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Sociological Self Images

Paradigms and Pluralisms in Sociological Theory

1960s-1990s

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of Master of Philosophy in Sociology

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Abstract

This thesis explores the identity and self-understanding of sociology as expressed chiefly in discourses of sociological theory. It takes as its starting point the 'identity crisis' of sociology that began in the 1960s with the demise of structural-functionalism, and continues into the present day.

The thesis consists of three main parts. In the first chapter I discuss the methods by which the history of sociology can be reconstructed. I argue that the issues raised by these historical methodologies shed light on wider issues of sociological identity. In particular, the question of the coherence and openness/closure of sociological approaches is considered.

In the next three chapters, I engage in a close reading of a number of substantive 'manifestos' for sociology, that attempt to delineate an epistemologically privileged space for sociological analysis. These are chosen to exemplify recent trends in sociological analysis including reflexive sociology, structural Marxism, neo-functionalism, structuration theory, sociology of postmodernity, and postmodern feminism. Each manifesto is considered with regard to its own particular merits and difficulties, but is also analysed in terms of a wider pattern of theoretical development. This pattern is termed the dialectic of openness and closure, a process whereby theories construct their arguments by criticising the closures and one-sidedness of previous approaches, only to create new closures themselves, in order to provide compelling explanations of important social phenomena. I argue that even though the emphasis on openness has become greater in recent times, closures are still effected by many sociologically-inspired theorists.

In the concluding chapter, I examine pragmatic philosophies of social science as the logical end-point of the increasing openness of sociological approaches. I argue that these philosophies, if fully accepted, could lead in effect to a liberal approach that contains few critical resources. As an alternative, I suggest that the continuing operation of the dialectic of openness and closure is a good thing for sociology, allowing continued development, whilst still focusing explanatory power.

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[1] Thankyou also to any of the ambient others whose orbit I passed through, and who cheered me up.

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Introduction

It is arguable that sociology has always existed in a state of crisis. Accounts differ as to the causes of this perpetual uncertainty[1], but a sense of crisis seems a relatively permanent feature of its history[2]. Nevertheless, there is a strong feeling that in the past three decades, sociology has experienced its deepest crisis yet. Whereas it had once surfed upon the waves created by the dangerous tides of history, finding its productivity at the very locus of conflict[3], these breakers now threatened to engulf sociology once and for all.

This thesis is an investigation into the recent crisis of sociology. The overarching question addressed here is whether there is some determinate form of inquiry called 'sociology' that can continue to hold a privileged epistemological position, or whether it is instead dissolving into the pluralised field of general social investigations. Thus, the thesis considers whether the crisis of sociology has left its form somewhat intact, or has dispensed with it, as it has historically been constituted, altogether. Consequently, the central meaning of crisis that thesis focuses on is the crisis of identity.

The method employed for this investigation is an analysis of those works that offer formulations addressing the current state of sociology, and its future. These 'manifesto' statements attempt to carve out a determinate space in which sociological analysis can continue to operate. Although sociology is, of course, a discipline centrally occupied with *research*, this thesis focuses upon the wider *theoretical frameworks* that guide this research. No doubt an examination of sociology that takes research as its analytical starting point might draw quite different conclusions. However, it is an interesting feature of those statements that address 'sociology' as a unified field of inquiry, that they typically focus on the *theoretical* trajectory of the subject rather than its research products. Although noting the somewhat unsatisfactory nature of such an approach, this thesis, in analysing such statements, retains their emphasis on theory.

The sociological manifestos are important for three different reasons. Firstly, as a matter of exposition, they are examined to discover the ways in which different theorists, over the past two to three decades, have constructed sociology in its historical and contemporary forms. Secondly, the self-images offered by these theorists are assessed in regard to the intrinsic coherence or usefulness of their framing of the important tasks for sociological analysis. These two considerations

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[1] For instance, Zygmunt Bauman argues that sociology's crisis state results from an inability to control discourse about its subject matter, society (Bauman, 1992: 73). Alternatively, Raymond Boudon suggests that this state results from epistemological doubts about claiming knowledge *of* a society, whilst being situated *in* that society (Boudon, 1980: 2).

[2] As Norman Birnbuam pointed out in 1975, at every international sociology conference since 1953 there has been a discussion as to whether there is a crisis in sociology (Birnbaum, 1975: 169).

[3] Franco Ferrarotti argues this position (Ferrarotti, 1975: 13).

are then put to use in an examination of the wider question of whether the attempt to stake out a particular space and call it sociology is a move that has continuing validity in our increasingly pluralised and 'post'-disciplinary times. I shall be considering this last question in relation to a pattern of development that I will argue runs throughout all of the manifestos considered here, a pattern I shall call 'the dialectic of openness and closure'.

Of course, this thesis is necessarily selective, and there are many different theorists who could have been considered. However, I hope at least to have focused on texts and authors that would be widely regarded as significant in the development of sociology over the past two and a half decades, and my engagement with these authors is intended to draw out the relevance of this selection.

The thesis proceeds as follows. Chapter One considers some meta-theoretical issues around the reconstruction of the history of a discipline such as sociology. Although it is commonly observed in post-empiricist philosophy of social science that 'histories' of particular domains are always also *theories* of those domains, it is still tempting to think that the discursive field of sociology has a 'natural history'. At best, such a position is problematical, and this is clarified by a consideration of the way in which different 'historical lenses' offer divergent interpretations of the discipline. This chapter focuses on the ideas of Thomas Kuhn and Imre Lakatos, the former of whom has contributed to a new 'common sense' about how to understand developments within many and various intellectual fields. The arguments presented in this chapter set the framework for the analysis of sociological identity conducted throughout the rest of this thesis

Chapter Two launches into a discussion of the selected manifesto statements. Considered here is the work of Alvin Gouldner, who set the scene for this thesis by (famously) announcing the crisis within the major sociological traditions. The remainder of the chapter considers the structural Marxist perspective of Göran Therborn, and the neo-functionalism of Jeffrey Alexander, as responses to this call of crisis that involve contradictory impulses between pluralisation and more orthodox commitments to the sociological tradition.

Chapter Three examines two self-images of sociology that are rather more ambivalent about the past and future of the sociological tradition. Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman both express strong doubts about certain aspects of orthodox sociology. Nevertheless, both theorists remain in some key ways loyal to this tradition, and would be held by many to be distinguished leaders of the discipline at the present time. As such, I consider some of the tensions involved in their role as 'ambivalent spokespersons' for sociology. .

In Chapter Four I explore the work of Ann Game, who amongst all the authors considered, is the most concerned to demonstrate that the sociological tradition is fundamentally flawed. Coming from a feminist poststructuralist perspective, she argues that a completely new mode of analysis, materialist semiotics, presents a more viable alternative to sociology. This chapter also refers to the earlier feminist sociology of Dorothy E. Smith as a point of contrast, Smith herself having attempted to thoroughly re-orient the orthodox sociological imagination.

The concluding chapter, Chapter Five, returns again to the meta-theoretical issues that frame this thesis. The contrast between a 'paradigmatic' and 'pragmatic' sociology is drawn out, and two examples of the recent, stimulating turn to pragmatic social analysis are considered, in the work of Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman. I also examine the work of the pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty, whose approach has been strongly influential among many postmodern social theorists. These analyses are brought to bear once more on the question of whether sociological theorising has a future as a determinate form, or if it deserves to fade into the background of a more general, pragmatically driven cultural criticism. Whilst the goal of this thesis is to help in the clarification of this issue, and contribute to the debate around it, I hasten to add that this important and taxing problem remains far from resolved by this discussion.