Lecture

Sociology that Really Matters

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Raymond Boudon

The diversity of sociology can be captured with the help of four ideal types. First is *cameral* or *informative* sociology: that which produces data and analyses oriented towards decision-makers. Second is *critical* sociology, which identifies the defects of society and proposes remedies for them. Third is sociology which aims to arouse emotions by describing social phenomena in a vivid fashion: it can be characterized as *expressive*. A fourth type, the *cognitive* type, sees the explanation of puzzling social phenomena as its objective. The four orientations characterize contemporary as well as classical sociology but are not equally valuable. Tocqueville, Weber, or Durkheim illustrate the fourth type, but various factors today have caused the other three to expand at its expense. As a consequence of this diversity within sociology and the trend away from the cognitive type, scepticism about the discipline has grown in recent years.

Introduction

The general article on sociology of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* states: 'It is evident that sociology has not achieved triumphs comparable to those of several older and more heavily supported sciences. A variety of interpretations have been offered to explain the difference'. In the following remarks, I would like to offer a comment on this diagnosis.

It is true that while some products of sociology seem genuinely scientific, others do not. Recently, some sociologists have gone so far as to say that sociology would be best served if it did not even try to be a science (e.g. Flyvberg, 2001). In spite of this identity crisis, sociology seems more solidly institutionalized than ever. In the third edition of the *International Encyclopaedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences*, more than 200 articles are devoted to sociology, against 100 to economics, 150 to history, 130 to linguistics, 130 to demography, 100 to philosophy, 40 to archaeology. How can these contradictions be explained?

Sociology: Science or Literature?

To answer this question, I will start from Lepenies's characterization of sociology as a *Third Culture* (Lepenies, 1988). He says that sociology continually oscillates between science and literature but belongs to neither. Classical sociologists such as Durkheim or Weber, in his view, regarded sociology as a science but their works displayed many aesthetic and ideological features. He says that they should be considered as intellectuals rather than scientists. He also asserts that sociology has always been split into a number of sects or schools, evoking the world of art more than of science. He therefore

contends that sociology is in fact and should be considered as a branch of literature: the branch specialized in social essayism.

It is true that sociology often does hesitate between science and literature. Thus, Goffman was described a few years ago as 'the greatest American sociologist of his generation'. Yet, Tom Burns's obituary of Goffman in the *Times Literary Supplement* appeared under the title 'Stating the obvious'. For sociologists with a scientific orientation, in Burns's view, the question was whether Goffman had taught us anything. His appeal seemed to lie, not in his scientific merit but his literary powers. He won his audience through his powerful descriptions of the hypocrisy of social life, and his books sold in numbers more typical of literary than scientific works. To take two other examples supporting Lepenies's thesis: David Riesman sold more than one million copies of his book, *The Lonely Crowd*. Through vivid description of the isolation of individuals in mass societies, he convinced a broad audience that he had produced a diagnosis of the causes of people's psychic unease. At the turn of the twentieth century, Le Bon captured the attention of a large audience at a time when what he called 'crowds' and what we rather call 'the masses' frightened the middle class: 'effrayaient le bourgeois'.

I would propose to identify the type of sociology illustrated by these writings as *expressive*. They are – or were for a while – visible because they expressed in an original and effective fashion feelings which many people experience in their everyday social lives, such as the feeling that they are manipulated by anonymous forces, or that hypocrisy is a dominant feature of social interaction.

Although the existence of this genre supports Lepenies's thesis that sociology is more an aesthetic than a scientific discipline, it is not the genre which the founding fathers practised. As Lepenies himself stresses, Max Weber deliberately wrote in an awkward fashion in order 'not to influence psychologically' his readers and to stress the value-free character of his analyses. Most of his analyses are scientific in the most uncontroversial sense of the word. Tocqueville writes a wonderful French, but he is very hard in his *Souvenirs* on those who, being inspired by what he calls *l'esprit littéraire*, tend to consider a theory as true as soon as it generates positive emotions. He could be critical of *l'esprit littéraire* because he felt rightly that his own analyses were inspired rather by *l'esprit scientifique*. Durkheim has been accused of being ideological, rightly in some respects. But he is considered a giant because he produced theories on many subjects that are genuinely scientific.

In place of Lepenies's conception of sociology as an intermediary between art and science, it would be more fruitful to consider it as a house with many mansions. Durkheim, Le Bon, and Proudhon can all be considered to be sociologists, but evidently they have different conceptions of the discipline. Lepenies is right when he says that some sociological products are closer to works of art than to works of science, but he is wrong when he applies the category of a *Third Culture* to the greatest classical sociologists.

What is a Scientific Theory?

As those who deny that sociology should try to emulate the natural sciences generally do not spell out what makes a theory scientific, it may be useful to try to clarify this question in a summary fashion. To the Vienna Circle, a good theory is a theory which in principle at least can be reduced to a set of uncontroversial statements, once it is unfolded. To Popper, a scientific theory is a theory which in principle can be shown to be false. To others, a good theory is a theory which can be expressed in a mathematical fashion. To others, it has to use the most sophisticated statistical techniques. To still others, there are no criteria of the scientificity of a theory and myths are as good as scientific explanations. This list is of course not complete, but is sufficient to show that we need greater clarity as to what a scientific theory is.

Falsifiability is an important dimension of scientificity, but it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition, as Popper himself recognized when he confessed that he could not decide whether Darwinism was scientific or not. If the use of mathematical language were the sign of scientificity, biology would not be a science. Possibly, in my view, the Vienna Circle came closer to the correct position: at the risk of being considered premodern by many philosophers of science, I would submit that a good scientific theory explains

a given phenomenon by making it the consequence of a set of statements compatible with one another and individually acceptable, either because they are congruent with observation, or for all kinds of other reasons variable from one case to the other. Thus, the Torricelli–Pascal theory of the barometer is better than Descartes's, not only because it correctly predicts the behaviour of barometers, but also because it avoids the Aristotelian notion of the *horror vacui naturae* and substitutes for it the much more acceptable notion of the weight of the atmosphere.

Tocqueville, Weber, and Durkheim

Contrary to Lepenies's view, many examples could be drawn from the founding fathers to show that sociology has proposed theories as valid as those of the natural sciences (Boudon and Cherkaoui, 1999; Boudon, 2001). Tocqueville's, Weber's, or Durkheim's theories are built in the same fashion as Pascal's theory of the barometer. They dissolve the puzzling character of the phenomena they aim to explain by deriving them from a set of statements, all of which appear as easily acceptable.

Tocqueville is seen by some as a proponent of political liberalism, a kind of anti-Marx, by others as a major analyst of the American constitution, and by yet others as a prophet who complained about the dangers of egalitarianism. But he also proposed genuinely scientific explanations for a number of phenomena. His book *The Old Regime and the Revolution* is a masterpiece in comparative sociology. It aims not to present the story of the Revolution, but to explain a number of differences between French and British society at the end of the eighteenth century. Why did Frenchmen at that time believe in Reason with a capital R while Englishmen did not? Why did French agriculture remain stagnant, while British agriculture modernized at a rapid pace? Why was the distribution of French cities as a function of size different from the distribution of British cities? Likewise, in his *Democracy in America*, published in 1835, Tocqueville identifies a number of differences between French and American society and tries to explain them. Why do Americans remain much more religious than Frenchmen, in spite of the fact that materialistic values impregnate their society? Why do they sometimes practise their religion with an exaltation unknown in France?

Reconstructing Tocqueville's programme from his analyses, it can be characterized by the following principles

- the objective of sociology is to explain puzzling phenomena;
- explaining a phenomenon, in sociology as in any other discipline, means finding its causes;
- the causes of the social phenomena are to be found at the level of individuals, their attitudes, decisions, choices, or beliefs;
- the attitudes, choices, beliefs, and representations of individuals can be understood: their meaning for the individual is what causes him or her to endorse them;
- the meaning for individuals of their choices are understandable exclusively by reference to the context in which they are embedded.

Max Weber similarly devised solid scientific explanations for a multitude of puzzling phenomena. For Weber, the ultimate causes of social phenomena lie in individual actions. So the sociologist should aim to discover the microscopic causes of macroscopic events. Weber's analyses of religion and other topics are grounded in the methodological principle that the causes of religious beliefs lie in the reasons people have for endorsing them. The convergence between the theoretical considerations of the *Essays on the Theory of Science* and the analyses of the *Essays in the Sociology of Religion* is perfect (Weber [1922] 1988; Weber, 1920–1).

Thus, for example, Weber explained the easy spread of the monotheistic Mithra cult through the Roman Empire by pointing to its particular appeal to Roman civil servants and soldiers (Weber, 1920–1). In contrast to the peasant-based polytheism of traditional Roman religion, Mithraism gave the stature of a god to a unique figure – half real, half unreal – which had affinities with the Emperor who sat atop the Roman state hierarchy and which therefore echoed the day-to-day experience of the servants of the empire.

Durkheim's view of science has less clarity than Tocqueville's or Weber's, at least if we rely on the schematic presentation in *The Rules of Scoiological*

Method. But if we infer his programme from his empirical analyses, it is easy to show similarities with Tocqueville or Weber. A good example is provided by Durkheim's theory of magical beliefs, one of the more remarkable aspects in his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim [1912] 1979). Magical beliefs, in Durkheim's view, draw on religious representations of the world in order to provide quasi-scientific explanations for otherwise incomprehensible aspects of daily life. They also provide recipes for dealing with practical problems. Though these recipes often prove ineffective, Durkheim argues that the credibility of the underlying magical belief system is sustained by a form of reasoning which echoes that found in science proper – the reluctance to abandon a theory simply because it conflicts with certain known facts. In physics, this syndrome is known as the Duhem–Quine thesis, named after the historian of physics who first identified it (Duhem) and the later figure who provided a formal analysis (Quine). For Durkheim, the Australian aborigine copes with conflict between theory and data in a manner similar to that described by Duhem–Quine in modern physics. Leaving aside further points on Durkheim's approach which I have developed elsewhere (Boudon 1998–2000: ii), it can be said that Durkheim's theory on this issue is genuinely scientific in the sense that it explains a puzzling phenomenon (that people persistently believe in the validity of causal relationships which are objectively invalid) by a set of easily acceptable statements (the Duhem–Quine assumption and the other assumptions introduced in the theory) and by its congruence with data. It easily explains the variation over time and space of magical beliefs, including variations that were discovered a long time after Durkheim proposed his theory.

The Achievements of the Tocqueville–Weber–Durkheim Programme

In summary, it is not difficult to identify in classical sociology scientific achievements, even 'triumphs', to use the vocabulary of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. In all the examples I have selected, phenomena that at first view are opaque are explained by their causes, these causes being represented by understandable individual actions or beliefs. These explanations are very convincing, exactly for the reasons why any scientific theory is convincing. They are congruent with observational data; they are made up of empirical and non-empirical statements and notions that are easily acceptable.

It would be as easy to find in modern sociology numerous examples illustrating what I would call the TWD programme (Boudon and Cherkaoui, 1999), the programme described by the kind of contributions from Tocqueville, Weber, or Durkheim I have just referred to. A host of studies, applying the principles of the TWD programme, provide convincing explanations of opaque phenomena: those dealing with crime, social mobility and stratification, education, social change, organizations, collective action, norms and values; social mobilization, innovation, and diffusion processes; collective beliefs, public opinion, institutions, etc. When taken together, these studies not only appear to produce cumulative knowledge, but in many cases they have profoundly changed how we perceive these phenomena.[1] Thus, studies of the diffusion of innovations have shown that we need not see the rejection of innovations as irrational even when they seem likely to benefit the interests of the actors themselves. Studies in the sociology of religion have shown that beliefs that appear strange to observers may appear well-grounded to those who hold them. Such studies have contributed to a better explanation of religious beliefs, but also possibly to a greater tolerance. Studies of education, stratification, and mobility have shown that the relation between the three processes is highly complex and have perhaps helped inject more wisdom into educational policies.

This does not mean that the sociological works that belong to the TWD programme are the most widely known. On the contrary, people prefer sociological products belonging to the *expressive* or *critical* types or the grand theories built around these *collective concepts* which irritated Weber. As Pareto has written, people often prefer a useful to a true theory, not out of perversity but simply because it is easier to see whether a theory is useful than to judge whether it is true or false. Thus the Nietzschean theory of the origin of Christianity is

simple and useful in the sense that it serves ideological interests. Weber's refutation of this theory is both complex and useless in the sense that it does not serve any religious or anti religious movement. One can even go further: the criterion useful/useless tends to dominate the criterion true/false. A false and useful theory is often perceived as true, as long as its falsity is not too visible. If in addition it is obscure, it may even be perceived as profound.

Four Ideal Types of Sociology

I can now return to the doubts expressed by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* on the scientific status of sociology I mentioned earlier. The institutionalization of sociology can be explained mainly by the success of its cognitive programme as illustrated in the past by Tocqueville, Durkheim, and Weber. But, while this programme is widely pursued by sociologists today, it is not the sole nor even the most visible version of the discipline. I would submit that it is possible to identify at least four major and permanent ideal types of sociology. I propose to call them the *cognitive* (or *scientific* type), the *aesthetic* or *expressive* type, the *cameral* or *descriptive* type, and the *critical* or *committed* type.

Cameral-descriptive and Critical-committed Sociology

As I have already outlined the *cognitive* or *scientific* programme and referred earlier to the *expressive* or *aesthetic* programme, I will now present the other two.

Schumpeter used the term 'cameral sciences' to refer to those sciences that aim to improve the adequacy of policy decisions. Many sociological works belong to this genre, although their authors are not always conscious of this point. They aim, for instance, to reveal and describe phenomena that are well known to the actors themselves. Thus a great part of urban sociology or of the sociology of social marginality consists in describing experiences which are part of the everyday lives of those being studied. Such research can be either qualitative, as in descriptions of the ways of life of marginal people, or quantitative, as when it attempts answer questions of the type 'how many?' or 'how much?'. Many surveys on the evolution of crime or suicide, the variations in public opinion, and many other subjects have an essentially descriptive scope and cameral function. They help to enlighten people but above all they inform the decisions of policy-makers. Along with other sources of information, such as press reports, administrative data, and census or polling data, cameral sociology meets a crucial and growing demand of modern societies. Not only the political decision-makers, but all kinds of actors have a need for social data: political parties, social movements, pressure groups, etc. Such data are used both in practical ways and in rhetorical argument, and thereby help to make political discussions serious.

This type of sociology has a long history. Thus, Le Play's work on *Les Ouvriers Européens*, which systematically described the living conditions of European workers, was motivated by the rationalization of social policy under Napoleon III. Today, cameral sociology has grown tremendously, even to the point where some traditional branches of sociology have acquired an increasingly cameral orientation. As noted by Luckman, while the classical sociology of religion raised useless but fascinating questions – as to the origin of the notion of soul, or why Christianity penetrated so quickly into the Roman Empire – modern sociologists of religion are often more concerned with cameral questions of vital interest to the churches, as whether, how, and to which extent Protestantism is threatening the interests of the Catholic Church in Latin America.

Once the cameral orientation becomes dominant, the cumulative character of sociology is weakened. Sociology of the cognitive type is internally driven, but cameral sociology is externally driven. When rates of crime increase, the sociology of crime tends to develop. The heyday of the sociology of education was the time of the exploding student numbers in the 1960s and 1970s, just as the unfavourable student demographics of today have caused interest in the sociology of education to wane. When unemployment increased, a wave of surveys on the unemployed followed. Today, urban violence, globalization, or terrorism are probably going to become popular topics. Cameral sociology is also affected by ideological fashion, akin to the preoccupation with

genetic deterioriation which overtook demography in the 1930s.

The fluctuating interests of cameral sociology in response to social and ideological conjunctures readily gives rise to the sense that it is less cumulative than other scientific disciplines.

As these examples show, the notion of descriptive sociology is less clear than it appears at first sight. For sometimes, through the description, the sociologist wants to serve a social, political, or ideological cause. The terms used sometimes make this clear. Thus the word 'exclusion' is very much used today in France where the word 'poverty' was used in the past. The two have close meanings. The main difference is an axiological one. While 'poverty' is a descriptive word, 'exclusion' is a normative one: a society cannot accept the idea that some citizens are excluded from it. A number of studies in the sociology of family aim more or less at legitimating the evolution of attitudes towards the family. When the main objective of a sociologist is to influence political processes, one can talk of *critical* sociology in the sense of the Frankfurt School, or of *militant* sociology. This critical dimension is more or less visible depending on the subject and the socio-political conjuncture.

Present Scepticism

We can go back now to the puzzling question raised by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Where does the contradiction come from between, on the one hand, the fact that the main objective of the social sciences is cognitive, that they aim at producing solid explanations of puzzling social phenomena, that classical sociologists and many modern sociologists have insisted on this objective and have shown it is possible to fulfil it, and, on the other hand, the fact that they are perceived as sciences of a particular type?

I see in summary one main reason for this state of affairs – a shift in the distribution of sociology between the four ideal-typical genres I have distinguished. The growth of the demand for social data, which goes with the rationalization of public policies in all sectors of social and political life – education, crime, housing, the regulation of economic life, etc. – has generated a proliferation of cameral-descriptive works. In addition, the growing importance of the media in modern social life has increased the demand for expressive sociology. The nineteenth-century citizen found in religion, literature, or philosophy an explanation for moral and physical afflictions, the modern and post-modern citizen looks rather towards psychoanalysis or sociology. Sociology is also used to legitimate social movements and actions. The media are more drawn to sociological products likely to meet a demand from their audience than sociological products with a cognitive function. They prefer useful to true theories, as is true also in psychology. Psychoanalysis is much more popular than experimental psychology and much more commented on in the press.

The genres I have distinguished are all legitimate and interesting, though the cognitive genre is certainly the most crucial. The pre-eminence of the cognitive aim can been seen in its centrality to the work of the greatest names. Le Play's work is important, but he is generally ranked lower than Durkheim or Weber because his contributions are essentially descriptive-cameral rather than explanatory. Proudhon has undoubtedly had more influence than Durkheim, but he contributed little of explanatory significance.

The genres I have distinguished are ideal types and the borderlines between them are in reality sometimes fuzzy. They are also hard to define fully. I have defined the cognitive genre as that which aims to explain puzzling phenomena, but there are other ways of serving the cognitive function of sociology. One, for instance, is to create concepts capable of bringing some order to phenomena. Thus, the contrast between *mechanical* and *organic* solidarity, between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*, between *appolinian* and *dionysian* societies, or Parsons's pattern variables are useful concepts. *Class struggle*, *exploitation*, and *alienation* are useful concepts although they have been included in controversial theories. But one should not confuse concept-building and theory-building. A concept, or system of concepts, is not a theory in the usual sense of the word. And if some concepts are fruitful, others are mere words. *Social capital* is an excellent contemporary example. Much is written about social capital today. But *social capital* is just a term for well-known mechanisms. As Alejandro Portes writes: 'Current enthusiasm for

the concept [of social capital] . . . is not likely to abate soon . . . However, . . . the set of processes encompassed by the concept are not new and have been studied under other labels in the past. Calling them social capital is, to a large extent, just a means of presenting them in a more appealing conceptual garb' (Portes, 1998).

Furthermore, these distinctions between ideal-typical genres of sociology help clarify some confusions. The paradigm described as *methodological individualism* (MI) has always been regarded with doubt if not hostility by many sociologists. This hostility has been explained by Homans: MI is in conflict with the idea of the weight of social structure and the feelings of powerlessness and lack of autonomy it creates in social subjects. But sociologists who reject MI often have additional reasons for doing so which, from a certain perspective, are understandable. For, while MI is relevant as far as the cognitive genre is concerned, it is often meaningless for the expressive, the descriptive, and the critical genres. Expressive sociology is effective when it confirms the weight of social structures evoked by Homans. The success of a Le Bon or of modern sociologists inclined towards structuralism can also be partly explained by their characterization of individual autonomy as an illusion. Descriptive or cameral sociology has little to do with MI either, since its aims are not explanatory. Critical sociology normally insists on the alienation and sufferings of people. MI has a real meaning only to sociologists whose purpose is to explain social phenomena and who assume that their causes lie in individual actions, attitudes, or beliefs; it assumes that the causes of these actions, attitudes, or beliefs lie in their meaning to the actors. For it is difficult to imagine that ordinary actions or beliefs can exclusively be due to obscure social, cultural, psychic, or biological forces. As Weber has rightly stressed, MI is the scientific approach to the explanation of social phenomena, while metaphysical descriptions are normally anti- or non-individualistic. For this reason, Tocqueville, who never reflected on methodology, intuitively follows MI and Durkheim, who is officially hostile to it, in fact uses it in his analyses. At the same time, it is unfashionable among the majority of sociologists today since its relevance to the *expressive*, the *descriptive*, or the *critical* programmes is limited. *A fortiori*, this explains why Rational Choice Theory (RCT) is not popular either, since RCT is a particular version of the MI paradigm.

Finally, these distinctions help us understand how the products of social science are evaluated. Thus, Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* has been highly praised. One can understand why. Like work by Erving Goffman or Howard Becker, it has drawn attention to the destructive effects of prison on individuals and its weak collective effectiveness. It is an important work in the critical and expressive genres. Scientifically, however, it contains factual errors and is logically crude. From the fact that prison increases the rates of recidivism, Foucault concludes it increases the rates of criminality – a mistake that a first-year student would not make. The positive evaluation of Foucault's work is not without justification and his book is useful, but that is not to say that it is true.

On the whole it must be recognized today that the cognitive TWD genre is less widely represented than the expressive-militant and descriptive genres. This perhaps explains why eminent sociologists have the impression of a discipline in a process of decomposition (Horowitz, 1994; Dahrendorf, 1995).

Note

1. Boudon and Cherkaoui (1999) propose a selection of pieces following the TWD programme. The first four volumes cover the period from the origins to 1930, the remaining four the period from 1930 to 2000.

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Author's Address

Université Paris IV – Sorbonne, ISHA, 96 bd. Raspail, 75006 Paris