Reflections on *Sociology's Unspoken Weakness: Bringing Epistemology Back In*

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Rob Stones's article raises an important challenge for contemporary social theory: the need for an epistemology for the social sciences that is as sophisticated and functional as the various ontologies that have been developed in recent decades. I share both his desire for adequate standards by which to judge knowledge claims in the social sciences and the realist orientation of his approach to the problem.

He begins by posing this as a general problem for post-positivist social theory. Arguably, the problem arises from the post-positivist commitment to epistemological relativism: from the perspective of a sociology (or indeed an ontology) of knowledge, not only the conceptual assumptions built into knowledge claims but also the standards by which they are judged are local to particular epistemic/epistemological communities (or circles: see Elder-Vass, 2012, Chapter 11). If this is so, then the project of specifying more general standards by which to judge knowledge claims seems in danger of being hopelessly naïve. Yet for realists, some knowledge claims are sounder than others, and so there must be standards by which we can judge them. And indeed there are such standards: all epistemic communities have

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their own standards by which they judge knowledge claims and even the same community may have different standards for different kinds of knowledge (Elder-Vass, 2012). But the challenge for epistemology is to provide reasons for preferring some standards over others.

We have, I suggest, at least four resources that may be called upon to help us resolve this issue. First, there is *experience*: those standards that support knowledge claims that accord with our experience should surely be preferred over those that do not. Second, we have *debate*: in the spirit of Habermas's discourse principle, we may say that any standard to which the affected parties would agree in an open process of discussion oriented to reaching agreement should be preferred (Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 50; Habermas, 1996, p. 107). Third, this problem is never entirely free floating but rather is necessarily tied to a *specific context*. In the case at issue here this context is, first, the academic space of social theory itself, and second, the public sphere when social theorists seek to influence it. The challenge is not to identify some universal standard of epistemological value but only one that we could justify preferring in this particular context. Fourth, we have *ontology* itself: any epistemology entails a theory of knowledge that itself rests on a social ontology and an epistemology that fits with the most plausible social ontology should be preferred. Still, applying these resources to the problem is a far larger task than I can attempt in this brief note, and they may still not be enough to provide a solution.

The last of them, however, may help to make further sense of the issues raised in the second half of Stones's paper. Here the question is re-posed, or perhaps illustrated, as a problem for John Law's version of actor-network theory in particular. A central feature of Law's work is his insistence on the existence of multiple realities. For him, for example, there is not one thing called alcoholic liver disease but many different diseases – not in the mundane sense that there might be different medical conditions brought about by alcoholism that affect the liver but in the much more provocative sense that what most of us would think of as "the same" disease at "the same" point of time in "the same" person is actually a different reality for each different specialist that interacts with it (Law, 2004, Chapter 4). Ironically, given the powerful antipathy of Bruno Latour to postmodernism, this leads us back towards strong epistemological relativism. The direction of travel for Law is to recognise all of these different "realities" as equally real and thus all of the different understandings of them as equally valid. If there is a different reality for each specialist who

brings a different set of concepts to their understanding of alcoholic liver disease, then it is hard to see how one could judge any one of their views of that reality to be wrong.

This is not, however, an issue that Law could consistently construe as soluble by strengthened epistemological standards. On the contrary, the problem arises from a key feature of actor-network theory's ontology. For Latour, and it seems for Law, the world is composed of assemblages, and the discourses, texts, and beliefs that are part and parcel of these assemblages are indissolubly wrapped up with its more 'objective' dimensions (Elder-Vass, 2015). Stones, however, following Bhaskar, insists that it is both possible and essential to treat transitive aspects as having intransitive qualities, and also that it is possible to make a distinction between the transitive aspects within the object of study and the transitive dimension of the social science gaze upon the object of study. Social scientists, according to this argument, are able to make claims about the discourses, ideas, and beliefs that are part of the object of study, and about the more material or objective features of the object of study. They are also often able to distinguish between these two different dimensions within the object of study. The actor-network ontology refuses to countenance these moves. It simply holds that objects cannot be separated from claims about them and as a consequence the whole concept of epistemology ceases to be available, except as something that other people talk about. Claims about things cannot be judged because they are intrinsically part of the things that they are about. Latour replaces epistemology with rhetoric, and I mean that as a literal description of his position: he argues that scientists deploy epistemological devices as rhetoric to bolster their claims about the world, and takes an entirely neutral position as to the validity of those devices (Latour, 1987, Chapter 1). The epistemological problem facing Law, then, may not be just an example of the wider problem facing theory, but a far more serious problem that arises from a fundamental flaw in the ontology of actor-network theory: its conscious refusal to distinguish between the complex intransitive domain and the transitive domains of social science. This means it cannot begin to distinguish between the things and ideas that are the object of study and our social scientific propositions about them.

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