

A Reflexive Writing of the History of Sociology

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I

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 and functioning 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 in turn 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 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. No matter how fragmented, this is a progressive process. 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.

Within this understanding of science, philosophy of science has been acting as a mechanism whereby the self-description of science is achieved. No doubt disciplines such as sociology and history may be concerned with the social and historical dynamic of science, but providing a definition of science as such is the exclusive task of epistemology. Therefore, even deciding whether the former can

claim the status of science falls within the competence of the latter. Thus, a circular device comes into being between a definition of science and the practices actually at work in science. Its purpose can be represented as a recursive foundation capable of securing the self-legitimation of science. Since any critique of science must comply with scientific standards, science increases its capacity for immunisation. Such a device hinges upon a clear distinction between science and pre- or non-science, and at the same time grants the disciplinary distinction between philosophy of science [which deals with 'rational' argumentation], and sociology of science [which focuses on the cultural, social, and political process surrounding the production, transmission and reception of science]. Yet, as the two disciplines could only partly account for the production of knowledge, it has to be assumed that what they cannot explain belongs to the specific techniques of each discipline.

In so doing, the *standard view* was able to consider science as a well-defined set of knowable proceedings. Scientific knowledge, on the contrary, was still viewed as a black box. Operations enabling scientific observation to come about were ontologically regarded as a matter of fact independent of observation. No question had to be stated as to methods by which observation is connected to a transcendental reality supposedly residing beyond the outside of the observing unit. The nature of this connection lay beyond the domain of sociological analysis. No second order observation could take place. Accordingly, one could safely investigate moral constraints at work in science inasmuch as they were taken as socially structured and organised. But by no means could such an investigation be extended to the technical or methodological measures enabling scientific knowledge to accurately represent the world, for these measures were assumed to be socially neutral.

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.

II

In order to fully deploy a sociology of sociological knowledge, it seems safe to indicate a twofold question as a starting point: to what extent could sociology gain a scientific approach to science and, consequently, would it ever achieve a satisfactory degree in scientific self-description? In a constructivist perspective, this means investigating the conditions under which a sociology of the constitutive processes of a scientific discipline may come about, and reflexively applying the same theoretical framework in order to approach the re-writing of history of sociology itself.

That is why sociology of sociological knowledge calls for an overall reconsideration of forms through which sociology has traditionally defined its own functioning and narrated its own history. By resorting to a specific 'method' and logic, these forms made appeal to highly localised criteria of rationality both ensuring a privileged status to science (thus to sociology) and enabling it to prove

its own superiority over the whole range of cognitive activities. However, as the crisis of neo-empiricism has made clear, a clear-cut demarcation between science and other human activities cannot be granted by virtue of methodological rules, for as soon as one accepts dealing with reflexivity, the question of demarcation itself must be attentively reconsidered.

So far, issues of reflexivity have not received adequate treatment within the sociological tradition. In order to develop a sociology of sociological knowledge, one has on the contrary to seriously confront different forms of reflexivity. These forms can be defined as cognitive, structural, and embedded reflexivity.

Cognitive reflexivity pertains to the capacity for awareness and reflection. It occurs in all the manifestations of reflexive monitoring of action which is intrinsic to part of human activities. By enacting such a “benign introspection”, one can think more deeply about what she is doing. Sometimes, for instance in scientific work, this reflection might involve or occasion the self-implication of structural reflexivity, but in this form reflexivity can be easily kept under control. On the contrary, any attempt to extend it from the level of consciousness to society necessarily leads to structural and embedded reflexivity: sociology is observing a society that is already observing itself, and these self-observations may guide sociology own observations.

No matter how these considerations seem to deeply undermine any persistence of sociology as a fully-differentiated scientific discipline and the extent of its autonomy, quite surprisingly the theory has not worked out any adequate form of self-implication which could instead be achieved by meeting the requirements set by both structural and embedded reflexivity. In other words, if theory can both perceive itself as being part of the object it describes and display sensitivity to the implications of that, description should then account for the consequences of such being part and not simply acknowledge them.

Structural reflexivity refers to those dimensions of representation which involve some degree of self-reference or self-implication by a statement or a set of statements. Whereas some statements self-refer in a trivial and ordinary way, from the ‘liar paradox’ onwards it has been realised that statements of this self-referential type may produce paradoxes. In Western philosophical tradition, attempts to neutralise the paradoxes of self-reference often led to excluding from the reference of a claim the claim itself. To prevent statements of a self-referential type giving rise to paradoxes, a distinction needs to be introduced so that the claim itself refers to a restricted portion of statements. This ensures that the statement is safely asserted. As long as the statement can be ascribed to a higher order (a metalevel) the self-reference can be avoided, and the paradox dissolves. Nevertheless, such a form of reflexive problem can hardly be suppressed. No matter how far one proceeds in the hierarchy of metalevels, the introduction of a new level makes a further paradox inevitable. As Gödel’s proof has shown, any self-referential approach cannot but lead to a paradox, and the paradox blocks the construction of the theory. Not even the implementation of highly formalised frameworks

¹ In this light, one can also understand the “institutional reflexivity” of modernity. According to Anthony Giddens, the institutional reflexivity refers to the fundamental structural dimension of modern society in which the regularised use of knowledge about social life turns to be a constitutive element in its organisation and transformation.

constitutes a solution, for logico-linguistical self-inclusion cannot be avoided in formal axiomatisation .

At least since Karl Mannheim, sociology itself has been intrigued by structural reflexivity. Yet, it has stubbornly refused to recognise not only that such paradoxes can be found to the same extent within the basic statements of its theories, but also that, without an extensive redefinition of theory-design, paradoxes inevitably affect the performances of theory itself.

Embedded reflexivity refers to the inseparability of representation and represented. It therefore implies a rejection of the idea that the observation of phenomena can be conceived of as independent of those phenomena. Representation and the represented object are so strongly interdependent that the sense of the former is elaborated by drawing on 'knowledge of' the latter, and this knowledge is elaborated by what is known about the former. The nature of representation, as it is perceived by that who enacts it, changes to match the perceived character of the underlying reality while the latter simultaneously transforms to match the former. Thus, establishing a connection between representation and represented is a back-and-forth process. Within radical constructivism, the notion of embedded reflexivity can be expressed by saying that one can only observe what one can distinguish and indicate. One needs a distinction in order to articulate the field one is faced with and to produce a cut, for in the world there are no distinctions and no negations. What is given is simply given, and positive. There are no "negative objects", since only an observer can identify an absence or a distinction.

Post-empiricist philosophy and historiography of science have shown the extent to which even in the very practices of science embedded reflexivity cannot be avoided, for the theory-ladenness of observation puts dramatically into question the idea of having a direct access to reality and therefore makes untenable the model of empirical validation put forward by the *standard view* of science.

III

In the *standard view*, science was conceived of as the substantive accumulation of 'truths' and the continuous elimination of errors. The notion of scientificity and the postulate of accumulation were thereby strictly coupled. Whereas the task of scientific theories was meant to be knowing reality as it is, this coupling always permitted to acknowledge failures arising from a lower representative capability of some theories without excluding that even in these cases any approximation to reality could be achieved, albeit to a lesser extent. This implicitly suggested that current procedures for producing new outcomes were immune from any future change. Whereas this assumption protected science against the emergence of reflexivity, it prompted a kind of historical investigations in which scientific theories of the past were asked for the "reasons of their immaturity" (Canguilhem).

On the contrary, as soon as reflexivity is taken into account, scientificity and accumulation have to be uncoupled, and each of them has to be given separate sociological treatment. This has far-reaching consequences on the way of conceiving of 'truth', and narrating its history. Truth now can only be regarded as an operator regulating communication among others, or, in other words, as a set of ruled procedures for producing, circulating and functioning of statements (Foucault). As operator, truth has no relationship to the objectivity of reality: it only

permits to distinguish between true and false statements. In turn, true and false do not refer either to objects or to forms of reality. On the contrary, they are communication marks indicating which options are available when a knowledge claim is evaluated: whether to go on taking for granted what is meant to be true or to stop and think about the conditions under which a statement has been held as false.

Such a definition of truth also implies that it is no longer safe to rely on the distinction between internal versus external history, and to hope that the former can offer some help against the destabilising effects of the latter. Once it is accepted that truth has an historicity, one should ask how it is possible to analyse the historicity of truth in the absence of the guarantees of truth. Accordingly, the way of approaching disciplinary histories should be deeply reconsidered, for it has become clear that any disciplinary narration cannot but relate to both a basic question and a set of theoretical devices, each of them finding the conditions of their possibility in that history itself. To borrow a phrase from W.H. Auden, narrating the history of a discipline is going through a “regressive road to the grandmother’s house”. No doubt, the origins of the discipline can be investigated, 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, as an internalist approach would claim, but quite a complex process strongly affecting the proper dynamic of the discipline itself. In fact, quite differently from being a mechanical transcription of the original, any disciplinary history turns the problem of defining a discipline and its scientific domain into a disciplinary question not deserving any further answer. That is why variations within such an internal and self-validating process of accounting a disciplinary history may support variations in defining the scientific domain of a discipline itself.

Needless to say, one might then be tempted to take up the postmodern predicament and conclude that, once truth has been dismantled, the unity of science can only be represented in negative as the impossibility of a grand narrative. But this, rather than an end, should be the beginning of an inquiry into forms whereby science (and sociology therefore) brings about its self-observation and self-description.

Yet a host of epistemic cautions needs to be put forward, for reflexivity imposes demanding requirements when theoretical devices for observing science are developed. Above all, it requires that the relation between observation and self-observation comes to the fore in the overall theory-design. In that claims and doubts cannot but include the entity expressing them, they force theory to bring about at least some capacity for self-observation. Theory has to make explicit how it theorises about itself and where places itself in its universal claims.

This stance is but the result of the demise of trust in the transparency of concepts. No one would question that scientific observation is achieved only through concepts, but now these are merely regarded as means through which the social differentiation of scientific from ordinary communication occurred. Accordingly, it is also no longer needed to work out any metatheory nor to combine weakened forms of constructivism when dealing with the issue as to the nature of theory with amended forms of empiricism when dealing with the issue as to what theory observes and how it validates what it observes. In fact, whereas these solutions resort to the common strategy of shifting to a metalevel whose regression is either interrupted with no reason or prevented by appealing to a dualistic approach to

science, by putting the emphasis on the question as to the distinctions used by an observer and the operations performed to make observation possible, nothing is left behind or beyond such a question. No doubt, one can say that this way of proceeding 'leads nowhere', but then she still has the burden of proving that getting nowhere cannot itself be an accomplishment.

If in the wake of the current deconstruction of metaphysics, this question can be re-stated in terms of second order observation, a "dynamic of iterative reconceptualisation" has to be consistently deployed (Woolgar). As soon as one turns to the issue of describing society, the starting point of any second order observation is to attribute any description of society to an observer which cannot but be in society itself.

IV

The rejection of an external observer describing society urges treatment of the description of society which sociology carries out by including sociology itself in what it observes. Sociology aims at observing and describing modern society. In so doing, it entertains a circular relation with its object, for the achievement of such an aim cannot but take place within society. This project does not stem from a definition of its object, since nothing is said about society by merely referring to it in order to define what sociology does. The problem arises from being the definition of the object one of the operations which constitute the object itself. Being part and parcel of the operation enabling the system to work, such a description has therefore to describe itself as well.

Thus, sociology observes society from within. This implies that it is no longer safe to refer to an epistemological framework in which subjects describe pre-existing objects whose unity and continuity are taken as self-evident. As a result, sociology can only be conceived of as *a form of description of society within society* among others, i.e. as a set of statements delimiting a same subject. Like any specialised set of statements, the description of society that sociology carries out constitutes the outcome of a thematic differentiation in a wider communicative context.

Once this stance is taken, one can no longer argue that the process of disciplinary differentiation of sociology has to be merely conceived of as reproduction of structures, for these only help certain events become more likely than others. Moreover, as deconstruction has made clear, each event appearing "on the scene of presence" is related to something other than itself, whereas this trace is related no less "to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and constituting what is called the present by means of this very relation to what it is not" (Derrida). Nor can one only refer to the totality of existing texts nor to the constitution of an established canon of seminal works, to a suitable combination of which the identity of the discipline might be reduced. For in this case one should still make sense of the way in which evolutionary mechanisms such as variation, selection and retention are actually at work in bringing about such a combination. Rather, one should investigate such a process by focusing on the way in which communicative events happen to be connected within a particular form of organisation differentiating them from the totality of communications on the basis of a central distinction.

No doubt, here one might be tempted by post-structuralism inasmuch as it has shown the extent to which any set of statements is submitted to regularities and transformations at work independently of individuals or collective carriers. Post-

structuralist archaeology indeed programmatically investigates scientific discourse not from the point of view of the individuals who are speaking, nor from the perspective of the formal structures of what they say, rather from the point of view of “the rules that come into play in the existence of such discourse” (Foucault). Unlike words, sentences and propositions, statements include in themselves as derivatives both the functions of subject and object as well as that of concept. The correlative space is then composed by the discursive order of the positions taken by subject, object, and concept within a given set of statements. That which seems to be an accident when seen from the perspective of words, sentences and propositions constitutes the rule under the statement’s point of view. Moreover, post-structuralism has shown to what extent a reflexive set of discursively and structurally connected statements defines an anonymous space in which the subject as well as the author is but “an empty function”, i.e. a “vacant place that may in fact be filled by different individuals” (Foucault) Yet, no matter how radical its break with all forms of speculation based on the continuity of consciousness, the universality of human nature, and the separation between subject and object of knowledge, post-structuralism has failed to take the necessary consequences of its own theory-design, and eventually resorted to the concept of power in order to externalise reflexivity.

In this respect, a dynamical notion such as autopoiesis may offer a much more consistent insight. Autopoiesis implies conceiving of a system as defined by its elementary operations which produce and reproduce a network reproducing such elementary operations. Hence, only operations which the system itself has produced can be used. Such a closure provides the system with the capacity for building its own complexity. External disturbances may stimulate selection, but this remains an exclusively internal process. No point-to-point relation between system and environment needs to be postulated, for through variation the system gains an internal supply of likely reactions to external disturbances so that it can then select among them without implementing any instruction from its environment. Systems are therefore incommensurable with one another. No transfer of processes among systems can occur without a radical change of their meaning. Devoid of any substantial identity or structure from which further linkages can be drawn, the ability to connect communications is the crucial condition of autopoiesis.

An autopoietic system has no teleological orientation besides its self-reference. Evolutionary mechanisms are mutually independent. Thus, there are no tight causal links between necessities set by selection and the occurrence and form of variations. One can therefore argue that interdependency between variations and the imperatives of selection is interrupted since evolution is a blind process.

The persistence of a system may be granted only if an element is produced in order to be connected, for the only necessity is to prevent the system from disappearing. Therefore, rather than the reproduction of structures, it is only the chance to establish connections to represent the indispensable factor for any system. No matter how extended the range of likely selections, the system has to reduce such a plurality of connective communications, for it has no foundation or computational rule. As an evolutionary mechanism, selection is a contingent act transforming disturbances into path sequences of the system conditioned by the history of the system itself. (Stichweh, 1995: 6) The structural determination of those elements which have to follow is achieved by excluding other possibilities. Actual connections presuppose the exclusion of likely connections so that the

system may produce new communications. Hence, the necessity of autopoiesis and the contingency of any connection whatsoever are two sides of the same coin.

V

Due to its constructivist stance, Sociology of sociological knowledge does not attribute any *a priori* epistemological difference between sociology and other forms of description of society within society. Quite the contrary, it put into question the commonly held understanding of the differentiation of those contexts of communication which are specifically aimed at advancing knowledge about society and which autonomously assess what can be expected from theories and methods. In an historical perspective, Sociology of sociological knowledge calls for an inquiry into the early stages of the discipline when sociology succeeded in autonomously adapting to the principle of the internal organisation of science along autonomous and non-hierarchical segments.

Only at the turn of the century has sociology differentiated from other forms of description of society by producing independent communicative units reproducing the distinction between the inside and the outside of a disciplinary segment. This has been achieved by feeding the communication cycle of the discipline with particular expectations, thematic definitions and codified identities. The internal differentiation of science constitutes the main pre-condition of this process, since the intensification of scientific communication is realised through the consolidation of specific thematic domains and an increasing technicisation of specific languages which refer to rules defining linguistic habits and conventions. In this way, the access to each domain of science is reduced and limited to the specialists of disciplinary communication whose chance to affect other segments decreases accordingly.

At an early stage, paralleled by the stabilisation of the term 'sociology' as distinguished from 'social science', this process enabled an increasing amount of communication to refer to a single operational domain which underwent a process of self-organisation. Structures started to be internally generated so to organise externally produced knowledge from a plurality of sources. Yet, two questions were still to be answered, namely those relating to the scientific status of sociology as well as to its location within science (Parsons). The former concerns the extent to which standards of scientific adequacy and objectivity came to be established as the working code of sociology, enabling it to differentiate from non-scientific forms of description of society within society. This involved the differentiation of sociology from literature and art as well as from that rich yet non-systematic knowledge we use to conduct our daily business of life (Bauman). Since the turn of the century, such an issue has been stated by distinguishing "scientific sociology" from "popular sociology". Such a plea for a scientific sociology urged an answer to the question as to how theory related to practice compelling (Durkheim), which was often stated by distinguishing sociology and art, the latter corresponding to the ancient meaning of the word, i.e. as a set of techniques conforming to rules implemented to secure a form of intervention on society.

The latter dimension in the constitution of sociology concerns the clarity of the differentiation from neighbouring scientific forms of description of society. The constitution of the discursive space of early sociology was constrained by pre-existing cognitively differentiated scientific forms of describing society. The establishment of sociology could only succeed by setting a domain which did not

consist of a duplication of those belonging to other scientific disciplines. Yet, this implied that the discipline had to autonomously work out a form of self-description that enhanced self-conformity to the principle of the internal organisation of science by clearly responding to the question as to its location towards other disciplinary segments. Such a location could no longer be thought of in terms of a higher ranking of sociology as the science of sciences as Comte suggested, nor in terms of a reduction of its memory to a mere methodological toolbox as recommended outside its boundaries.

This point is properly made in Simmel's 1895 paper on the problem of sociology, by raising the question whether sociology had to be conceived of as a discipline or simply as "a method of investigation, a directive principle which can be made fruitful in an endless number of the most different fields of science, without being itself a science" (Simmel, 1895: 413).

Being a latecomer not only urged sociology to confront a scientific system already differentiated into several disciplines working as equivalent segments, with no internal hierarchy, it also meant that its domain had to be exclusive. That is why although early sociology took society as its object, disentangling it from its location within former distinctions (state/society, individual/society), the discipline had to autonomously control claims to a higher ranking among the social sciences which stemmed from within its discursive space.

Under this condition, knowledge started to be received from "special sciences" and organised according to new criteria. In 1898, the preface to the *Année Sociologique* programmatically stated:

Our role as critics must be to extract from the works we study the objective residue, that is, the suggestive facts and the fruitful insights - whether they be interesting for their intrinsic value or because of the discussion they evoke.... [W]hatever little remains after a critical evaluation, that much is gained for science ... Since many of [the works with which we have to deal] are not explicitly sociological, we could not be satisfied with giving their contents, with merely expounding, as it were, the materials they contain; as far as possible, we had to submit them to a preliminary elaboration which would indicate to the reader what information contained in them is useful to the sociologist (Durkheim, 1898: I-VII).

Through the "preliminary elaboration" a pristine though unstable distinction between internal and external communication becomes possible. The latter cannot be immediately connected to other elements of the former. On the contrary, internal communication must be retained. Even "the mediocre products must be noted; they form an element of the whole" (Letter of E. Durkheim to C. Bouglé dated June 20th, 1897)

At a later stage, elements and operations could no longer be introduced into the system from its environment. The system might still be affected by stimulations and disturbances originating in the environment, but under no occasion were these perturbations internalised as constitutive elements of the ongoing processes of the system. This later status achieved by sociology set the process of problem articulation, theory generation, data handling, and knowledge organisation free from any interactional control from other spheres of society. In 1897, Paul Lapie envisaged this process by saying that at stake was "the necessity to do *sociology sociologically*, that is to say, without referring that science back to something other than itself" (quoted from Besnard).

While such an operational closure of sociology secured the recursive organisation of the discipline independently of the proper dynamics of other functionally differentiated sub-systems, at the same time it increased the autonomy of the discipline with respect to other sciences. On the one hand, this process implied that information about the environment was coupled with the proper dynamics of the system. On the other, it followed that the discipline produced its own distinctions as to what had to be considered as information and what not.

By the 1930s problems concerning the scientific status of sociology and its relation to other disciplines had lost most of their relevance when compared to the heated debate at the turn of the century. Sociology came to be defined “as a clear and logically consistent science” (Sorokin, 1932), or as “a collective and impersonal science, independent of the doctrines of any particular thinker, continuing to progress, when he has disappeared” (Fauconnet, 1927: 16). The very question “What is sociology?” was now considered as an old and vexing question.

A viable answer was then to be found either in “a definition of sociology derived from titles of courses” which also testifies the internal differentiation the discipline had achieved. Nevertheless it is indeed at this stage that a plausible answer is also sought in (writing) the history of the discipline.

From the Twenties to the early Thirties the setting of the historical identity of the discipline became one of the crucial issues in sociological debates. Through the thematisation of its proper history, sociology stabilised its boundaries both by selecting its subject matter and “scientific domain”, as well as by determining the range of theories and methods permitted within its discursive space. This operation was also indirectly performed by defining the cluster and the level of legitimacy of the “founding fathers” of the discipline. Whereas early sociologists envisaged the development of the discipline independently of any “emphasis on the individuality of the initiator” (Brandford), at this stage such “Gründer der Soziologie” or “Makers of sociology” entered the disciplinary discourse in a highly personalised form. As communicative units, they help reduce the range of likely selections in terms of theories and methods and prompt new connections by means of secondary literature aimed at the understanding of sociological classics. Hence, it would be pointless to question whether this effect is achieved through the fine-tuning of what a “founding father” said or by actively reducing her contribution to those parts of it which the discipline has already selected and retained.

At this stage, the discursive space of sociology develops so to stand the increased amount of semantical artefacts which the discipline produces. New operative principles allow sociology to work by focusing either on its systematics or its history. No matter if conceived of in terms of theoretical conceptions, false starts and archaic doctrines or as a collection of different authors’ contributions, the history of sociology helps the discipline continuously perform its distinction from other forms of description of society, whether they belong to the context of communication of science or not. In so doing, sociology became a fully differentiated scientific discipline, although one must not assume that its history has been written only once and for ever.

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