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EPISTEMIC CONFUSION AND PATTERNS OF SOCIOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

The language of contemporary sociological writings contains several terms, words and concepts which refer openly or implicitly to significant awareness of existing epistemic and heuristic shortcomings of sociological knowledge, and to the specificity of modernity which brought this knowledge about. The way sociological knowledge has been patterned in the twentieth century, I contend, produces confusion as to the nature of society and to our ability to understand it.

Hegel (1802; 1999: 176), speaking about constraints of philosophical epistemic condition, has already been aware of the imminent *fundamental untruth of the whole* that would produce the nothingness of social knowledge. Such nothingness is in other words the light-weightiness or the inability to substantively contribute to our understanding of the world. Positivism has endowed us with a conviction that scientific knowledge magnifies our opportunities of cognition. But the nothingness signifies that we are not necessarily better off when undertaking systematic research and explanatory endeavours. When one cannot discern between what is more significant and what is not, it is the indication of confusion.

Eisenstadt (1999: 198) realises that *tensions and antinomies* that have developed within the basic premises of modern social thought reflect the fact that social reality of the late twentieth century is *radically different* from assumptions about convergence of various worlds, societies and civilisations. His analysis proves that sociological knowledge, derived from both classical sociological tradition and from the studies of modernisation conducted in the 1940s and 1950s has conflated different dimensions of modernity and thus proved to be highly inadequate to the reality we have inherited from the short twentieth century.

Alexander (1995: 2-3) speaks about the crisis of reason which produces the epistemological and sociological fallacy. The discipline falls short of allowing to reflect the *sense of instability, of the imminent transitoriness of the world* (*ibid.*, 9) because its only scientific foundations lie within the concept of reason, thus neglecting the extra-reasonal sources of cognition. Sociological knowledge, he continues, is constructed upon a binary code, artificially dichotomising the narrated conception of social reality, so that people can *maneuver the space in between* (*ibid.*, 14).

Likewise, Jameson (1991) speaks of the disorientation that the contemporary life projects on our knowledge of the surrounding world, that includes loss of spatial coordinates, the decline of historical consciousness, and the general phenomenon of cognitive boundaries of

the modern world to be breaking down (Best and Kellner 2001: 7-8). Calhoun attributes this to the fact that for the most part of the twentieth century

social science accepted the world as it existed, indeed even precluded recognition of the possibilities for fundamental social change.

(1995: 20)

Scholars reflect upon the epistemologically devastating impact of temporocentrism, whereby values and beliefs of a limited time period are extrapolated to judge the past, the present and the future, thus narrowing their cognitive horizons.

In brief, the attempts to mirror the society in which we live usually bring images which are either distorted, or belated, thus lagging behind the richly textured real life, images that are either too particular or too general, so that one has difficulty determining causality patterns. With Hegel lamenting that *the owl of Minerva rises only with the falling of the night* comes recognition of our limited epistemic and explanatory capacities.

Two quick conclusions should be introduced at this point. One is that epistemic shortcomings reflect on our ability to act, to reason and predict and to feel good about our capacity to grasp the world around us. Another conclusion is that a remedy most likely lies within the meta-knowledge of society, or within our ability to meta-theorise, thus reflecting on what we do not know and why. Otherwise, as Alexander aptly puts it: *social theory is caught up in the dream of reason* (*ibid.* 77).

The uncertain nature of society

Society, being the object of systematic and scientific study is described and reflected in statements, sentences, assumptions, premises, conclusions and laws which the discipline of sociology is attempting to produce with a variable degree of self-assertiveness. It appears that the very subject matter of sociology should allow unequivocal linguistic and conceptual reflection, which in turn should produce certainty as far as epistemic products of the discipline. But it is not so much so.

What is studied by sociology appears to be relatively simple. It examines cultural patterns which influence the behaviour of age cohorts and class segments of societies and populations. It monitors routinised political practices that allow individuals to interface with bureaucratic structures and organisations which have been created years earlier, and the ways in which such organisations comply with or differ from patterns that we discern as characterising a good society.

It investigates rational or emotional determinants of choices we make when confronted with various market situations, i.e. when we evaluate commodities available for purchase, acquisition and consumption. It inquires how obligations and expectations are formulated with regards to individuals and groups and how patterned exclusion minimises the former and maximises the latter among disadvantaged social groups.

It further studies how various patterns of economic activity, say, entrepreneuriality and profit-making, gain their way to the minds of the people and thus how the multidimensional

systems of interaction, engaging moral, religious, pragmatic and knowledge-based considerations are welded together into sets of practices that inform everyday life. Sociology questions also how human societies change, and when, and whether they actually send a detectable signals indicating their quest and need for novelty and fresh ideas. Sociology studies how societies perpetuate and preserve already existing patterns of organisation, shielding them from contenders and violators and imposing hefty penalties for any recognisable infractions.

In short, sociology provides us with pictorial descriptions of temporary configurations and constellations of factors, actors and determinants which contribute to such images that we detect, and record for others to see and to know (Eisenstadt 1999:200).

Information, knowledge, understanding and explanation are major forms of scientific and intellectual output of this discipline. Information is simply gathered, like in an exit poll where people are being asked as to how have they voted, or what choices have they made when participating in a routinised process of political vote. Knowledge is mined, excavated from underneath of the obvious, like in an interview with a patient who brings to surface facts and events that otherwise would have not been available for the oversight of the analyst. Understanding is constructed through mundane cross-referencing and contextualisation of answers given to the investigator. And explanation is pursued by generating theoretical questions as to the causality of things social, the reasons for things happened the way they actually did.

Such interrogatory practices of contemporary social sciences allow for the step-by-step proceeding which helps elevate the pyramid-like edifice of social knowledge. The positivistic heuristic heritage makes us expect that this pyramid is constructable, that its base is to be at its bottom, while the steep top, containing the most general statements is vertically poised above the base.

But the events of the twentieth century have eroded this scientific construction. First, the unprecedented nature of certain social facts (like the Holocaust and massive ethnic cleansing, numerous wars etc.) simply does not allow for understanding, let alone explanation. As Alexander puts it:

in the chaos and devastation there emerged what to earlier progressives would have been a totally unexpected event. This was the outbreak in Europe of counterrevolutions of the right. Rather than the promotion of civility and inclusion, there was a genocidal murder of large segments of the carriers of progress.

(1995: 76)

The explanatory capacity of the social sciences rests on the foundation of reason. But the declension of reason ruins the entire construction, sways it or turns it upside down. The unexplainability of social facts contributes to confusion.

Second, the elliptic rather than linear nature of historical processes eludes explanatory attempts. Research indicates that boredom and ennui have been a product of economic affluence and of lack of greater social problems (Alexander 1995: 77; Alfino et als. 1998: 2-3; Ritzer 1999:2). As a result, several social processes run upstream and people flee away from the certitudes of reason, progress and sanity to follow the ideologies, myths and tales which stay in denial of what the humanity has accomplished in the past.

The phenomenon of epistemic confusion

My contention is that we are dealing with a significant epistemological confusion which is brought about by sociological knowledge. It is so for three reasons.

First, our accumulated knowledge is by itself incoherent and thus cannot be brought together under one roof. Several authors indicate that it is polyvalent and polyvocal (Agger 2000), dualistic (Fukuyama 1994), discursive (Lemert 1997), and recursive (Babbie 1994), relative (Best and Kellner 2001) and culture-specific (Alexander 1995), thus it does not convey from one culture to another. What is known as sociological perspectives or theoretical approaches is, in fact, a set of diverse and mutually inconsistent assumptions about the human society. Subjecting the vast body of social knowledge, whether theoretical or empirical, to a universal, singular and coherent cross-reference system would yield no convincing results. Any attempt to create and to apply a sociological search engine to this reservoir of epistemic assets would produce mutually contradictory results. A common disagreement as to the meaning and the predicate of the concept of society is the testimony to this situation (Babbie 1994).

Second, the criterion of oneness cannot be applied to human society. In fact, the ontological propensity of human society is by itself multi-dimensional, changeable, explosive and it does not lend itself to a one set of epistemic tools (Beck 1999). Consequently, we are applying different cognitive instruments, depending on the mode of society. This produces significant methodological problems, since descriptions and analyses are frequently incomparable and mutually inconsistent not because they have different linguistic or textual structure, but because they refer to different ontological entities.

Third, sociological knowledge influences the way people think and act, and yet this influence is mostly unpredictable, brings unforeseeable consequences and creates a vacuum in the cognating subjects who cannot bear the heuristic consequences of their knowledge (Bauman 2001).

The above are, respectively, epistemic, ontological and dynamic (explosive) aspects of sociological knowledge.

Epistemic confusion is thus a complex process. It refers to the way we, as humans, derive, catalog, reference and employ knowledge about our human society and the reality surrounding us. By confusion I mean **the state of mind which fails to correctly distinguish between things, and one that indiscriminately accepts and deals with divergent contents and statements that are thrown together into our field of perception. Our inability to eliminate or to downgrade the significance of various social facts (that our cognitive apparatus enhanced with media instruments is delivering to us daily) produces a deluge of information which is paralysing and deluding. Accordingly, epistemic confusion is the phenomenon when an individual, or a collective of individuals, when trying to make sense of the surrounding world, is unable to discriminate between statements of varying validity or with different relevance to the timeline of processes and events that one wants to evaluate or to gather knowledge about.** Confusion is at the same time an acknowledgement of perplexity, is an indication of heuristic helplessness and thus produces loss of assertiveness, and is a cause for mistaken or unclear identity. When it results from the inability to resolve dilemmas brought about by social life, it indicates ones inability to employ broader cognitive background referencing mechanisms (Searle 1998).

When it results from the inability to sift between too many cognitive and explanatory options, it indicates deficient cultural learning mechanisms. When it results from the incapacity to confront social reality as it is, it indicates severe structural problems with the accessibility to social and mostly intellectual capital (Fukuyama 1995).

Empirically, I believe, one may detect epistemic confusion in many ways. First, when employing regular interrogatory epistemic practices or asking the regular question about what is the world around me?, one is unable to come up with one single answer, or with a set of consistent, if not accurate statements. Second, when asked about ones own identity, i.e. asking the question about who am I in this complex world?, one comes up with no convincing conclusion and thus places itself outside of the cultural, moral or historical contexts (Lemert 1997). Third, when asked to express ones own moral and political preferences and to justify them, as in the case of taking part in democratic vote, one is unable to discern what is desirable and detestable, and thus votes erratically or refrains from voting at all. Fourth, when forced to recognise the consequences of certain actions, whether individual or collective, one is unable to link the cause with the prospective effect and thus is overwhelmed with the sequentiality of social processes. Fifth, when confronted with the imminent explosiveness or unpredictability of actions or processes, one is unable to recognise and to evaluate the margin of risk and the prospect of chaos.

Confusion is therefore a state of incertitude as to what is, what was, what will be and what could be. Having clues, convictions, beliefs and preferences, though, does not mean to be right. Thus, when saying that sociological knowledge brings about certain degree of epistemic confusion does not mean to say that otherwise people would be closer to knowing the truth about social reality. Instead, it refers to cognitive helplessness and moral resignation from inquisitive intellectual undertakings, and refraining from such social actions which could bring about significant social changes or protect and defend existing status quo.

Confusion may lie at the foundation of permissiveness, apathy, and militantism, as it may render individuals and groups at the mercy of mobilising manipulators who would then re-program them for specific social actions. Certitude does not guarantee truthfulness of our knowledge either. People who are sure about their past or present may as well be wrong as those who have no clues. Certitude, meaning conviction about the correctness of ones beliefs and knowledge provides powerful motivation for participation in major endeavors of civil repair and transformation (Alexander 2001), and is likely to produce a crusadic type of mind anyway.

But confusion contributes to, if not forces a human mind and sociability to degenerate and to give up on things which are vital for continuation of human society. While this is a state of mind which is induced, learned or otherwise acquired, it contributes to the erosion of the foundations of social solidarity, communitarism, and trust (Fukuyama 1995). Such erosion has been widely reported (Putnam 2000, Fukuyama 1992) and debated. It does affect contemporary American society (Rossides 1933), as it is visible in societies undergoing accelerated change. It is produced by axial civilisations (Eisenstadt 1999) and by affluent economies (Baudrillard 1998).

The correlation of confusion with the level of education would have to be tested empirically, but it seems that formal education is not a sufficient vaccine for the disease of confusion. Likewise, the prevalence of confusion is probably unrelated to social stratification, as this phenomenon occurs among middle and higher classes, as well as among the working

classes. Epistemic confusion, however, seems to be cyclical and at least co-temporal with major social disasters (Halevy 1965). It can lead to collective delusions.

The uncertain nature of social knowledge

My next contention is that social knowledge produces confusion because of the way social reality is constructed. It means that the nature of social reality by itself limits our ability to produce an effective cognitive instrument in the social sciences. Not only the more we try to know, the less we know, but also the more complex society becomes the less we know. Three feelings of inadequacy of our knowledge are most prevalent as of late.

Firstly, our diagnostic or perceptive abilities are questioned, and consequently we have good grounds to believe that our knowledge of human society is disparate from what society actually is. We have limited verbal and narrative abilities to infer knowledge from social facts. Our communication with other people is distorted by powerful cultural and political mechanisms. In everyday communication prevalent in the anglo-saxon culture, the so-called small talk is a form of maintaining subjectless conversation on insignificantly safe matters. Likewise, I contend, academic communication in the social sciences takes either a form of a small talk, or a big talk, respectively. Luckmann speaks about the first-order and the second-order units (1999). The former is so specific, that most audiences would have no clue as to what it actually pertains to. The latter is so general that it has no predicate, either. It is well taken by Luckmann:

evidently, matters are not simple. There is no easy solution to the problems arising in the reconstruction of the meaning of social interaction and dialogue

(Luckmann 1999: 398)

Resulting is different degree of accuracy of social knowledge about the extent to which others shared past interactions, or the extent to which the world within reach is shared with other participants of this communication.

In other terms, the image of society, as we construct it through scientific and epistemic practices, probably does not adhere to the actual society that exists independently. The poverty of sociological knowledge as compared with the rich texture of everyday life is intuitively detectable. One of the major failures of such knowledge is its atemporality it simply flattens the time dimensions within which society lives, and conflates it to one. Griffin and van der Linden correctly observe that most sociologists

by definition and intent do not seriously ground either the theories they use or the analyses they perform in the historical (temporal and spatial) contexts.

(1999: 4)

In reality, however, not only time matters, but understanding and explaining past actions and ability to locate events (social facts) in time is crucial for building the image of society.

Second, our ability to apply social knowledge to a human society is inadequate, and thus what we produce as a result of rational and planned undertakings is different from what we intended to obtain in the first place. Babbie observes that

sociologists are devoted to studying something that wont stand still. It is constantly changing.

(1994: 14)

Whatever we learn about society becomes changed and altered in the process of learning. Hence many of our undertakings produce efforts different from those expected.

Third, our knowledge seems to be civilisation-specific and we find ourselves unable to extrapolate it on societies that remain outside our own civilisation. The temporal factor is significant here. Majority of sociological analyses either deal with short-term configurations and arrangements of the social space, or they offer atemporal images. The image of the other, and the very concept of the otherness in fact is embedded in our own concepts of moral and cultural correctness and tradition. This civilisation-specific nature of sociological knowledge produces profound contradictions.

It seems that nothing has changed as far as how the social sciences are equipped to describe and explain social reality. This is what Lippmann wrote sixty five years ago:

the conceptual apparatus required for the successful analysis of a great society is not yet perfected sufficiently to be used effectively by students of the social sciences, much less by public men. It is not merely that we do not have today enough factual knowledge of the social order, enough statistics, censuses, reports. The difficulty is deeper than that. We do not possess the indispensable logical equipment the knowledge of the grammar and the syntax of society as a whole to understand the data available or to know what other data to look for.

(Lippmann 1937: 33)

These shortcomings reflect the uncertain epistemic status of sociological knowledge. Scholars talking about tensions, inconsistencies, gaps usually refer to various defects of the sociological narrative.

The Epistemology of Post-Modern Confusion

I contend that the epistemic confusion we experience is related to the expectations that arise from the ascent of late modernity. This contention can take two forms. In the stronger version one would assume that late modernity produces confusion by the virtue of the declension of reason. In the weaker version one would assume that confusion is only further magnified by the inability of the social sciences to cope with the explanatory task as far as the events of the twentieth century.

But there are additional reasons for such confusion. One, and major cause lies in the expectations we have as far as accessibility and utilitarian value of such knowledge. Another rea-

son lies within the pace or speed of social change and results from the overwhelming human appetite to immediately consume the fruits of improved scientific research, technological advancement and organisational complexity. Those two reasons add to the already sufficient epistemic conditions for confusion.

Zygmunt Bauman (2001) observes that one of the major reasons for the tensions surrounding what he calls a sociological thinking is that sociology is widely meant and expected to open the door to increased freedoms and liberties of the mankind. Freedom: both a freedom from, and a freedom to is obviously a result of the Enlightenment project which promised an average person an ability to orientate oneself in the surrounding world. This was the Enlightenment vision of social reality and of its intelligibility. An optimistic one. Writes John Searle:

from the time of the scientific revolutions of the seventeenth century until the early decades of the twentieth, it was possible for an educated person to believe that he or she could come to know and understand the important things about how the universe works. From the Copernican revolution, through Newtonian mechanics, the theory of electromagnetism, and Darwin's theory of evolution, the universe made a kind of sense, had a kind of intelligibility, and was becoming ever more accessible through the steadily increasing growth of knowledge and understanding. It was even possible for educated people to feel that scientific knowledge was perfectly consistent with, even an adjunct to, their religious faith.
(1998:1)

It is clear that there was an extensive period in Western civilisation when it was universally assumed that the universe was completely intelligible. Thus two assumptions have been made. The stronger one, being more inclusive, proposed that everybody is capable to comprehend the world around her. The weaker assumption, more exclusive, would propose that between the minds of the rank-and-file members of human society and the complex structures of the surrounding world, physical and social, there needs to be some sort of an intermediary agent who would, first, read the hidden pictures and configurations with the assistance of special instruments and methods, and, then, translate them into the narrative form understandable to everybody.

The former suggested that there is certain epistemic propensity of human mind which allows to comprehend the world by referring to the commonsensical knowledge, available to all. It offered a democratic and unconditionally optimistic vision of human cognition, as predicated upon universal access to the same reservoirs of knowledge. Truth, meant as correctness of the image of surrounding reality, is here available to everybody who is then capable to discern it from untruth.

The latter, on the other hand, made this comprehension contingent upon translation, and thus allowed for the existence of highly specialised knowledge, produced by specially educated people who would perform specialised and exclusive social role. Those would be either les savants or scholars, methodologically purist scientists, public intellectuals or professional academics. Each of these categories would be specifically enfranchised to gather information, process it into a form of scientifically approved knowledge and then to proliferate it by writing for or speaking to wider audiences. The masses then would be able to comprehend the processed message which is already transcribed in a commonsensical ver-

biage. Truth is thus conditionally available to the masses and only after it gains license from the interpreters.

Feagin and Vera (2001) distinguish between the egalitarian and elitist models of knowledge in the social sciences. They realise that scientific knowledge is

a commodity that confers the power to control nature, to shape other human beings, and to improve ourselves. Knowledge is power, and some, like Michael Foucault, use one word, power/knowledge, to describe the two.

(2001: 10)

Possessed with such knowledge and understanding, whether extracted directly and firsthand, or obtained through the intermediary and thus re-told and re-packaged, every person would be able to make an informed judgement of the situation and to form some basis, recommendations and preparations for action(s) to accommodate to the surrounding conditions. Freedom was constructed as one's ability to be independent in judgement and action from the recommendations and orders of others. Knowledge through empowering of individuals and groups allows them to liberate themselves from the constraining and harnessing everyday reality. Freedom, in other words, was to be, first and foremost, an individual ability to steer one's way through the surrounding world, to sail away from obstacles and to be able to reach, metaphorically speaking, the peaceful waters where no danger would exist. Out of such liberal individualist quest for freedom the collective sense of freedom was also constructed. It was a purely social pursuit. Tired with past uncertainties, human societies at large, and their governments, were searching for methods of harnessing the spontaneous and unpredictable social processes. Writes Zygmunt Bauman:

[people sought] how to get what we want and how to jump over or bypass anything that may stand in our way. This is informed by the belief that freedom derives from the ability to control a situation and thereby to subordinate it to our purposes. The promise of knowledge is then taken its ability to tell us, beyond any doubt, what will happen, and that this, in turn, will enable one to act freely and rationally in the pursuit of particular ends. Armed with this knowledge, the only moves that will be made are those guaranteed to bring about the desired results.

(2001: 168)

The physical world seemed to be easily subdued to such a quest for freedom-cum-control. The social world required further engineering efforts, and both the welfare state capitalism and state socialism relied heavily on such regulatory attempts. In the social world control over a situation necessarily involved, as Bauman remarks (*ibid.*) control over other people. At this precise moment sociological knowledge experiences the first wave in the long sequence of tensions. Common expectations and institutional needs are in clash: on the one hand they would welcome knowledge as a liberating force, on the other, however, as they expect this knowledge to be socially useful, they allow by default that social knowledge is limiting our human freedoms.

By exploring the hopes, wishes, desires and motivations that inform human action, sociologists may be expected to provide information about the way things need to be arranged in order to elicit the kind of behaviour that people ought to exhibit. These expectations amount to the demand that sociological thinking should produce recipes for the control of human interaction.

(2001: 168,169)

This closes the loop of the vicious circle: in their quest for knowledge people taste knowledge as power, and then seek it as a liberating force. In order to experience these new freedoms they want to optimise for one parameter, which is certitude of knowledge as prediction, but by the same token of increasing the certitude of their knowledge-based interventions they immediately limit the scope of freedoms available to them. The picture gets even more complicated as we move from the individual to a collective level. Social knowledge, meaning to be a liberating factor, contributes to the perpetuation of the status quo, frequently by setting the limits of its investigation within narrowly confined boundaries.

What is then foreclosed is an understanding of potential alternative visions of social relations, as well as the possibilities for change that are pregnant within all contemporary arrangements.

(2001: 174)

This is the context of social knowledge that, according to Bauman, produces social tensions.

Rationality [is] presenting itself as a two-edged sword. It clearly assists in the process of obtaining more control over actions. Placed in the service of the individual, rationality may increase the scope of individual freedom. There is also another side to rationality. Once applied to the environment of individual action to the organisation of the society at large rational analysis can serve to limit choices or diminish the range of means from which individuals may draw in order to pursue their ends. Therefore, it may constrain individual freedom. Sociology reflects this tension.

(2001: 175)

In fact, the democratisation of social knowledge (proliferation of various types of writing and data) which takes place through massification of communicative patterns in modern society comes at a substantial price. Sartori (1997) maintains that the availability of mass media has transformed human society into a watching crowd, that follows colourful icons without actually inquiring into the nature of what is being seen. This is consistent with Baudrillard's description of the simulacra, and with Debord's concept of the society of the spectacle. Ritzer (1999) in his hypothesis about the ongoing process of quasi-rationalisation of social organisation of consumption, leisure and work joins the ranks of the critics of modernity, suggesting considerable poverty of social knowledge available to the masses. So, the mass culture, mass communication and a conviction that everybody having an access to information can possess understanding of society produces confusion and delusion

of the masses. An attempt to liberate the knowledge from the elitist constraints does not help. Neither does an attempt to retain its elitist and specialised character.

I conclude that sociological knowledge by itself does not offer sufficient guarantee of certitude. To the contrary, its ontological and epistemic determinants render it vulnerable to confusion. The remedy of this condition can not stem from the process of gathering data, organising it or writing the narrative. It has to come from the meta-theoretical controls, by which I mean systematic analytical and interrogatory practices aiming at determining not what we currently know, but what we do not know, and then evaluating the width of this gap. Meta-theory is an analytical tool which does not expand the explanatory capacity of the existing theories, but which allows to ascertain its limitations. Meta-theory is a conscience of the social sciences.

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