ('Sociology is a science because it is about facts and not about moral evaluations'). 'Value relatedness' (*Wertbeziehung*) ('Facts do not represent reality as it 'really' is and do as such do not speak for themselves either') is thus typically treated only stepmotherly, arguably because it is more difficult to reconcile with a positivist understanding 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 is 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 political or religious critiques that are ultimately a matter of moral taste. Precisely awareness of and concerns about the presence and political consequences of such intellectually arbitrary moral points of view in sociological research plunged the discipline into 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 it 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 foreshadowed the 'crisis of sociology' that would break out in the 1960s. By then many sociologists started doubting whether their discipline was as 'truly' scientific as they had traditionally taken it to be – whether at a closer and more critical look it could really ascertain on strictly intellectual grounds what things 'really' meant. Those concerned eventually ended up disenchanting sociology by relativizing the epistemological authority positivism had traditionally endowed it with.

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 (1962) 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, 206-07). 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, 241-142). 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* (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 do 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 a theory and those that are embraced by the sociologist who needs to assess the latter's 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 one 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 does so by pointing out how the up until then dominant theoretical infrastructure of structural functionalism had become increasingly incompatible with the newly emerged moral and political climate. 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). Indeed, in counter-cultural circles back then, 'The System' was singled out as the arch enemy of humanity and democracy, and as basically the root of all evil (Houtman, Aupers, and De Koster 2011, 1-24, Roeland, Aupers, and Houtman 2012).

According to Gouldner the 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.

4. Sociology after the Crisis

4.1. The Cultural Turn in Sociology

Such Romanticism has since the 1960s incited a cultural turn that has abandoned the quest for knowledge about a social reality that is allegedly 'more profound' than culture. This cultural turn started off as a critique of positivist understandings of social problems and deviant behavior (Cole 1975) and symbolic interactionists were among its first advocates. Howard Becker, already discussed above, is one influential example. 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 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 a well-informed critique of the positivist approach to social problems (see also Best 1995, Loseke 2003).

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," the latter 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 sociologists as respectively "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, emphasis 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.

Spector and Kitsuse propose an alternative, constructivist approach that exclusively addresses how actors 'code' social conditions as morally unacceptable, and hence as social problems. In this 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). Their 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 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 'objective' social conditions, but their cultural 'coding' as legitimate or not. Constructionism thus effectively pushes sociology from its epistemological throne, because it dismisses the 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.'

In recent decades Jeffrey Alexander and colleagues at Yale University's Center for Cultural Sociology (CCS) have also advocated a cultural turn in sociology, similarly aiming to liberate culture from its subaltern status as a mere 'side issue' or "'soft', not really independent variable" by discarding 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). In doing so they set their 'strong program in cultural sociology' decidedly apart from 'weak programs' in the sociological study of culture. The latter do not study culture as meaning in and of itself, but do rather endow meaning with

meaning, which results in claims about 'the meaning of meaning' that are not unlike conspiracy theories (compare Harambam and Aupers, Chapter 8). This is done by interpreting culture by definitional fiat in terms of something else, typically as reflecting, justifying, sustaining or challenging an allegedly 'more profound' social reality that consists of structures of power and inequality, in the process reducing culture to "the wagging tail of social power, as resistance to hegemony, disguised governmentality, organizational isomorphism, cultural capital, or symbolic politics" (Alexander 2010, 283).

Postmodern sociology, another much-discussed manifestation of sociology's cultural turn, takes culture at once more and less seriously than most other cultural sociologists do. It takes it more seriously in that it explicitly conceives of sociology itself as part and parcel of culture, thus dismissing the notion of culture as a thing 'out there' to be studied by sociologists from the outside, as it were. This does not give rise to an interest in whether sociological research findings are 'true', however 'lowercase t' conceived. What it does give rise to is an interest in the metaphysical assumptions that sociologists tacitly take on board while conducting their research, paying special attention to their deconstruction and pointing out how they produce research findings that performatively sustain social structures of power and privilege in the real world. Scholarship about 'immigrant integration' has for instance been critiqued for being informed by "conceptions of incompatibility between 'the West' and 'Islam' or 'modernity' and 'migrants'." The empirical studies that such "artificial separations" give rise to do thus at a more critical look entail "a thoroughly neocolonial practice," "in its effects only slightly removed from the explicit racism of (…) the (alt-)right" (Schinkel 2018). Despite their typical self-understandings and self-presentations as strictly 'neutral' and 'objective', such studies do as such not simply represent a social reality 'out there', but do rather performatively sustain, or even create, what they purportedly study. Gender differences are here likewise understood as performatively created and sustained on the basis of tacitly accepted cultural notions of what it means to be 'a man' or 'a woman' that inform sociological research. In the hands of postmodernists, gender is thus transformed into a 'simulacrum' in the sense of Baudrillard (1976), 'a copy without an original' (Butler 1990). The aim of postmodern sociology, in short, is to unmask positivist pretensions of 'mirroring' or 'reflecting' social reality as in fact creating and sustaining cultural hegemony, with all the social injustices this entails. Ultimately and paradoxically, then, the postmodern ambition of taking culture more seriously than most cultural sociologists do, subordinates culture to social inequality after all, resulting in a 'weak' rather than a 'strong' program in the sociological study of culture.

The postmodern conception of sociology as itself part and parcel of culture entails a massive relativizing of the discipline's epistemic authority. The work of Steven Seidman (1994), postmodern social theorist and LGBT studies pundit alike, constitutes a case in point. Seidman argues that sociological truth claims have always and inevitably been infused with tacit moral understandings of the world and he refuses to construe this as a shortcoming. Rather to the contrary: such moral narratives about the world, he maintains, are – and always have been – the only valuable thing that sociology has to offer, so that purging the discipline of them will only bring it closer to the point where it has nothing significant at all to say about the world anymore.[3] 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).

According to Seidman the value of sociology does hence lie not in its scientific quest for unshakable 'truths' about society, but in telling moral stories about it – moral stories that cannot be defended on strictly scientific grounds, yet matter more than methodology, facts, and empirical proof. This obviously leaves professional sociologists without good arguments to claim the right to moral story-telling exclusively for themselves. Indeed, even more so than professional sociologists, Seidman understands 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).

Like the cultural turn in sociology generally, such a postmodern sociology disenchants the discipline by dismissing positivist pretensions of being able to 'objectively' and 'neutrally' represent social reality 'as it really is'. It critiques the dismal role of such pretensions of scienticity in consolidating and justifying the subordinate status of marginalized minority groups (defined in terms of class, gender, race, sexuality, or whatever). Aiming to drive out politics masquerading as science, postmodern sociology accepts the entanglement of science and politics as inevitable and even desirable. This informs its self-understanding 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'.

4.2. Shallowness and Profundity in Contemporary Sociology

The cultural turn in sociology is of course not uncontested. It evokes conflicts about shallowness and profundity between those who identify with it and those who do not. Critics of constructivism like environmental sociologists Riley Dunlap and William Catton, for instance, critique constructivists for "treating global environmental change (…) as a social construction." Doing so, they maintain, entails a failure to address the 'real' problems, i.e., "the social causes, consequences and amelioration of global environmental problems," which "seems particularly unwise in the case of global environmental change" (quoted by Burningham and Cooper 1999, 300, who defend constructivism against these admonitions). Sociological students of culture do in their turn obviously dismiss the implied notion of culture as shallow and insignificant. Jeffrey Alexander, for instance, seeks inspiration from Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1965 [1912]), which understands societies, 'primitive' and modern alike, as constructing meaning on the basis of binary cultural distinctions between the sacred and the profane (both understood more generally than in the conventional, strictly religious sense).[4] This results in a sociology that focuses on the cultural binaries that set the sacred apart from the profane, with the participants in social life themselves being typically unaware of their culturally constructed status.

In Alexander's hands cultural sociology thus becomes "a kind of social psychoanalysis" that aims "to bring the unconscious cultural structures that regulate society into the light of the mind," "to reveal to men and women the myths that think them so that

they can make new myths in turn" (2003, 3-4). Other cultural sociologists do rather seek inspiration from Weber's classical cultural sociology (e.g., Campbell 1987, 1996, 2007), which like Durkheim's (1965 [1912]) coincides largely with his sociology of religion (Weber 1963 [1922]). Treating culture as something the participants in social life *can* be reflexively conscious about, they rather foreground actors' conscious motives, the meaningful actions these give rise to, and the opportunities for 'verstehen' this provides, thus dismissing positivist 'explanations' of 'behavior' as shallow and superficial.

This Weberian approach has for instance been mobilized to critique the claim that western countries have witnessed a decline in 'class voting' since World War II. For this claim is informed by shallow research that merely documents a declining trend in the relationship between class and voting behavior without even studying why people vote for the parties they vote for in the first place (Houtman 2003, 103-120, Houtman, Achterberg, and Derks 2008, Houtman and Achterberg 2016). Indeed, if the voting motives of economic conservatism versus progressiveness and cultural conservatism versus progressiveness are taken into account, it becomes clear that no such thing as a decline in class voting has occurred. For the economically underprivileged ('the working class') have remained as motivated as ever to vote for leftist parties to effectuate economic redistribution between classes. It then also becomes clear, however, that the declining relationship between class and voting does in fact stem from something else, namely a massive proliferation of 'cultural voting' that plays out in the reverse direction. Such cultural voting entails rightist voting by those without much 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1984), motivated by disrespect for cultural diversity and a longing to protect social order. Due to the neglect of voting motives this proliferation of cultural politics has however been systematically misinterpreted as a decline in class voting. Relationships between class and voting, in other words, do not even represent changes in class voting in the first place. They do instead represent the net balance of class voting and reverse cultural voting. The claim of the decline of class voting has as such been built on the quicksand of shallow research, because a declining relationship between class and voting means basically nothing. It can even occur if class voting has increased rather than decreased, namely if reverse cultural voting has increased even more (Houtman 2003, 103-120, Houtman, Achterberg, and Derks 2008, Houtman and Achterberg 2016).

Sociologists of positivist persuasion express similar concerns about shallow articles with eyebrow-raising 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. To mask that the emperor is naked many of them carry pompous subtitles that invoke large datasets or advanced statistical methods. Remaining strictly limited to the registration of statistical relationships between variables, with theoretically informed explanatory mechanisms at best invoked (often not even that) rather than actually studied, such research makes no contribution to theory testing and remains without sociological-theoretical implications. Its shallowness is nowadays mocked by fake articles with titles such as 'Determinants of Age in Europe: A Pooled Multilevel Nested Hierarchical Time-Series Cross-Sectional Model' (Bezemeni 2011) and references to imaginary articles with titles like 'Individual and Contextual Effects of Variables on Other Variables in 278 Countries: Multilevel Multinomial Logistic Modelling by Means of the New BULLSHIT Software' (Houtman 2009, 526).[5]

In response to such shallow research critics have argued 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" (Hedström and Bearman 2011, 5-6). This plea echoes Robert Merton's classical road map for an explanatory sociology that aims to systematically test sociological theories by means of '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). A positivist understanding of sociology does as such make much of the distinction between "sociological theory" and "an isolated proposition summarizing observed uniformities of relationships between two or more variables" (idem, 66). For from a theoretical point of view the latter are merely data that invite sociological-theoretical explanation. Such "empirical generalizations" (idem, 66) do not answer sociological questions, but merely raise them, which is precisely why statistical explanation should not be confused with sociological-theoretical explanation.

What Merton argued half a century ago, in short, was that a scientific sociology worth its salt requires more than documenting relationships between variables, because the latter do not provide any sociological-theoretical insight into underlying explanatory mechanisms.[6] That his classical plea is meanwhile back on the table demonstrates that sociology's disenchantment has not wiped out positivist dreams of a sociology that uncovers what things 'really' mean. It also illustrates, however, that the disenchantment has not only incited a cultural turn, but has also sparked conflicts about shallowness and profundity beyond the sociological study of culture.

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

Sociologists have typically understood disenchantment as eroding the authority of religion, but the process has also robbed their own discipline of much of its former authority. Cultural sociologists, postmodern sociologists, and quite a few researchers within the discipline's quantitative mainstream have all abandoned the scientific quest for non-cultural social mechanisms that reveal the 'real' meaning of social phenomena. Ambitions of disenchanting their discipline can as such be found among both humanities-minded (cultural and postmodern) and science-minded (statistics-and-data-driven) sociologists, 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 [1921/22], 506). To the extent that their contrasting disenchantment strategies have driven the two groups further apart, disenchantment has deepened the gap that sociology once promised to bridge: the one between the humanities and the sciences (Lepenies 1988).

Maintaining that no such thing as disenchantment has occurred in the real world, critics have portrayed Weber's theory as not much more than a modern myth, "the myth-of-the-end-of-myth" (Josephson-Storm 2017, 19). In making this argument they invoke the

persistence of esotericism, a tradition that has been present in the West since the Renaissance, that dismisses the disconnection of religion and science, and that as such "came into being as an attempt to repair the rupture between religion and science" (idem, 15). Pointing out esotericism's persistent appeal in the West, not least in intellectual circles, it is then pointed out that "we have never been disenchanted" and that "the tale of disenchantment – of magic's exit from the henceforth law-governed world – (…) is wrong" (idem, 3).

Today's widespread notions of 'spirituality', pitted against 'religion' to inform self-identifications as 'spiritual but not religious' (Tromp, Pless and Houtman 2020), do indeed convincingly corroborate the persistent appeal of esotericism. Such spirituality emerged in the context of the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s and has since then come to increasingly permeate the western cultural mainstream. It dismisses religious faith and scientific reason alike to embrace personal experience as an alternative epistemology and it understands the sacred as a spirit or life force immanently present in the world (Hanegraaff 1996). Such esotericism was already massively present in Germany in Weber's days, not least in his own intellectual circles, which led him to dismiss it in the crassest of terms as "weakness" (Weber 1948 [1919], 149), "humbug," and "self-deception" (idem, 154-155, see Houtman and Aupers 2010, 1-3). Irrespective of whether such esotericism is understood as either an alternative type of religion (e.g., Heelas and Woodhead 2005, Houtman and Mascini 2002) or as basically neither religion nor science, however, its expansion since Weber's days contradicts his theory of disenchantment.

The Achilles' heel of Weber's account of disenchantment lies in its intertwinement of normative, logical and empirical analysis. For this leads him to mistake his ideal-type of science as a disenchanting force for an adequate account of actually existing science, misconceiving the latter as reflecting his personal ideas about "the proper conduct of science – that it leaves metaphysics behind and separates facts from values – [views that] Weber thinks *ought* to be adopted by a proper scientist in any field" (Asprem 2014, 39, emphasis in original, DH). In reality, however, Weber's ideal type of science as limiting itself to empirical and logical analysis has "little to tell about the attitudes and endeavours of real scientists and intellectuals" (idem, 39).

Yet, invoking the persistence (or even proliferation) of esotericism in the twentieth century as 'proof' that Weber's theory of disenchantment is a mere 'myth' is a bit odd. For the very binary of 'truth' versus 'belief' that informs the notion of 'myth' has itself meanwhile lost much of its former traction, ironically not least due to sociologists' attempts to disenchant their discipline. If social reality is ultimately taken to be a web of myths in and of itself, as cultural sociologists do, then it is indeed up to them "to reveal to men and women the myths that think them" (Alexander 2003, 3-4), with the relevant question no longer being "how to demystify culture," but rather "how culture allows contemporary actors continually to remystify their social worlds" (Sherwood, Smith and Alexander 1993, 375). Because different myths think different groups, such an understanding precludes 'black-or-white', 'all-or-nothing' verdicts about Weber's theory. What is needed instead is empirical research into "the attitudes and endeavours of real scientists and intellectuals" (Asprem 2014, 39) that leaves open the possibility that the 'myth' of disenchantment drives intellectual dynamics in particular (sub-)fields while failing to do so in others.

This is precisely what I have done in this chapter for the field of sociology, and more specifically the sociological study of culture. I have demonstrated how the skepticism that lies at the heart of the scientific truth imperative has led increasing numbers of sociologists to dismiss metaphysical assumptions that cannot be justified on intellectual grounds. Those concerned have thus discarded the positivist pretension that sociologists can demonstrate what things 'really' mean by uncovering a social reality that is 'more profound' than the 'myths' people live by. Dismissing pretensions of being able to tell morally right from morally wrong on intellectual grounds, this has led them to relativize the authority of their discipline, pushing 'the queen of the sciences' from its throne.

Far from asserting sociology's epistemic superiority over religion and politics, then, those concerned have maneuvered their discipline into a position that is much more modest than the one that positivism has traditionally claimed for it. Conceiving of sociology as surely radically *different* from religion and politics, they no longer conceive it to be *superior* to the latter. Ambitions of disenchanting sociology, in other words, have since the second half of the twentieth century brought the discipline into the position that secularization theory defines as the final destination of religion: that of a mere 'sub-system' alongside others, no longer capable of submitting the rest of society to its authority.

Notes

[1] The author gratefully acknowledges the other authors in this book as well as Steve Vallas for their constructive comments on earlier versions of this chapter.

[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 conditions of moral, religious and political pluralism back then as well as today, conflicts about the definition of social problems are inevitable from a cultural-sociological point of view.

[3] One may indeed wonder why precisely Marx, Weber and Durkheim have become sociology's three founding fathers. Could this be because each of their sociologies resonates with one of the three modern political ideologies? The fit is obviously imperfect, but it does not seem far-fetched to maintain that the fate of the dispossessed working class in modern capitalist society is the principal concern of Marx and socialism alike; that the fate of the individual in a rationalized and bureaucratized modern society is the principal concern of Weber and liberalism alike; and that the fate of community in modern industrial society is the principal concern of Durkheim and conservatism alike. 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.

[4] Needless to say, the late cultural-sociological and anthropological Durkheim differs profoundly from his early, positivist counterpart, as traditionally foregrounded in introductory sociology textbooks – the Durkheim of the division of labor (1964 [1893]), of the rules of sociological method (1964 [1895]), and of suicide rates (1951 [1897]).

[5] The first paper has been published by the journal *European Political Science*, with the 'About the author' note pointing out that "Uchen Bezimeni (…) currently works on developing optimization methods for publishing in situations of data abundance and absence of original ideas." The second paper has not actually been published. Back in 2009 it was mockingly listed as 'work in progress' on the website of a colleague and subsequently cited by the author of this chapter in a critical article about the state of sociology in the Netherlands (Houtman 2009).

[6] Just consider why later generations of sociologists have bestowed an exemplary status upon Durkheim's analysis of egoistic suicide (1964 [1893]). 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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