

Reflexivity and Postmodernity in Sociological Theory

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I

The individual/society distinction has served as the starting point for the differentiation of sociology as a scientific discipline. Functionally equivalent distinctions such as subjectivity/social order and identity/culture have been more recently used to enforce the state sociology has achieved. Nevertheless, as Jacques Derrida has shown, these like any distinction can easily be deconstructed. Yet, it would be mistaken to claim that the only conclusion of such way of proceeding would be what is traditionally meant by relativism, i.e. a theory of knowledge which, no longer able to distinguish between true and false, legitimises an *everything goes* situation the performance of which would be to construct likely agents matching any new opinion when it appears. The problem of relativism is in fact a by-product of the implicit individualism sustaining classical epistemology, according to which the individual (or a plurality of isolated individuals) constitutes the “‘subjective’ correlate of knowledge” (Luhmann, 1990b, p. 100). On the contrary, as SSK has shown, as soon as the historical and social embeddedness of cognitive processes is recognized as inescapable the problem of relativism comes to its own *dis-solution* (Ashmore, 1989, pp. 87-111). Or, as AST puts it, even if it is not possible by this means to get rid of what in the terms of tradition would be described as ‘relative’, “this relative itself has become an impossible distinction, a distinction with no other side” (Luhmann, 1994b, p. 40).

The strategy that these styles of theory-building deploy arises from the demise of trust in the transparency of concepts and responds to the question as to which are the

distinctions used by an observer and which are the operations performed to make observation possible. If in the wake of the current deconstruction of metaphysics, such a question is re-stated in terms of second order observation, i.e. “observers observing observers” (Luhmann, 1994a, p. 132), this strategy calls consistently for a “dynamic of iterative reconceptualisation” (Woolgar, 1991, p. 44). 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. Unlike classical epistemology, the observer is no longer conceived of as an individual (or, at the most, as a plurality of isolated individuals). Rather, the observer is understood as a social network having communication as its own basic operative unit. This kind of system may have storage capacities though no central memory is available for operations but only the distributed memories of actors. Therefore it is a virtual system based on parallel and distributed computation that operates at the addresses of the nodes involved.

The rejection of an external observer describing society suggests constructing the description of society which sociology carries out by including sociology itself in what it observes. This would lead to a conception of sociology only as a form of description of society within society among others, i.e. as a set of statements delimiting a same subject, about which can be given historical evidence.

Post-structuralism has helped explain how statements — unlike words, sentences and propositions — 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.

From that ensues a reframing of the way of conceiving of the *self-in-the-text*. Radicalising the post-structuralist inquiry into the procedures of control and delimitation of discourse, SSK has indeed shown to what extent the author is merely one kind of agent charged with responsibility for producing representations. Non-human agents can stand as agents of representation as well. Determining the relationship between agents and object depends upon highly localised methods of attribution and assignation. Science (and, sociology therefore) should then be conceived of in terms of a

“coexistence of animate and inanimate agents in a locally constituted moral order of representation”. It would then be pointless to linger upon the scientist-author as the one responsible for advancing particular knowledge-claims, for that would lead to quite a narrow definition of agent. In particular, any move from author to self would be very limited in comparison with the move from humans to agents. As AST puts it, one can refer to authors and talk about them “without feeling the pressure to explain what one is talking about”. But authors are “‘etcetera’ terms” (Luhmann, 1997). They make communication easier, but they do not serve as concepts. Thus, the mere reference to authors should be banished in the construction of theories, for it would prevent explanations and comparisons.

The epistemic scope of such a way of proceeding should now be clear. Firstly, it means the tenet of observation having direct access to its own object is put seriously into question. The constructivist approach shared by AST, PS and SSK allows one to conceive of any cognitive act as a construction of the external world. Knowledge has therefore no access to a reality ‘out there’. Reality ‘out there’ exists but it does not provide any information as to how to deal with it. Any cognition is a purely internal construction by a cognizing unit. Any test that claims to assess the validity of internal constructions against outside reality is merely an internal comparison of diverse world constructions.

‘Truth’ is then consistently conceived of as a code, as an operator regulating communication among others, or, in other words, as a set of ruled procedures for producing, sharing, circulating and regulating statements, i.e. ‘truth’ is an intrinsically self-referential difference between true and false. As operator ‘truth’ has no relationship to the objectivity of reality: it only allows one 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.

Secondly, any dualistic conceptualisation is banished from the early stage of defining the basic procedures in theory-building. By rejecting the pristine dualism between communication and agency, AST takes communication as the only basic concept. After questioning the Anglo-Saxon empiricist distinction between representation and what is represented, SSK takes the concept of 'text' as its own starting point. These concepts have the advantage that they can be used reflexively to observe the functioning of theory itself. This allows the ongoing theory as well as alternative theories to be included within the boundaries of thematic relevance which the theory itself has set..

II

Under the heading of reflexivity different dimensions are gathered, some of which have been puzzling the Western philosophical tradition for a long time. Since Mannheim, reflexivity has entered, under different forms, the core of sociological theorizing. However, often the claim that the discipline was recently established was used as an excuse for sociology not to get engaged in the kind of problems that reflexivity raises. In the '30s, Raymond Aron warned against the possible degeneration rooted in a "sociology of sociology": such an "anxiety about self-justification" on the one hand might have led to an "endless duplication of the inquiry", on the other might have exposed the discipline to the risk of losing any "curiosity for facts" (Aron, 1935, pp. 137-139). Thus, in the sociological tradition issues of reflexivity have not received any adequate treatment. In contrast, AST, PS and SSK offer a fully-fledged way of dealing with different forms of reflexivity, which, drawing on SSK, can be defined as cognitive, structural, and embedded reflexivity.

(i) 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. What we are exhorted to it is simply a "benign introspection", whereby we can think more deeply about what we are doing. When introspection takes place in scientific work, it aims at improving the adequacy of the connection between scientists' statements and the objects of those statements. Sometimes such reflection might involve or occasion the self-implication of structural reflexivity. Yet, in this form reflexivity can be easily tamed.

This is not to say that by dealing with cognitive reflexivity one could not venture into more problematic and exciting domains, but such an option is by no means necessary, nor even particularly likely, for the postulate of a distinction between representation and its object is accurately preserved. The “institutional reflexivity” of modernity has also to be understood in this light. According to Anthony Giddens institutional reflexivity refers to the fundamental structural dimension of modern society in which the regularized use of knowledge about social life is a constitutive element in its organization and transformation. In its original definition, institutional reflexivity refers to the fact that constantly increasing segments of social life, and material relations with nature, are susceptible of continuous revision in the wake of new information and knowledge. And the chance that such information and knowledge will come about is not only incidental to modern institutions, but constitutive of them.

Surprisingly, although these considerations seem to put dramatically into question any persistence of sociology as a fully-differentiated scientific discipline, and also question the extent of its autonomy, the theory has not worked out any form of adequate self-implication which could instead be achieved through the thematization of other forms of reflexivity. In other words, if theory can both perceive itself as being part of the object it describes and show sensitivity to the (even potentially destabilizing) implications of that, description should then account for the consequences of such being part and not simply record them.

(ii) *Structural reflexivity* refers to those dimensions of representation (including either everyday language or more formal bodies of knowledge) 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 realized that statements of this self-referential type may produce paradoxes. It should be clear that the paradox produced by these statements occurs only if the statement reflexively includes itself. If it is possible to prevent this reflexive reference the paradox vanishes. For instance, if Epimenides was not a Cretan, there is no problem with the claim ‘All Cretans are liars’. To the same extent, the reason why such paradoxes do not usually arise in everyday language is that participants into a conversation assume, though implicitly, that the statement does not self-refer. Therefore ‘I am lying’ will be taken to mean that someone is lying in some respect which excludes her own claim of being a liar.

Unlike the mysticism of the Far East which, particularly in the communicative practice of Zen-Buddhism, deals with paradoxes by a rejection of making distinctions, the Western philosophical tradition has usually attempted to neutralize paradoxes of self-reference by excluding from the reference of such claims the claim itself. In the case of a statement such as ‘there is no truth’, the paradox emerges as soon as the self-reference of the claim is not denied. If there is no truth, then it cannot be taken as truth that there is no truth. Therefore, if such claim is to be maintained a distinction needs to be introduced so that the claim itself refers to a restricted portion of statements, granting the statement itself to be asserted as true. Inasmuch as the statement can be ascribed to a higher order, i.e. a metalevel, the self-reference can be prevented, and consequently the paradox dissolves.

The kind of problems relating to the emergence of paradoxes has led disciplines other than sociology to work out adequate devices such as the concept of autologic which originally appeared in linguistics. The concept of ‘learning’ is an example of autological concept: indeed one can talk about ‘learning to learn’. Or one can consider the concept of ‘theory of knowledge’: no doubt a theory of knowledge is a theory about knowing, but a theory about something has to make this something known. Thus a theory of knowledge has to make knowing known.

At least since Mannheim, sociology itself has met the same kind of problem. Yet, it still stubbornly refuses to recognize not only that such paradoxes can be found to the same extent within the basic statements of theory but also that without an extensive

redefinition of its theoretical design paradoxes cannot but dramatically weaken the performances of theory itself. Sociology is an implicitly self-referential discourse: theories of society are theories about society within society. If this starting point is epistemologically forbidden, then, it is impossible to elaborate any adequate concept of society, and theory will continually have to confront the need to stabilize the effects of paradoxes of self-inclusion. Quite often, as an overview of the solution suggested by Mannheim may show, the favourite strategy has been to seek a stabilization granted by the capability of reducing any self-referential dimension to a state of latency. This way, it becomes possible to observe how knowledge is constructed without questioning the conditions making such an observation possible. This move leads to a fake form of second order observation. Second order observation sees that an observer cannot see what it cannot see, but it cannot reflexively include this finding in its design, for the risk of being paralyzed would be inescapable. In order to proceed any further second order observation has then to establish a distinction between forms of knowledge it assumes are socially constructed and amenable to observation, and others (including itself), that constitutes special cases and therefore cannot be observed. Yet, the specificity of the latter is never made clear, and as soon as the problem of self-reference arises the response consists of assuming that the unboundedness of this way of proceeding may be granted by the degree of relative freedom of those producing it. Unfortunately in so doing the problem is just pushed to a different level and not dealt with.

The attempts at conducting a “systematic study of sociological theory, as an independent and significant endeavour, albeit one that is intimately involved in sound theoretical and empirical work” (Ritzer, 1991, p. 2) are caught in the same trap. To these attempts belong both those efforts to bring about metatheorizing in sociology and attempts at matching 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. These approaches resort in fact to the same strategy of shifting to a metalevel whose regression is either interrupted with no reason.

(iii) *Embedded reflexivity* refers to the inseparability of representation and represented. An early version of it can be found in ethnomethodology where the general and universal character of accounting procedures is considered. The essentially reflexive nature of accounts resides in the mutually constitutive nature of accounts and reality. To decipher an account, one must already know what it is that the account refers to; and to do that, one must have already deciphered the account. Embedded reflexivity implies a rejection of the idea that the observation of phenomena can be conceived of as independent of those phenomena. The interdependence between representation and represented object is so tight 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 perceived by an actor, 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.

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 the traditional philosophy of science.

III

Any reflection upon sociology is part and parcel of sociology. Sociological theorizing is a sociological question in itself. This calls for fairly demanding requirements in theory building. Above all, it is necessary to make clear the relation between observation and self-observation 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 theorizes itself and where it places itself in its universal claims. Such claims strengthen an oscillation between observation and self-observation thereby transforming theory into a research practice, into an attitude towards sociological research. This stance makes untenable any attempt to locate theory building within the classical sociological domain hinging upon the micro-macro distinction.

What is at stake in both AST and PS is neither to understand whether and how subjectivity and social order come to terms with each other, nor is it to respond to the question as to which may be the most effective way of integrating micro and macro analysis so to achieve a suitable description of this likely composition. On the contrary, the very micro/macro distinction may be understood as compelling once the discipline achieves its differentiation through the individual/society distinction. At stake is representation as such. That is explicitly stated by both AST and PS, whereas it may also be stated by an extended implementation of SSK aimed at overcoming the ambiguous attitude which social studies of science display as to the epistemic consequences of constructivism. If representing society is the very object of sociology, representation then is the condition of possibility of sociology itself. This is why these styles in theory-building enacted a radical shift in the boundaries of thematic relevance that the theory sets. Such a shift is achieved by means of a rejection of the issue of that which is given to representation in favour of the issue of that which makes representation possible.

Under this perspective, the starting question undergoes a radical reframing. Firstly it is now necessary to understand according to which semantics a form of description of society may have developed as it has. Secondly one has to figure out which specific

elements it made reference to, and which particular methodological options it was coupled with.

AST has shown how compelling the issue of matching any semantics with a given configuration of society is. To put it in post-structuralist words, the crucial issue negatively refers to what it “is impossible to think, and what kind of impossibility are we faced with here” (Foucault, 1973, p. XV). In fact, the sociological way of accounting for the subjectivity-social order relation cannot merely start from taking both the quest for personal individuality, and the capability to describe oneself and the others, as anthropologically given. For this quest and its chance of finding room in communicative relations depend upon socio-structural conditions, namely the complexity and specificity of the differentiation of the social system. Even if every society has understood the individuality of human beings in terms of a psycho-physical entity attempting to make sense of its own finitude, it is only under a particular configuration of the social system that the attempt to frame the basic problems of individuality occurs. The individuality of the individual is indeed a fairly late achievement.

These theoretical starting points grant the conditions of possibility for an inquiry which investigates “the set of those more or less conscious ways of questioning, setting rules, and structuring which make us recognize a certain speech on society as sociology”, and this independently of confronting the essentialist question about the correspondence between observation and reality. The latter may yet be reframed in terms of an inquiry into the degree of discrepancy between socio-structural and semantic components of society. For it seems safe to assume that obsolescence of self-descriptions and misdirection of self-observations cannot remain for long concealed, and that in the end a considerable degree of discrepancy will cease to be tolerated.

This suggests that the semantics used in describing society should not be dealt with as a “translation of operations and processes that take place elsewhere (in men’s thought, in their consciousness or unconscious, in the sphere of transcendental constitutions); but that it should be accepted, in its empirical modesty, as the locus of particular events, regularities, relationships, modifications and systematic transformations; in short, that it is treated not as the result or trace of something else, but as a practical domain that is

autonomous (although *dependent*), and which can be described at its own level (*although it must be articulated on something other than itself*)” (Foucault, 1972a, p. 164, emphasis added).

IV

The kind of problematics we have been so far describing constitutes a privileged target for a reflexive sociology. Such a Sociology of sociological Knowledge (SsK) aims at observing and describing how societal self-descriptions and self-observations transform in response to structural transformations. This task requires a capability of moving into a wider horizon for which only fairly abstract theories appear appropriate.

Only by so doing, is it possible to explain how sociology developed from the individual/society distinction and how it is still currently working on the transformations of that very distinction.

To the same extent it is no longer safe to place theory in an external position in relation to society, for the cost of stabilizing paradoxes of reflexivity would be higher than that the theory can afford. At this level, a viable solution would be that, before being described according to the concepts it uses, theory accepts that it will have to confront the issue of the style in which it is constructed. And that is just what PS, SST, and AST do.

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