

# **PATTERNS OF COGNITIVE AND INSTITUTIONAL DIFFERENTIATION OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES**

## **A Comparison Between American and French Early Sociology**

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### 1. Common Basis (shared with Mr. Barbesino's project)

Recent developments in post-Kuhnian, constructivist oriented epistemologies have supplemented social studies of science with new theoretical devices. A possible convergence among fairly diverse theoretical traditions such as post-modernism, post-structuralism, self-referential system theory, new history of sociology & sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK) in (re-)writing the history of social sciences might then be suggested.

This theoretical strategy deserves a deconstruction of both the *received view* of the sociology of science & its implementation within the history of the social and political sciences. The narrative structure of disciplinary histories hinging upon the figure of the “founding fathers” has to be investigated, as well as the function performed by disciplinary history in setting the boundaries of the disciplines themselves. No doubt to share this standpoint it is necessary to start from a new beginning which is radically different from both the traditional forms of philosophical reflection about science and their reception within social science discourses. In other words, the first step is to take as fundamental the very concept of reflexivity as it has been developed by the strong programme of Edinburgh School and SSK.

### 2. Individual Project

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. 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.

What I want to do first is to sketch how it is possible to narrate the history of sociology, i.e. to explain in how far any form of narrating the history of sociology hinges upon a particular notion of what a sociological science has correctly to be understood. The first step is to deconstruct the standard view of science and to suggest an alternative framework working at different levels.

Deconstruction must be implemented 1. at the stage of the very definition of the nature of science; 2. at the stage of the division of labour among different approaches to observe science (i.e. which part of science might be investigated by different disciplines). At this stage, it becomes relevant to find out which are the tasks of a sociology and an historiography dealing with science as their proper subject-matter. In other words, deconstruction should account for the possible existence of a form of division of labour which depends upon a normatively compelling definition of science produced by epistemology as a «species of knowledge about knowledge». 3. At the stage in which sociology itself becomes a case study in the inquiry about science. Here we should answer the question about a possible persistence of a form of division of labour when dealing with the problem of a definition of sociology as a science.

The second aim of this project is briefly to sketch what it is meant by Sociology of sociological Knowledge (SsK) as well as to explain why I do prefer to talk about SsK rather than sociology of sociology. In fact, both Marxist and Mertonian sociology of sociology share a common starting point, namely epistemic realism. In other words, they do share the standard view of science as it has been defined by neo-empiricist epistemology. One of the main consequences of sociologies of sociology which adopted the received view was their neglect of the nature and structure of sociological knowledge. This point applies to Marxist sociology of sociology as well, for though on the one hand its focus is on unmasking ideological presuppositions, on the other it assumes as possible an ultimate access to social reality, which can eventually be gained by the means of historical materialism. By and large, these sociologies operated by treating sociological knowledge as a black box. Quite surprisingly, they

assumed that nothing was to be gained by opening the box and scrutinizing its contents. The social origins of real (i.e. non-ideological) sociological knowledge were considered as simply not relevant to its content. Thus, even in the case of a sociological inquiry into sociological knowledge, the relationship between real scientific knowledge and the 'objective, natural (i.e. social) world' is treated as a black box. The nature of this relationship was taken as lying beyond the domain of sociological analysis. It was then neither necessary nor desirable to consider the way in which they are linked.

In this respect, sociology of sociology appears to be a special case of traditional forms of sociology of science. Both are definitely incapable of including in their research programmes the issue of reflexivity of knowledge.

Quite differently does sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK) operate. To its programme, scientific knowledge was not going to remain a black box for it treats the content of science as problematic. SSK's originality, then, may be based on the claim to be «concerned precisely with what comes to count as scientific knowledge and with how it comes so to count». (Collins 1983:267)