

Eigen-Mechanism and the History of Sociology: A reflexive Writing*

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The starting question of this puzzling over which we tried to make clear in the title of our talk is the following one: why do sociologists, when they write the history of sociology, forget that they are sociologists? In other words, how can we explain the very peculiar fact that sociologists do not usually use the concepts of sociology when they re-read sociology?

1.

By turning science into an object of sociological inquiry, the Mertonian sociology of science also proved so effective in the analysis of its own forming that the application of its research program to the observation of sociology itself seemed to grant the validity of claims as to the scientific character of the discipline. In so doing, sociology came to be considered as the likely target for a sociological inquiry whose main concern was either to account for the position of the discipline within science, or to highlight processes whereby sociology was eventually set free from extra-scientific concerns. This stance was consistently deployed in Merton's distinction between the 'history' and 'systematics' of sociological theory. The latter represents the selective accumulation of those parts of earlier theories that have survived the test of empirical research. The former includes those theoretical conceptions dissipated by empirical testing, the false starts and archaic doctrines of the past. At the stage of a sociological inquiry into sociology, the division of labour between history and systematics was granted by repeating the distinctive features of the *standard view* of science. Science is regarded by such a *standard view* as the intellectual undertaking which provides a true description of reality as it is. Once subjective factors, social elements, and private interests are neutralised, observation enables regularities and law-like generalisations devoid of any bias whatsoever to be achieved. By assuming that laws of observation are prior to any theoretical formalisation, these can be given the status of *truth*, since they are meant to belong to the structure of the natural

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world. It is reality itself which decides between true and false. Whereas theories substitute for each other, the *standard view* considers that observations gradually accumulate since new theories may incorporate previous observations. Hence, science is but a never ending accumulation within the main dimension of observation. For discontinuities in theories do not seriously affect the general dynamic of science, inasmuch as theory is conceived of as a surface occurrence merely codifying observation. As a result, narrating the history of science from the *standard view* standpoint corresponds to establishing the chronicle of such a cognitive process of accumulation.

Even when anti-positivistic and anti-realistic stances seemed to directly undermine the *standard view*, quite often they had to be rejected for they would have put in danger any sociological quest for scientificity and prevented the discipline from referring to the practices of science. Only when the standard view of science was seriously questioned by observing the latency of its epistemic foundations, the chance to observe and describe what “others cannot observe” (Luhmann) could be extended to the way in which sociology observed science, and therefore sociology.

A twofold question marked this period: to what extent could sociology approach science scientifically and, consequently, would it ever reach a satisfactory degree of scientific self-description?

In this talk, we wish to provide some sketchy hints as to under which conditions a sociological approach to the constitution of a scientific discipline may come about in order to be reflexively implemented to sociology itself.

We argue that forms whereby sociology has traditionally defined its own functioning and written its own history have to be seriously questioned in the wake of constructivist approach which take processes of constitution of sociology into a scientific discipline as their very subject matter. Those forms always resorted to a specific method and logic, whereas they preserved a particular way of conceiving rationality which granted a privileged status to science. By so doing science (and sociology therefore) proved its own superiority over the whole range of cognitive activities.

However, if the crisis of neo-empiricism has, since the mid-sixties, questioned the certainties that led to a clear distinction between science and other human activities, its impact on social sciences has also undermined the overall reliability of parameters whereby such disciplines differentiated from what remains outside their boundaries. Such a new research program should start from a phenomenon known since its origins by sociology, even if sociology has always tried to keep its effects out of the process of theory building: I mean *reflexivity*.

When dealing with the question as to how to define sociology, reflexivity calls for a differential treatment of two dimensions which in the *standard view* of science were taken as coupled: scientificity and cumulativity. By this very decoupling, a sociology of sociological knowledge becomes possible for

constraining effects of scientificity are seriously weakened. From that it ensues a greater relevance taken by the generic dimension of cumulativeness in terms of the capacity for growth and accumulation which a discipline enacts by drawing on the heritage of its past statements.

On the one hand, this enables to examine any cognitive system without attributing it any *a priori* relevant epistemological differences when compared to other cognitive systems; on the other it allows to observe sociology by emphasizing the inter-textual foundation of knowledge. This stance suggests a convergence among::

1. Foucauldian post-structuralism, according to which cleavages in the historical succession of *episteme* introduce a conception of the social cognitive legacy that cannot be reduced to any infinitesimal cumulation of knowledge;
2. Luhman's systems theory, which directly relates a theory of society to the study of the cognitive processes at work in science, and according to which any social determination is a reduction of complexity;
3. sociology of scientific knowledge, which underlines the reflexive component of the social construction of sciences.

As a result, sociology can be epitomized to a minimal definition that would represent a research program differing from that used on the basis of the categorial model where subjects describe pre-existing objects. The most efficient solution is a definition of sociology as *a form of description of society within society among others*.

Within such a framework, sociology appears as a set of thematically specialized statements within a wider communicational frame, whose persistence depends on its belonging to communication. So, any set of statements expresses itself autonomously without being predominantly linked to a subject because, as a reflexive set of discursively and structurally connected statements, it defines an anonymous space in which even authors represent a derived function. This conception, which considers sociological knowledge as an object of its research, no longer needs to invest cognitive resources in order to impute any set of statements to a social group or category.

2.

To reflexively re-write sociology, a sociological hypothesis on the origins of sociology must be first provided. The searcher becomes then aware of the importance of going back in history to achieve such a purpose. It would be so a mistake to describe the origins neglecting a concomitant examination of the influence of the narrative models of the discipline history on their representation.

A specifically socio-historical new narration of the sociology history appears then really appropriate. It must take into account the process of emergence and

constitution of the discipline in the last decades of the 19th century. This project focuses on two questions:

1. How did sociology differentiate from the other rival forms of knowledge about society?
2. Through which ways and means did sociology manage to last?

3.

An inquiry into the history of a scientific discipline conceals, however, insidious passages: the historical variability of the scientificity criteria does not overlap the historical variability of the definition criteria of the disciplines. At first sight the analytical distinction between science and discipline allows not only a further step in the understanding of the differentiation of sociology compared with a plethora of knowledges on society simultaneously at hand during the second half of the 19th century, but also to examine the selectivity process of sociology. Thanks to that process, sociology is able to elude interactional controls by other sectors of science.

As a science, sociology had to solve the following problem: how referring a form of description of society to society itself? Claims to be part of the system of science impose a production of standard statements which had to be organized according to historically strengthened models of scientificity. The transmission, the institutionalization and the teaching of those statements have then created a progressive development of a specific language adapted to the object processing.

This shows the importance of the discursive practices in the affirmation of a scientific field. Nevertheless, in order to distinguish those statements from the common use of language, sociological terminology had to be submitted to a linguistic therapy.

As a discipline, the discriminating dimension whereby sociology has affirmed itself deals with its adequacy to the principle of the organization of science on the basis of the forming of specific and non-hierarchical segments. The internal differentiation of science constitutes the only process of this historical affirmation: in fact, the intensification of the scientific communication is realized through both the consolidation of singular thematic domains and a growing technicisation of specific languages which refers to strict rules defining new linguistic conventions.

That way, the access to particular domains of science is also reduced and limited to specialists of the sub-systemic forms of disciplinary communication whose probability of intervene on other segment decreases accordingly.

Thus, the novelty brought about by the 19th century is the constitution of a specific field, of a distinct discipline aiming at the scientific description of society. It is, however, important to note that this historical path sets some constraints: a discipline must provide a form of self-description that allows a

self-conformity to the principle of internal organization of science. This implies that a discipline has to clearly answer the problem of its positioning in the frame of the other disciplinary segments. Such a positioning can no longer be thought either in terms of a hierarchical over-determination of sociology as the science of sciences, or in terms of a reduction of its cognitive legacy to an ordinary methodological toolbox. Thus, any reliable model to observe and describe the disciplines genealogy must refer to both the *cognitive differentiation process* and its *institutional autonomisation*. This urges then to distinguish between the two dimensions.

Cognitive differentiation means the autonomisation process of a thematic context able to grant the recursivity of communication —that is to say, the differentiation of a specific research field that is able to deal with, and to react upon, theoretical self-produced problems. Recursivity means in fact that what is done is partly determined by previous operations. States of the system produced by its own operations can be used as a criterion in order to accept or refuse the further operations.

The *institutional autonomisation* represents the chance that the communicational distinction fits the constitution of specific spaces within the institutional structure on the basis of a shared ideal of science. The degree of institutionalization shows to what extent the cognitive differentiation is recognized as an autonomous social domain that can set its own rules in an independent way and without overlapping other domains.

The cross tabulation of the four dimensions (discipline, science, cognitive differentiation, institutional autonomisation) enables the study of a wide historical range of forms of description of society.

Thinking in terms of the differentiation sheds a new light on the order of historical mechanisms whereby sociology has been constituting as a discipline in the late 19th century. Several theories qualified for a radicalized description of society were already available within the conceptual legacy in which sociology came into being, but choosing among these positions would have determined the impossibility to specify itself as a thematic and autonomous new domain. Consequently, the constitution of sociology happened according to a twofold strategy: on the one hand, sociology has to submit to the limitations imposed by the necessity of differentiating itself from the non-scientific forms of description of society; on the other hand, it must take into account how to operate when most segments of the communicative domain of science were already engaged.

4.

The institutionalization of sociology took place between 1890 and 1920 thanks principally to its penetration in the universities which grant both cognitive differentiation and institutional autonomisation. Significantly, after this period

of installation, the questions related to the demarcation of boundaries and to the determination of discipline identity no longer raise any interest. From then on, the definition of sociology has no longer been a problem, but the teaching of its foundation become the actual problem.

It is easy to note that, since the thirties, reviews and books deal less and less with the questions related to the definition of sociology. On the contrary, the number of pages devoted to an historical approach of the disciplinary identity keep increasing.

Through the thematization of questions as to the history of sociology, the past of the discipline is built up. However, the constitution of a historical identity of sociology is sometimes awkward: in the thirties, sociologists redefine it quite differently from what it was at its beginning. Whereas early sociology refused any personalization by insisting on the cognitive specificity of the discipline, the *a posteriori* re-writing of the history of sociology forgot its previous desire for anonymity by stressing the supposedly determinant role of the “founding fathers”. On the contrary we suggest that founding fathers are to be considered to as communicational units strengthening the memory of the discursive recursivity of the discipline. The reinforcement of the discipline comes from a semantic enrichment consolidating its own structuration out of a field of objects, techniques and various methods, as well as from the inclusion-exclusion of semiotic alternative fields.

According to a constructivist perspective, this awkward character of sociology can be explained by distinguishing author and discipline as two organizational principles of discourse. An *author* in new sociological discourse is no longer only the one who says or writes. An author gets a scientific status by speaking in the name of a founding father; thus, she appears as an organizational principle, as the origin and the source of its re-found meaning, as the authorized interpret of its coherence, giving therefore the illusion of erasing her own personality in order to let the discipline speak anonymously.

Thus, author and discipline do not only represent two alternative principles of the discourse organization. They also represent two fairly diverse mechanisms of temporalization which allow the constitution of the memory of a discursive domain. This let the paradoxical dimension of sociology emerge: current re-writing of the past is generally thought as a yard stick to determine tools, techniques and problems of the current research.

To conclude, we can say that such a sacralization of the classics fulfills a crucial communicational function in the development of sociology, since it supplies integration of disciplinary components in the field of the theoretical discourse. From the perspective of sociology as a system, such an integration does not aim at achieving the equilibrium or cooperation of the parts, but it simply aims at controlling, closing and maintaining the discipline boundaries—that is to say the regulation of the discipline as a system. From the perspective of the discipline as a system, that is also to say the recursive and reflexive application

of operations to the discipline itself in order to strengthen it thanks to such an eigen-mechanism of stabilization.

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