

Is Sociology of sociological Knowledge possible ?

A Second-Order Thought on the History of Sociology

Paolo Barbesino
Salvino A. Salvaggio

I

Although post-modernism is strongly re-shaping processes of both theory building and theme selection in social sciences, its epistemic drift is still far from influencing the way in which social sciences describe themselves and narrate their disciplinary history. This lack is particularly striking in the case of sociology, especially in the face of the fairly new emphasis on what is local and contingent, which has been one of the main issues in disciplinary debates during the last two decades. If the main outcome has to be found in underlining the extent to which even scientific discourses (i. e., concepts, paradigms, and theoretical attitudes) have been shaped by particular historical circumstances, at the same time such an emphasis gave rise to a strong dislike, and even a refusal, of all overarching theories and reductive schemes of explanation. Quite often, this had led to a new and more radical form of epistemic relativism 'so strong as to seem almost self-defeating, and to something like the project of seeking to demolish the claims of theory and method to organise the materials of experience'. Nevertheless, it has supplemented sociology with analytical devices capable to stand the increased degree of reflexivity and self-reference within social science discourse, and obviously it has reverberated on the way in which the history of the discipline might be thematized.

To narrate the history of sociology and its constitution as a scientific discipline a host of epistemic and methodological cautions deserves to be put forward. Any disciplinary narration relates to both a basic question and a set of theoretical devices, both finding the conditions of their possibility in that history itself. Narrating that history is going through a 'regressive road' to the origins of the discipline, but every step further affects the way in which what lies behind comes to be interpreted. Writing that history is

not a neutral scientific fact but a quite complex social process strongly affecting the proper dynamics of the discipline itself.

II

As early as 1930, in his *Soziologie als Wirklichkeitswissenschaft*, Hans Freyer devoted a crucial paragraph to *Die Soziologie selbst als geschichtliches Phänomen*, which is included in a chapter taking into account *Die doppelte Beziehung der Soziologie zur Gesellschaft*. In sharp opposition to those who, like Othmar Spann, maintained the possibility for a «gute, nämlich [...] universalistische Soziologie» to be found since Plato, Freyer highlighted the «geistesgeschichtlicher Irrtum» affecting every history of sociology which does not realize how the problem of the origins of sociology «mit der Epoche der bürgerlichen Revolutionen, mit der Auflösung der absoluten Staaten und der Entstehung der hochkapitalistischen Klassengesellschaften in Europa in spezifischer Weise verbunden ist».¹

Although, on the one hand, Freyer's historical outlook is mostly concerned with an explanation of the development of sociology which is primarily related to causes that are external to the social system of science and its proper dynamics, on the other hand, it has to be considered more than a clue of the historiographical consciousness of the author. Indeed it can also be taken as an index of a later development of sociology in which the ongoing processes in the constitution of both the “history” and “systematics” of sociological theory perform the distinction of the discipline from former Western forms of description of society. Discontinuities between traditional Western social thought, administrative statistical surveys and political theory on the one hand and sociology on the other are the outcome of self-descriptive processes performed by the discipline itself.

During this later phase, sociology itself, through the means of the thematization of its proper history, sets more demarcatedly its boundaries both by selecting its subject matter and “scientific domain” as well as by determining the range of theories epistemologically and methodologically permitted within the system. This operation is also performed by defining the cluster and the level of legitimacy of the «founding fathers» of the discipline (in the sense put forward by Talcott Parsons in his historically

¹ H. Freyer, *Soziologie als Wirklichkeitswissenschaft*, Leipzig und Berlin, 1930

weak description of Max Weber). Such «Gründer der Soziologie»² or «Makers of sociology»,³ who enter the disciplinary discourse in a highly personalized form, are now allowed to be declared in relation to the higher degree of institutionalization the discipline has achieved. Their discursive contribution lies in both predetermining the range of theoretical references allowed and stimulating new secondary literature in the form of an understanding of sociological classics.

In a constructivist perspective, this means that even the classical distinction put forward by Robert Merton between history and systematics of sociology has to be thematized as a further operation performed by the discipline itself. Such a distinction is indeed a form of facing the evolutionary improbability sociology has to deal with in the wake of increased amount of disciplinary semantical artifacts produced.

From the standpoint of an application of system theory within the sociology of scientific knowledge, this phase has to be described as the transition of sociology from self-organizing system to autopoietic system. In this sense, the self-organization and autopoiesis of sociology are defined as two successive phases in the developmental process of the discipline.

As remarked by Rudolf Stichweh, this assumption «presupposes that “self-organization” and “autopoiesis” differ with regard to the criteria of the autonomy they imply. Furthermore, the criteria of autonomy are not only different but also sequentially ordered».⁴ This means, even in the case of sociology, that a discipline first had to work as a self-organizing system in order to become an autopoietic system in which the system itself produces the elements by which it is constituted. In this later phase, no element and no operation can be introduced into the system from its environment. Obviously, the system may be affected by stimulations and disturbances originating in the environment, but under no occasion are these perturbations internalized as constitutive elements of the ongoing processes of the system. That is to say, this later status achieved by sociology sets «the process of problem articulation, theory generation, data

² Cf. F.K. Mann (ed.), *Gründer der Soziologie*, Jena, 1932

³ Had it been published, this could have been the title for E.E. Eubank's collection of interviews to European sociologist in the Thirties. Cf. D. Käsler, *Soziologische Abenteuer. E.E. Eubank besucht europäische Soziologen in Sommer 1934*, Opladen, 1985,

⁴ R. Stichweh, «Self-Organization and Autopoiesis», in W. Krohn, G. Küppers, H. Nowotny (eds.) *Selforganization: portrait of a scientific revolution*, Dordrecht, 1990

handling, and knowledge organization»⁵ free from any commitment to other sub-systems of society.

While the operational closure of sociology secures the recursive organization of the discipline independently of the proper dynamics of other functionally differentiated sub-systems, at the same time it increases the autonomy of the discipline with respect to other sciences. On the one hand, this process implies that information about the environment is coupled with the proper dynamics of the system. On the other hand, it follows that the discipline produces its own distinctions as to what has to be considered as information and what not.

In our theoretical model this means that cognitive autonomization of sociology has to be regarded as achieved through the differentiation of an eigencode (social/non-social) which operates in coordination with and at the same level of the main code of social system of science (truth/falsehood). For a condensation of semantical artifacts around the specific disciplinary eigencode «is in a literal sense constructive of new facts»,⁶ it constitutes the precondition for any further institutionalization of a cognitively autonomous form of description of society. That is to say, a matrix-disposed operational unit combining the main code of science with proper disciplinary eigencode has first to be settled in order to regulate the cognitively autonomous functioning of sociology as a scientific discipline.

Such a developmental process eventually implies that a wide range of problems has to be solved once for ever and does not constitute anymore the issue of the day. These intimately related problems concern namely:

- a) the stabilization and widespread use of the term «sociology» as distinguished from «social science»;⁷
- b) the status and scientific domain of sociology;
- c) the location of sociology with respect to other sciences. To these should obviously be added

⁵ S.B. Cohen, «A question of boundaries. The response of learned societies to interdisciplinary scholarship», in S.B. Cohen et al., *Learned societies and the evolution of the disciplines*, New York, 1988

⁶ M.A. Arbib, M. Hesse, *The construction of reality*, Cambridge, 1986

⁷ As an example, the turn-of-the-century transition within the German language from *Gesellschaftslehre* to *Sociologie* and eventually *Soziologie* deserves to be investigated. Cf. L.H. Adolf, *Über das Eindringen des Wort "Sozial" in die deutsche Sprache*, Göttingen, 1963. Cf. also F.R. Shapiro, «A note on the origin of the term "social science"», *Journal of the history of the behavioral sciences*, 20, 1984

- d) the distinction between «sociologie scientifique» and «sociologie populaire»,⁸ epitomizing the crucial distinction between «a proper and systematized social science discourse system» and the «ultimately too free-ranging social discourse system»⁹ of public opinion; and
- e) the distinction between sociology and art - in its twofold meaning of form of description of society within society and form of policy-oriented intervention on society.

By the Thirties these problems have lost any relevance while sociology turned to be defined «as a clear and logically consistent science»,¹⁰ or as «a collective and impersonal science, independent of the doctrines of any particular thinker, continuing to progress, when he has disappeared».¹¹ As early as 1932, the question about «What is sociology?» is considered as «an old and vexing question».¹²

A viable answer is then to be found either in «a definition of sociology derived from titles of courses» which also testifies the internal differentiation the discipline has achieved. Or in the «sociology of sociology» which, as early as 1935, is defining a form in the «self-understanding» of the discipline at the risk of «degenerating into an indefinite duplication while analyzing itself».¹³

In so far as it seems plausible to define history of sociological thought as a second-order observation coming about as early as the publishing of disciplinarily sociological textbooks and dictionaries, treatises on the origins of the discipline and bibliographies entirely devoted to sociology, that history has yet to deal with a situation in which sociology *did* already

⁸ C. Bouglé, «La sociologie populaire et l'histoire» (orig. published in 1899), in Id., *Qu'est-ce que la sociologie*, Paris, 1925. An equivalent distinction had been drawn by F. Tönnies in his review essay of E. Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique*, Paris, 1895, published in the *Soziologische Studien und Kritiken*, III, quoted from the English translation in W.J. Cahnman (ed.), *Ferdinand Tönnies. A new evaluation*, Leiden, 1973. Tönnies defines *Les règles* as belonging «to the efforts that distinguish a scientific from a rhetorical sociology», *loc. cit.*

⁹ See H. Nowotny, «Knowledge for certainty: poverty, welfare institutions and the institutionalization of social sciences» in P. Wagner, B. Wittrock, R. Whitley (eds.), *Discourses on society. The shaping of the social science disciplines*, cit.

¹⁰ P.A. Sorokin, «Rejoinder notes on “What is sociology?”», *Social Forces*, X, 1931-32

¹¹ P. Fauconnet, «Current Sociology. The Durkheim school in France», cit

¹² S.A. Rice, «What is sociology?», *Social Forces*, X, 1931-32

¹³ R. Aron, *La sociologie allemande contemporaine*, Paris, Puf, 1935

exist. History of sociological thought doesn't question positive answers about the existence of sociology. Despite, quite differently from being «a mechanical transcription of the original»,¹⁴ it commutates the problem of defining sociology and its scientific domain into an exclusively sociological question not deserving any further answer. If this question is posed in a sociological way, that is to say at least in form of an «exegesis of existing texts»,¹⁵ then the existence of the discipline doesn't depend on possible answers but on recursive production of the question itself. This implies that sociology has definitely become capable of finding «justification in [its] own circularity and cannot but produce regularities that regulate themselves and that govern the transformation of their own regularities».¹⁶

Nevertheless are the decades at the turn of the century those which constitute a crucial and particularly intensive phase in the development of a scientific reflection about society. Independently of different patterns affecting the origins of the discipline in both Europe and the States, sociology is the outcome of converging cross-national processes of differentiation and autonomization of its semantics as well as its structure which was permitted by high level of redundancy that (sociological) communication about society had previously achieved. Nevertheless, this obviously doesn't imply any assumption about a wide consent among first generations of sociologists about the discipline, its scope and its subject-matter. At the same time this doesn't either imply to overlook different national patterns in the institutionalization of sociology which are depending on different factors such as «the resource base of the discipline, the competitive nature of an expanding educational system, and an influential sponsorship by influential groups».¹⁷

¹⁴ M. Mulkay, «Don Quixote's double. A self-exemplifying text» in S. Woolgar (ed.), *Knowledge and reflexivity. New frontiers in the sociology of knowledge*, London, 1988

¹⁵ B.S. Turner, «Classical sociology and its legacy», *The Sociological Review*, 36 (1), 1988

¹⁶ G. Teubner, «How the law thinks: toward a constructivist epistemology of law», *Law & Society Review*, XXIII, 5, (1989)

¹⁷ D.E. Sutherland, «Who reads European sociology? Reflections on the relationships between European and American sociology», *Journal of the history of sociology*, I (1), 1978

If the question about the origins of sociology takes this form which is at the same time expressing a deep dissatisfaction with traditional sociological models on the institutionalization of innovations in higher education, then different theoretical convergences could be suggested. On the one hand, the very concept of semantics may be reformulated taking into account not only methodological outcomes of Foucault's effort, in terms of determination of discontinuities and «functional conditions of specific discursive practices»,¹⁸ but also suggestions arising within the new history of political theory with particular respect to concepts such as «canon» and «authorship». In this direction, it might be possible to develop a theory of the author both as a condensation point of ideas formerly floating within the disciplinary discourse of a science as well as an effective structure of scientific argumentation. On the other hand, the inquiry into the structure of social system of science might be effectively pursued with the aid of theoretical devices deriving from both traditional sociology of science and post-Kuhnian oriented, constructivist sociology of scientific knowledge.

The research work focuses on these processes with particular concern to both theoretical weaponry and institutional structure of the earlier development of sociology. Whereas the former is the outcome of increasing stratification within sociological semantics, the latter is related to the constitution of a network of research institutions, learned societies and disciplinary journals. This network enables both formal and informal communication among social scientists, although a reassessment of balance concerning forms of communication in the light of communication technologies is still far from being accomplished.

¹⁸ M. Foucault, *Language, counter-memory, practice*, Ithaca, 1977