For inclusion in Fran Collyer (ed.): *Research Handbook for the Sociology of Knowledge.* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2023.

**A Diagnosis of the Sociology of Our Time**

Frédéric Vandenberghe, IFCS-UFRJ, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and Max Weber Kolleg, Erfurt, Germany

Abstract: For Karl Mannheim, the sociology of knowledge was not a special sociology among others, but a continuation of the philosophy of history by other means. In the spirit of Mannheim, this chapter resituates sociology within the context of the system of disciplines that emerged in the 19 th. century and defends sociology as the *Grundwissenschaft* (basic science) of society. Over and against narrow conceptions of the discipline, it outlines the relations between sociological, social and societal theory.

Keywords: Karl Mannheim – social theory – philosophy of history – sociology of knowledge

The sociology of knowledge is a successor to the philosophy of history. It continues Hegel and Marx´s intimations of world history, but in the spirit of neo-Kantianism. It extends dialectical reflection on the travails of the Spirit through various societies and historical epochs, while incorporating the epistemological reflections of Wilhelm Dilthey, Georg Simmel and Max Weber on history, sociology and the human sciences. The result is a philosophy of history that takes the form of a sociology of sociology. Fully aware of its historical, social and cultural conditions of possibility, it also knows the limits of its own knowledge. Without ever falling into the traps of anti-Marxism, it corrects the philosophical hubris of historical materialism with a historicist account of social, cultural and personal change. In continuous dialogue with the sociologies of culture of Max and Alfred Weber, it is as much indebted to Hegel’s dialectics as to Dilthey’s hermeneutics. The sociology of sociology conceives of itself reflexively as a situated account that offers a synoptic interpretation of the dynamics of society.

In *Ideology and Utopia*, Karl Mannheim suggests that the sociology of knowledge should not only investigate the emergence of disciplines, but also their disappearance. In the same way as the history of art seeks to discover why and how certain art forms (like theatre and dance) lose their dominance or certain styles (like baroque or expressionism) become hegemonic at a certain time, 'the sociology of knowledge should seek to investigate the conditions under which problems and disciplines come into being and pass away' (Mannheim 1935:109).

In the spirit of Mannheim, I want to investigate in this chapter the emergence and disappearance of sociology as the basic discipline of the social sciences, as the 'key science' (Mannheim 1935:247), able to unlock the secrets of the present. I do not mean to suggest that sociology is only of historical interest, like phrenology, or that one should study the writings of Marx, Weber and Durkheim the way one studies those of Lombroso. Rather my argument will be that the professionalisation, disciplinarisation and departmentalisation of sociology makes it increasingly difficult for the discipline to understand itself, its genesis, its validity, and its context of justification.

In this chapter, I want to look back at sociology – the general science of society that emerged in western Europe in the 19th. century as a successor to moral philosophy – triumphed in the 20th. century as a reflection on the Fordist model of industrial capitalism that it helped to bring into existence, and started to decline at the turn of the 21st. century (Caillé, Chanial and Vandenberghe 2019). As a kind of obituary to the whole subfield of social theory (Lizardo 2014), and as counterpoint to the disciplinary-departmental logic of professionalisation, specialisation and fragmentation, I will sketch out a conceptual genesis of sociology in continuous dialogue with Karl Mannheim. The chapter is written as an unapologetic contribution to the defunct genre of 'Theory-Ology', which John Martin Levi (2015:2) lovingly describes as 'study of the work of theorists' in the Parsonsian style, and qualifies as 'theory of theory that we all hate' (without specifying whom this 'we all' might be). I should also stress that it is more of an “intellectual” than an “institutional” history of ideas, to use Fran Collyer’s (2012: 7-8) insightful distinction between two different “styles” of thinking and writing with their own grammars, categories and presuppositions. I am indeed more interested in the conceptual genesis of the discipline than in the historical setting in which a given body of knowledge was first formulated, developed and transmitted. My approach to the history of ideas is not historicist, but ‘presentist’ (Seidman, 1983). I am concerned with the general theoretical presuppositions of a sociological analysis, diagnosis and critique of the present. If I revisit the writings of the early Mannheim, it is indeed to understand the ontology of the present. My analysis of the intellectual tradition of the sociology of knowledge as a cultural and political sociology of the mind may be presentist; it is in no way ‘Whiggish’. It is not a history of the progress of sociological knowledge and it does not glorify the present either. Rather, it seeks to reactivate the intellectual heritage of the past to better diagnose the existent social pathologies and withstand the coming crises.

The chapter is divided into four sections and a conclusion. The first section sets the scene by contrasting classical visions of the task of sociology to those in the contemporary context (1). The next two sections cover the emergence of sociology within the system of disciplines (2), its emancipation from moral philosophy and its continuation by other means as general sociology (3). The fourth section reformulates the dated language of general, systematic and historical sociology into more contemporary terms and tries to spell out the relations between metatheory, social theory and sociological theory (4). The conclusion ponders whether sociology is still the basic science and wonders if it is still up to its task of producing a diagnosis of our time.

Like Mannheim, and inspired by him, I will attempt a theoretical reconstruction of the social sciences as a whole. This is not an easy task. However hard I have tried to reassemble the bits, there are always some loose bolts and wheels that endanger the construction and show the arbitrariness of the distinctions I try to establish. Now as then, one must nevertheless try to remain faithful to the theoretical mission of sociology. A century later, Mannheim’s (1932:56) conclusion at the end of his book on the contemporary tasks of sociology is unexpired:

A general design of the social sciences remains necessary, even if we could not realise everything or when the practice would later show that the task that became visible at the intersection could be realised later by another discipline and sociology was only the catalyst of certain questions.

**1. Who now reads Mannheim?**

Originally, sociology was not supposed to be a social scientific discipline among other disciplines (Habermas 1981). Both the French and the German traditions conceived of sociology as a super-discipline that orchestrates the production of social scientific knowledge and coordinates research among the disciplines of the social sciences (but also within the subdisciplines of sociology), into a morally righteous, politically engaged, empirical philosophy of history without teleology or metaphysical guarantees. This conception of sociology as 'general sociology' (sociology as the encyclopaedia of the social sciences in the French tradition) or 'systematic sociology' (sociology as the system of social sciences in the German tradition) corresponds more or less to what today is called - and disparaged - as 'social theory'. In English, the term includes both general sociology and the theory of modern society (Reckwitz 2021:26, n.1). Social theory, in the broad sense, is the space of articulation between social, political and moral philosophy, the various disciplines of the social sciences and the anti-disciplines in the human sciences (Caillé and Vandenberghe 2021). While the latter have expanded their reach well within the social sciences by way of the 'Studies', sociology has contracted from 'Big S Sociology' to 'small s sociology' (Savage 2020). The repudiation of social theory as armchair speculation coincides with a renewed defence of sociological theories of the middle range, as advocated by Robert Merton (1968:39-72) in *Social Theory and Social Structure*. These constitute the bread and butter of ordinary sociology. Social scientists work on specialised issues and delimited social phenomena. Instead of grandiose theories of society that are text-based, contemporary sociology cultivates theoretical modesty and recommends research on more tractable problems. Properly done, hands on, theory is an art, a craft and a practice (Swedberg 2014) – it invents, through abduction, abstract concepts and causal models that explain the observed regularities in social behaviour.

The positivism that one still finds in Merton´s critique of Talcott Parsons’ elaborate schematism reappears now in the form of methodological pluralism. Whether one does fieldwork, interviews or surveys, whether one works on media discourses or scrapes Big Data from the Internet doesn´t matter. As long as one´s reflections are grounded in empirical research and methodologically justified, one can even accept the use of 'secondary data', though 'primary data', produced and collected by the researcher, remain the touchstone of the profession (Lahire 2021). Sociology defines itself in opposition to philosophy ('they don´t have any data!') and the Studies ('they don´t use a proper methodology!'). The disciplinary retrenchment of sociology with its insistence on the necessity to gather data first-hand (qualitative, quantitative or mixed) and avoid generating theory out of theory, has been observed by colleagues from neighbouring disciplines. Informally, one complained that sociologists spend so much time these days on methodological questions that general issues are left for discussion after the talk.

This is not how Karl Mannheim understood sociology. Even his sociology of knowledge was not a special sociology (sociology of …), but a general, systematic and historical sociology of societies in turbulent times with diagnostic intent. Instead of opposing philosophy to sociology, the social sciences to the human sciences, or theory to research, he always tried to ingrate them into a new dynamic synthesis. His philosophy of culture, his sociology of knowledge, his sociology of the mind, his diagnosis of fascism, his advocacy of democratic planning, his sociological psychology, his humanist pedagogy and social ethics (Kettler, Meja and Stehr 1984; Kettler and Meja 1995), all have to be understood as phases within a world-historical sociology that proposes to understand the ontology of the present. The task of understanding the present is rather tantalising. It presupposes that one transcends the perspective of one´s own discipline, extrapolates research from neighbouring disciplines, and reassembles the data in a slightly speculative narrative of the present that is intended both as an interpretation of, and an intervention in, the present situation.

Now as then, the social, economic and political situation is critical. The resolution of the crisis demands a reliable analysis, a sound diagnosis, and a firm decision (*kairos*). The specificity of Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge is that it proposes a totalising interpretation of the intellectual situation of action that is idiographic. It understands the historical situation in its singular becoming by multiplying the perspectives of the various actors who constitute the situation, understanding their general worldviews (ideologies and utopias) as expressions of differential modes of being-in-the-world that are related to their social locations at a particular moment in history. While each of the ideologically oriented actors can only see a part, the sociologist can see the situation as a whole. The synoptic view of the intellectual situation it constructs is of-and-in the situation', as John Dewey would say. As a geometral of perspectives, it integrates the various perspectives into a system of interrelated positions (relationism) that transcends the situation as it is experienced by the various collectives that are in conflict with each other. As a summation of perspectives that constitute the situation, it captures the constitution of society in its becoming as a process (dynamism). The self-description of society it offers to society is not only relational and processual, structural and dynamic; it is also synthetic and reflexive, descriptive and normative, diagnostic and critical without being partisan.

Unlike Marxist social diagnoses and critiques that analyse society dialectically 'from the point of view of totality' (Lukács 1972:1-26), the sociology of knowledge does not lock the interpretation of the present into a philosophy of history that is written in the future perfect tense. By generalising historical materialism, it particularises it, and thereby transcends it, according to Mannheim (1936:105): 'Only when we are thoroughly aware of the limited scope of every point of view are we on the road to the sought for comprehension of the whole'.

The task of the intellectual is to reconstruct the ideologies, utopias and other practical knowledges behind the interpretation of the present, to give them maximal coherence and understand them as expressions of existential locations within society. Ideologies and utopias are totalising visions and volitions of the world that are incongruent with reality. They are not just representations, however; they also include irrational, volitional, emotional and subconscious elements. Because of their social anchoring in the social structure, they are inevitably skewed and biased. The blue prints for action they offer are partial and partisan. The sociology of knowledge is engaged, but it is not partisan nor partial. Its function is to be an 'organon for politics as a science' (Mannheim 1935:153-191) that dialectically mediates between theory and praxis. Without any privilege that transforms the social suffering of the downtrodden into an epistemic vantage point, it systematises the diagnoses of the present of the various actors into the most comprehensive understanding of the situation adequate for action. By means of a synoptic and dynamic view of the situation that is able to 'determine from case to case what is no longer necessary and what is not yet possible' (Mannheim 1936:154), it provides the indispensable theoretical orientation to transformative practice.

The problem with contemporary sociology is that while it recognises the multiplicity of crises that affect society, modernity and the social sciences themselves (Macé 2020), it no longer allows for a comprehensive analysis and diagnosis of the current situation. The classics are ritualistically invoked in teaching and, occasionally, also in writing, but their general approach to society, culture, history, the economy, technology, politics and personality is seen as something from another age. In the span of a generation, social theory as an integrative enterprise that seeks to maintain the dialogue between social, political, and moral philosophy on the one hand and the various social and human sciences on the other, has simply disappeared. The synthetic theories of the last century (Bourdieu, Habermas, Giddens and Co.) that tried to overcome the double opposition between agency and structure on the one hand, and conflict and consensus on the other in a comprehensive social theory, were the last gasp of grand theorisation within sociology. The ambition and enthusiasm of the 'new theoretical movement' in sociology (Alexander 1988) has petered out in the sterility of neo-classic scholasticism. In comparative literature, the excesses of deconstruction and criticism have opened the way not only to a myriad of 'turns' (from the linguistic to the affective), but also to the new fads of 'post-critique' and 'post-theory' (McQuillan et al., 1999 with a 'post-word' by Hélène Cixous). Theorising in the old style integrates metatheory (reflection on the philosophical foundations and textual reconstruction of the classics), social theory (construction of a system of concepts valid for the social and human sciences as a whole) and the theory of society (analysis, diagnosis and critique of social formations) in a unique framework. This conceptual scaffolding is no longer seen as being part of sociology. Nowadays, the practitioners of the discipline would rather outsource these conceptual issues to philosophers. The systematic approach to social theory and the essayistic approach to society are still tolerated, but are no longer seen as the core of the discipline. Somewhat unexpectedly, the editors of a *Handbook of Classical Sociological Theory* openly call for the burial of 'dead-end social theory' and recommend that it go the same way as political theory – housed in the department, but expelled from the discipline (Abrutyn and Lizardo 2021:1-17).

Sociologists have abandoned the task of analysing society in its totality and as a whole to Critical Theory and to the Studies, by which I mean to refer to a motley crew of post-structuralist, subaltern, de-colonial and trans-feminist critiques of knowledges, discourses and practices that are permeated by power. That is where theorising now is taking place. It is also where the ontology of the present is being articulated (Vandenberghe 2022). Sociology is 'irritated' (in the Luhmannian sense) by these developments that are taking place at its borders - in, across and against the inherited discourses of the discipline. Overwhelmed by the societal crises and overstretched by the Studies, sociology doubles down and turns back on itself. Instead of opening up and assuming its role as the orchestrator of the social sciences and the Studies, it defines itself more narrowly as a science (rather than as a conscience), as a discipline (rather than as a super discipline) and as a set of methodologies (undergirded by a set of epistemologies, ontologies and normativities) that ground it ever firmer in the field. The consequence of this retraction is that sociology becomes unable to understand the societal developments that are undermining the ground on which it stands. Paradoxically, the science that thrives on crises can no longer explain its own demise.

**2. The System of Disciplines**

Science is a subsystem of society. Like astronomy, biochemistry and Egyptology, sociology is a scientific discipline. A scientific discipline is the primary unity of internal differentiation of science (Stichweh 1992). Generically speaking, disciplines are systems of communication among scientific communities that produce specialised knowledge, organised around a general research programme on a specific subject area. The results of scientific research are shared with the peers in oral presentations (talks, seminars, conferences) or written publications (papers, articles and monographs). The critical discussion of theories, concepts, methodologies and data further the advancement in knowledge, which is geared through competition towards continuous innovation and accumulation.

The organisation of science into disciplines is a modern invention. Up till 1750, scientists (professional and amateurs alike) were generalists and their knowledge was encyclopaedic. Through internal differentiation of the sciences, scientific disciplines emerged in the 19th. century as new ways of ordering knowledge for the purposes of teaching and learning. The system of disciplines, departments and academic professions emerged first in Germany’s modern research universities. It spread from there to France, England and the United States to become universal.

At first, the disciplines were organised along national and linguistic lines. Later, the scientific system became organised as one of the truly global subsystems of the world society (Stichweh 2000:103-183). It functions as a single unit that comprises all scientific communications, and nothing but those. Universal inclusion does not mean equality, however. Like any other functionally differentiated system, the system of scientific communications is a hierarchical one. Prestige accrues to research (communication among specialists and production for peers) rather than to teaching (transmission of formal knowledge to a lay public) - not to mention administration! It is also regionally stratified. It contains a centre, which concentres the bulk of the means of production, a semi-periphery, which often transmits the knowledge produced in the centre to the periphery, where the production from the centre is consumed and emulated.

It is within this context of the differentiation of the sciences that sociology emerged in the 19th. century in Europe in the wake of the Humboldtian university revolution in Germany under Bismarck and the establishment of the *grandes écoles* in France under Napoleon. At the intersection of the German *Geisteswissenschaften*, the British moral sciences (which included political economy) and French political thought, it arose as an empirical offshoot of the philosophy of history, confirming Mannheim’s (1953:214) affirmation that 'every sociology is ultimately derived from a philosophy of history'.

With some notable exceptions (Wagner, 2001, Wittrock 2003, Collyer, 2012), the standard history of the sociogenesis of sociology backgrounds the scientific revolutions of the 19th. century that led to the institutionalisation of the modern system of disciplinary science and higher education. Instead of studying the scientific revolution that led to the differentiation of knowledge in disciplines and departments, it foregrounds the impact on the nascent discipline of the industrial revolution in Great Britain, the political revolution in France, and the philosophical revolution in Germany. From this genealogical perspective, which is also the one adopted by contemporary subaltern studies, feminist studies and post-colonial studies that focus on the junction of knowledge and power, the emergence of sociology becomes almost coeval with the transition to modernity in Western Europe and, by extension, in North America. The collapse of the metaphysical-religious worldview that had started in the Renaissance and continued with the Reformation, Counter reformation and the Enlightenment, was exacerbated by the development of science and technology, the formation of the modern nation-state, and the coalescence of markets and industries in a capitalist economy. Eventually, when the feudal order broke down and the church had lost its monopoly of interpretation, the social sciences emerged from the wombs of the old society as analysts and catalysts of the phased transition to modernity. The sociology of knowledge can be understood from this perspective as the systematic analysis of the social, cultural and political conditions that make the production of a reflexive self-description of societies possible in times of transition between phases.

Differentiated from economics, which goes back to Adam Smith, Malthus and Ricardo and analyses of the 'laws' that govern the production of wealth, and the political sciences, which focus on government and governance; sociology studies the structure, institutions and dynamics of modern societies. Being itself a product of history, the emergence of sociology as a relatively autonomous discipline coincides with the discovery of society (Collins and Makowsky, 1972) as a relatively autonomous formation. Unlike the state, the social cannot be explained by the will of government; unlike the market, it cannot be reduced to the actions of the individuals either, but has to be understood in its own terms. The reflexivity that connects the two autonomies - the autonomy of sociology and the autonomy of society - is constitutive of both (Vandenberghe 1997-1998, I: 8-14), though one should probably not overestimate the transformative power of sociology. After all, it is only a subdiscipline of the social sciences, which are themselves only a part of the sciences, which are only one subsystem of society among others.

The internal differentiation of the scientific system into disciplines was accompanied by an external delimitation of their jurisdictions and boundaries. Together with history, economics, political science and anthropology, sociology was one of the five disciplines that emerged between 1850 and 1914, from within philosophy and in opposition to it, as part of the social sciences (Wallerstein et al., 1996:1-33). The first department of sociology was created at the University of Chicago in 1892, though to correct the historical amnesia, one should also mention the creation of an Institute of social sciences in 1887 in Venezuela and of a chair of sociology in 1882 in Colombia (Dufoix and Macé, 2019). In 1898, Emile Durkheim established *L´année sociologique*. Sociological societies were set up before the First World War in the United States, France, Germany, Australia and Japan. Sociology obtained its distinctive disciplinary-departmental identity after the war. By 1945, the social disciplines were fully institutionalised in most of the major universities of the world with their own departments, chairs, courses, professional training and decrees (Collyer, 2012).

History conceived of itself largely as an idiographic endeavour, based on facts and research in archives. Economics, the political sciences and sociology tended more towards the nomothetic pole of the sciences. Whereas history studies the past 'as it really happened' (*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*), in Ranke’s celebrated formulation, the other disciplines investigate modern societies, using a variety of methods, but distinguish themselves from each other by their respective subject areas (wealth, government, societies). As a successor to Oriental and other Area Studies, anthropology is the study of non-literate societies that were colonised by the West. Of the five disciplines, anthropology was the last to be institutionalised.

The distinction between the disciplines is arbitrary. There are, as Craig Calhoun (1992:184) has cogently argued, no coherent, principled bases for justifying the disciplinary division of labour. There are different reasons for that. One is ontological. Following the outdifferentiation from the economy and politics, the social emerges as an autonomous domain that becomes the object of an autonomous discipline. This story is well known (e.g. Elias 1984) and need not be rehearsed here. With Dilthey, Weber and Mannheim, one could make a similar case for 'culture' and 'history'. Like society, the autonomisation of cultural formations justifies the formation of cultural sciences to analyse the genesis and validity of spheres of signification, value and expression. In reality, of course, these distinctions are much more fluid. Even if not all social facts are 'social total facts' that, like the gift according to Marcel Mauss, involve all the institutions of society and all of its members, most social facts are simultaneously cultural and historical facts.

The second reason for the arbitrary nature of disciplinary divisions is cultural. National traditions make different distinctions that may prove almost 'untranslatable' and work with disciplinary divisions that are almost incommensurable. Thus, for example, the German opposition between the *Natur-* and *Geisteswissenschaften* intersects with the French distinction between the natural and the moral sciences, but is not identical to it. Similarly, the distinction between the natural sciences and the humanities overlaps with the former distinctions, but leaves a gap that is difficult to gauge (Gens 2004). Given that sociology emerges at the confluence of French and German traditions of the social, political, moral and human sciences, any classification of sociology will be inevitably affected by a penumbra of significations. Some sciences of old (like philology, the religious sciences or even mythology, for example) will necessarily be left out from the compact and will reappear at a later stage as 'studies' of this or that.

The Gulbenkian report (Wallerstein et al., 1986) includes history in the social sciences and excludes psychology from it. History traditionally is part of the humanities, and not of the social sciences. Contemporary psychologists see themselves as behavioural scientists, closer to biology than to sociology. A considerable number of sociologists consider themselves as social psychologist, but within psychology, social, cultural and interpersonal psychology and psychoanalysis are relegated to the margins of the discipline. Within anthropology, one finds physical anthropology, archaeology, cultural anthropology and social anthropology lumped together. Meanwhile, physical anthropology has drifted towards the natural sciences and archaeology has become part of history. In political science, one finds a similar jumble with traditional divisions between political theory and history of ideas, national politics, comparative politics and international relations. The divisions between disciplines may have no robust intellectual foundations; they nevertheless continue to structure the sciences and determine the distribution of resources. The divisions are also reflected in the self-conceptions of the researchers. The invocation of interdisciplinarity should not hide that the communication between disciplines (between philosophy and sociology or sociology and literature, for instance) is not really encouraged within the departments.

The word discipline derives from the Latin *discere* (to learn). *Disciplina* and *doctrina* are coupled concepts, with the former referring to the teacher’s side of instruction and the latter to the student’s side. Thanks to Foucault’s junction between knowledge and power, the concept of discipline is now closely associated with technologies of government and intellectual control of students and scholars alike who are gently kept in check so that they do not deviate too much from the course, the canon and the 'proper' ways of doing science. Or, more tersely, in the words of some governmentality scholars: 'Disciplines discipline disciples' (Barry, *apud* Carrol 2013:11). They define the proper authors (the canon), works (the curriculum), journals (the literature), theories (the doctrine), concepts, (the analytics), terminology (the lexicon), techniques (the methodology) and empirical materials (the data) one has to incorporate to be, become or remain a legitimate member of the fraternity of scholars.

In his sociology of the scientific field, Bourdieu (1976) has shown that the sciences are traversed by vicious struggles among scholars for the power to define the stakes of the discipline, demarcate its boundaries and delimit what is legitimate research and what is not in accordance with their own vested interests in the field. When there is a consensus about the fundamentals of the discipline and the competition of ideas occurs without contesting them, the discipline is able to inculcate its principles of vision and division of the world to the newcomers and, thereby to discipline them. Even when they compete with their colleagues and contest their vision of science and the discipline, the conflict is waged on the basis of a fundamental consensus. In this way, through mutual accommodation, the disciplines stabilise each other, as each protects its own turf. I would like to argue that, paradoxically, this consensus on the fundamentals of sociology as a discipline is what in the long run undermines it. By turning away from its fundamentals and turning in on itself, its founders and its methods, sociology becomes inapt to accomplish the task that the sociology of knowledge ascribed to it, namely to understand the ontology of the present.

**3. Moral Philosophy and General Sociology**

For a long time, the sciences remained within the bosom of philosophy. The scientific revolution of the 16th. century arose out of a conjunction of mathematic formalisation and experiments in physics. It was followed by a second scientific revolution in the 18th. century when the disciplines split off from philosophy (Wittrock, Heilbron and Magnusson 1998). Natural philosophy gave way to physics, chemistry and biology. Similarly, moral philosophy was replaced by a federation of disciplines (history, economics, sociology, political science and anthropology) that make up the social sciences. The humanities for their part encompass disciplines that are excluded from the natural and the social sciences. Poised between science and literature (Lepenies 1988), the social sciences approached the human world mostly, but not exclusively, from a naturalist perspective. Between the old moral philosophy and the new social sciences, there is a rupture in terms of method and continuity in terms of substance. The social sciences position themselves in opposition to the speculations of philosophy - Let us begin then by laying facts aside, writes Rousseau (1964, III:109) in his prize winning essay on the origins of inequality. Social and political thought becomes science when it submits the imagination to facts. When the abstractions of philosophers are tied to observations, philosophy becomes “positive”, by which Comte means empirical and scientific.

In the French tradition, the emphasis on factuality goes hand in hand with an emphasis on facticity that is meant to emulate the natural sciences. Comte´s denigration of internal experience, which manifests itself in the elimination of psychology in his classification of the sciences, finds expression in Durkheim´s social factism. Facts have to be analysed from outside ‘as if they were things’. Even suicide has to be analysed without recourse to subjective meanings. In the German tradition, the social sciences are considered part of the human sciences. Everything in which experience has been objectivated is open to understanding. The inherent connection between culture and agency (structure and practice) underscores the continuity with the humanities and the necessity to disclose meanings, norms and experiences from within. From within and also without rupture of continuity between science and common sense.

Coming from the neo-Kantian philosophy of culture and the post-Hegelian philosophy of history, the sociology of knowledge clearly stands in the hermeneutic and historicist tradition of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. Mannheim extends the hermeneutic method of the human sciences to the social sciences and develops the sociology of knowledge as an interpretative historical sociology of conflicting political ideas, ideologies and practices that are rooted in different experiences of classes, status groups, age groups, genders, sects, schools, etc. in a polarised society. The sociological analysis of worldviews is both structuralist (relational) and historicist (processual). The antagonist worldviews on society that the sociologist finds in society are complementary and form a coherent atheoretical system that one can theoretically reconstruct and historically understand, through the documentary method, as the expression of an epoch. When one reinserts the various visions and volitions of society in the chaotic flux of life from which they emerge, they are not only relativised, but also dynamised and understood as moments and movements within a history that has become conscious of itself at the level of reflexive consciousness (Mannheim 1952:88).

While the new disciplines are institutionalised as research sciences based on experience and are, thus, *Wirklichkeitswissenschaften*, they also continue the tradition of moral philosophy (in the broad sense of the term) by their own means. Moral philosophy *sensu lato* includes not only moral and practical philosophy, but also political philosophy, the philosophy of history and the philosophy of the historical sciences. This becomes clear when one moves from the empirical to the conceptual side of the scientific continuum (Alexander 1982) to inspect the metaphysical environment of the social sciences in general and sociology in particular. By focussing on the metaphysical environment of sociology, I want to outline a conceptual genesis of sociology and parse the relations between philosophical sociology, social theory and the theory of society. The excess of theory is intentional. It is meant to show how far the current understanding of the discipline has veered away from classic understandings of sociology as the heir of moral philosophy and the queen of the social sciences. By abandoning its general ambition, sociology has cut its linkages to philosophy and become a specialised discipline among others. The consequence of this reduction of sociology to an empirically driven research discipline is that it has lost its capacity to propose an encompassing interpretation of the present.

Classical sociology presents itself simultaneously as a general and a special discipline, as a super discipline above others and a specialisation among others (Habermas 1981). This particular status of the discipline derives from the ontological definition of its subject matter (society in its totality), the epistemological ambivalence of its status (transcendental or empirical?), and its reflexive anchoring in the normative presuppositions of modernity. Similar to history and anthropology in that respect, sociology does not confine itself to the study of a particular sector or subsystem of society, like the economy or politics. Studying the part of life that is not politics, economics or psychology, while adopting more or less their nomological outlook, it concentrates on ‘society as such and as a whole’ (Strydom 1998:64). Its pretention to offer a general understanding of social life is part of the official justification of the discipline. At best, it is an aspiration. In reality, it is a rationalisation of its interests that is better explained by academic politics than by a rational principle that grounds the partition of the social sciences into different disciplines (Calhoun 1992). A sociological analysis of the institutionalisation of the disciplines of the social sciences would have no difficulties to show that the domain and objects of sociology are historical sedimentations of struggles for recognition, resources and power. The partition of social reality is contingent and could have been different. The sociology of sociology brings good news: As long as there are sociologists who believe in their discipline and have stakes in it, it will survive.

But what is society? Is it a presupposition or a reality? Is it a natural entity or a cultural artefact? Is it *sui generis* or can it be reduced to elementary forms? And where is society? Within, between or above people? And is there just one society or are there many? And how does one study and observe societies? Is the aim of sociology to explain social behaviour or to understand social action? The difficulty one has to answer those questions suggests that society, this totality in which all social actions, relations, institutions and systems presumably takes place, is both a transcendental presupposition and an empirical object of sociological knowledge. The redoubling of the transcendental into the empirical is typical of post-Kantian subject philosophies and shows that sociology has substituted society for the transcendental subject.

If one looks at sociology from the subjective side with the neo-Kantians, it will appear as a coherent systematisation of presuppositions that rigorously defines the production of propositions of knowledge that distinguishes it from other sciences. If one defines it from the objective side, the domain of sociology will appear as a regional ontology that is defined by the distinctive properties of society that distinguish it from other entities (cultures, individuals, animals). A structural analysis of epistemology, like the one Mannheim pursued in his doctoral dissertation (Mannheim 1952:15-73), will reveal that the systematisation of the logic of the social sciences is necessarily incomplete. The presuppositions that epistemologically sustain the autonomy of the social sciences find their grounding in the ontological autonomy of society. From the point of view of other sciences (history, psychology, biology, neurology, etc.) that do not share the ontology of sociology and that developed their own systematisations, the autonomy of society can only appear as a hypostasis (Mannheim 1952:33). In any case, the circularity between the object of sociology (the unity of society as presupposition) and its project (the study of society as a whole) is constitutive of the new science. It explains why the founders envisioned sociology at the same time as a discipline among others and as a super discipline that transcends, contains and includes the other disciplines in its bosom.

Society is not a substance, though. Like in Hegel, albeit without metaphysical guarantees, it is conceived of as a world-historical process that evolves through the ages towards freedom (Honneth 2014). Even if one no longer subscribes to the Eurocentrism that usually comes as a package with evolutionist accounts of societal development, it is difficult to completely avoid the philosophy of history and its presupposition that there is something like a history connecting society and people across time and space. The shift from a post-Hegelian philosophy of history to a neo-Kantian philosophy of the historical sciences points in the right direction. For a science like sociology that is so intimately tied to the advent of modernity and for whom modernity is both a presupposition and an object, the imprint of the philosophy of history remains implicit. It never completely disappears (Knöbl 2022).

If it is difficult to completely escape from the philosophy of history when one studies modern societies, it is even more difficult to reject the normative principles of modernity altogether. In the case of a historical object like sociology, genesis and validity do not diverge, but converge in a normative circle of foundation that duplicates the transcendental-empirical one. Being itself a product of modernity, sociology endorses the normative principles of subjectivity and liberty on which modern societies are based. These principles continue to structure the system of sciences. If it investigates the social preconditions of moral individualism, it is not to negate the validity of the normative principles, but to understand their social genesis. Although I wouldn’t go as far as Christian Smith (2014), who describes the secular project of American sociology as a sacred and spiritual one, I believe that at the end of the day all of the layers he discerns in the modern-liberal-Enlightenment-Marxist-social reformist-pragmatist-therapeutic-sexually liberated-civil rights-feminist-GLBTQ-social constructionist-post-structuralist/postmodernist tradition of sociology (id., 11) are nothing but historical realisations of the modern principles of subjectivity, alterity and freedom. To the extent that the liberation from oppression and ignorance presupposes equality and projects fraternity, the sociological tradition is a progressive one. It promises to reinvigorate the liberal-humanistic heritage with the social democratic one in a progressive vision of the future of humanity in times of transition. If one ties the pretention to totality, historicity and normativity together, one arrives at the view of sociology as a comprehensive research tradition that encompasses general sociological theory, world-historical sociology and normative social theory à la Rawls (Fararo 1989:15-16).

As a successor to moral philosophy (in the broad sense of the term), sociology is the *Grundwissenschaft* (Mannheim 1932:4) - the basic (Mannheim 1953:203) or central discipline (Mannheim 1957:1) of the social sciences. The sociological ambition is to construct a unified framework of reference for the social sciences that maintains the organic unity between the trunk and the various branches of social scientific knowledge. The core of the discipline is occupied by what may be referred to as general sociology, a denomination that comes straight from John Stuart Mill’s *System of Logic*. It embraces the theoretical, conceptual and methodological dimensions of the social sciences and is responsible for the articulation between sociology and its neighbouring disciplines, as well as for the coordination between theory and research in the subdisciplines of sociology that are defined by the sector of societies they study (sociology of religion, culture, science, education, work, etc.). It is called general sociology, because it purports to describe the elementary relations, processes and forms of sociality that may be found in every society and because it offers a synoptic view of society that synthetises the research of the various disciplines of the social sciences (Borlandi 1998).

Comprising everything that is social (language, religion, the economy, the state, law, education, etc.), i.e. that originates from or terminates in human conviviality, it organises the knowledge of the special sociologies into a synthetic sociology that shows the imprint of the whole on all of its parts and each of its members. The underlying idea is that the specialisation of disciplinary research has to be accompanied by conceptual abstraction and empirical generalisation of their results in a framework of reference that covers society as a whole and all societies. Just as it would be an absurdity to study the different parts of the human organism without a knowledge of biology, so also it is absurd expect that there can be any organic division of labour in the field of the social sciences without general sociology as the basic social science (Mannheim 1953:203).

General sociology provides an encompassing view of society. Its function is to coordinate and orchestrate the social sciences. Following Mannheim’s division of sociology along two axes (static/dynamic and general/idiographic), we can distinguish three types of sociology: pure sociology, comparative sociology, and historical sociology (Mannheim 1932:2-14; 1952:195-208; 1956:55-59, 82-89; 1982:98-118). The first is the study of forms of association from a phenomenological perspective (Husserl/Simmel), the second social relations from a structuralist perspective (Cassirer/Max Weber), and the third social processes from a historical perspective (Dilthey/Alfred Weber). Pure sociology is static. It is concerned with determining the constants of social life - the essences, as phenomenologists would say - and the axiomatisation of the principles of social life as such, independently of any historical variation. The constants can be analytic (like in Kant), eidetic (like in Husserl), empirical (like in Weber) or obtained through a mixture of constructive imagination, eidetic variation and inductive generalisation, as is the case in Simmel’s sociology of the forms of association.

Comparative sociology assumes that the essences are differentially actualised in different societies and epochs. To analyse variations of social forms through space and time, the typological method is used. Comparative sociology constitutes the zone of transition between static and dynamic sociology (Mannheim 1958:2). Depending on whether the ideal types obtained by comparison of different societies are organised synchronically or diachronically, comparative sociology can be either systematic or historical. In systematic sociology, the comparison of existing societies and their institutions is achieved structurally. Historical sociologists construct abstract typologies of social actions, relations and orders and organise them into a complete system of concepts. It is best exemplified by Max Weber’s *Economy and Society*.

Historical sociology is the analysis of societies not structurally, but historically and longitudinally. It involves the organisation of materials in a dynamic view of sequences of social transformation of societies across many generations. Usually, these sequences are organised into a world historical narrative connecting the archaic and traditional to modern societies. Long term social processes, like civilisation, urbanisation, industrialisation, secularisation, democratisation or individualisation, to name just a few, traverse whole societies and connect chain of actions across time and space in a single history.

While systematic sociology shows the traces of neo-Kantianism, historical sociology is indebted to post-Hegelianism. Post-Hegelian neo-Kantianism forms the matrix of sociology as a whole and of the sociology of knowledge in particular. The sociology of knowledge is indeed a historical sociology of culture. Following Dilthey’s (2002) foundation of the human sciences, it understands culture as the totality of objectivations of human experience (*Erlebnis*) in a transpersonal sphere of common significations, valuations and expressions. It comprises cultural formations (religion, arts, sciences, ethics, law, etc.) that find their origin in subjective experiences, but have objective validity and follow their own logic. These cultural formations in which collective intentionalities and entelechies have crystallised are historical through and through.

The historian or sociologist who wants to understand the meaning of a particular work of art, a poem or even a scientific text has to hermeneutically reconstitute the series of mediations that make the work intelligible and connect the part to the wholes until the work is eventually understood as a concrete product and a document of its epoch. A cultural product always condenses objective, expressive and documentary meanings (Mannheim 1952:33-83). To disclose these, a work has to be interpreted, first, in its individuality, then, in the context of the life and the oeuvre of the author and, finally, also in the context of the culture, the spirit and the *Weltanschauung* of a whole epoch that traverses different socio-logical systems and gives them their characteristic style and signature.

The sociology of culture shades into the sociology of knowledge when it relates the understanding of cultural documents of an epoch to the collective experiences of social groups. As a subdivision of the sociology of culture, the sociology of knowledge functionalises cultural creations, i.e. it understands them as a function of the interactions and social relations between groups. The sociology of knowledge does not explain culture by society; it interprets both cultural processes and social relations as unique expressions of the same spiritual formation. As both partake of the objective spirit, the *Geist* can understand the *Geist*. While the sociology of culture discloses the meanings, values and expressions of the objective spirit from within, without negating their validity, the sociology of knowledge understands that they are the sedimentation of the experiential contextures (Dilthey’s *Erlebniszusammenhänge*) of various social groups (classes, estates, generations, etc.) at a certain moment in time. The same contents of the spirit that are understood from within as ideas by the cultural sciences reappear as ideologies when they are analysed from without by the sociology of knowledge, which discloses their existential determination (Mannheim 1970:388-399).

If historical sociology makes the abstractions of general sociology dynamic through comparison, cultural sociology becomes concrete when it describes historical individualities. The abstract typologies of social processes, relations and forms become alive when a given society is analysed in all its complexity as a meaningful totality that is the result of a multiplicity of factors and actors coming together in time and space - what Mannheim calls a constellation or a configuration, a term that will be appropriated by Norbert Elias. The synergies between a cultural approach of beliefs, ideas, values and expressions and a sociological analysis of the lived experiences of social groups become fully realised in a concrete analysis of the intellectual situation. Thanks to those synergies, the analyst is able to understand the intellectual, social and political situation in its complexity and capture the nervus rerum of historical events (Mannheim 1932:25). In the sociology of culture, the attempt is made to analyse unique historical situations in terms of a unique combination of properties and factors undergoing a constant process of transformation - constellations which in themselves are phases in a genetic process the overall ‘direction’ of which can be determined (Mannheim 1952:158).

The description of the social situation in its structural complexity and as a dynamic totality is neither nomological nor dialectical. Rather it is idiographic. The sociologist uses structural, cultural and historical methods to paint a portraiture of a particular society at a given moment of its history. By looking at the correlation of forces between classes, generations and other collective subjectivities, as well as the conflicting visions of the world that animate them, she reveals the structures, processes and practices that have led to the present constellation and indicates tendencies and possibilities that are already immanent in its becoming. The diagnosis of the concrete situation presents a relational and dynamic view of a society that is in constant flux and in crisis, and it does so in the hope to contribute to the development of a scientific theory of politics that enlarges the field of vision of the decision makers, orienting the latter with a realist assessment of the situation and helping them to take the next step. After all, as Mannheim (1956:120) says, one can only master a situation by looking beyond it.

**4. Social, Sociological and Societal Theory,**

Our discussion of the division of labour between philosophical sociology, general sociology and the special sociologies, as well as Mannheim’s examination of the relations between pure, comparative and historical sociology, were partly inspired by Georg Simmel’s delimitation of the field in the opening chapters of his *Soziologie* (Simmel 2009, I:19-39) and his *Grundfragen der Soziologie* (Simmel 1999:62-87). Taken together, the various sociologies do not only offer a synopsis of the whole field of sociology, but allow one to specify the role of theory in the articulation between philosophy and the humanities, the social sciences, and specialised research. In our framework, general sociology functions as a bridge between the metaphysical and empirical environments of science. It extends social, moral and political philosophy into a comprehensive social scientific research programme that covers the whole of society and coordinates research of the specialised disciplines.

At the intersection of the philosophical, general and special sociologies, we find theory trice: first, on the systematic axis, as a dialogical space where sociological, anthropological, historical, political and economic theories can be discussed, inter-articulated and reassembled (social theory); second, on the empirical axis, where the results of more specialised research can be elaborated, organised and integrated in the frame of reference (sociological theory); and, third, on the historical axis, where the results of research can be totalised in a grand narrative about the developmental tendencies of contemporary social formations, like capitalist societies, industrial societies or even the world system as such (societal theory). In all cases, theory is what keeps communication going within the social sciences, between and within the various disciplines and subdisciplines, but also between the metaphysical and the empirical environment of the social sciences.

If we retranslate the old-fashioned language about the divisions of sociology into more contemporary terms, we can perhaps distinguish metatheory, social theory, sociological theory and societal theory (Caillé and Vandenberghe 2021:27-31, 143-145). It should be noted that in English, social theory comprises both social theory (*sensu stricto*) and the theory of society, whereas in German, *Sozialtheorie* (social theory) and *Gesellschaftstheorie* (theory of society or societal theory) are distinguished (Reckwitz 2021:25-44). The French for their part don’t even have a concept of social theory. They use the categories *sociologie générale* and *théorie de la société* as its equivalent. Here, I will follow the German usage. I believe it is more convenient to parse the interrelations between various concepts of theory and the role of research in a more dynamic fashion.

First, as the name indicates, metatheory is theory about the theories of the whole gamut of sociologies we have discussed so far. Taking all the theories together as if they formed a unique stream of thought, it focuses on the philosophical foundations of sociology. It usually proceeds through rational reconstructions of the classics, from Durkheim to Luhmann, from Weber to Habermas, and from Marx to Bourdieu. A rational reconstruction extracts as it were the philosophical logic that animates the theories of the great authors and follows it through to its ultimate consequences. The construction of a logical series of *Aufhebungen* that transcend, while incorporating the theoretical accomplishments of the authors, aims to show that they have not fully realised all the potential that was ensconced in their work. The discussion of philosophical issues (metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, ethics, etc.) serves to make explicit the system of presuppositions that has guided the fundamental decisions that underlie their theory construction, and to make it more consistent.

The main theoretical traditions (positivism, functionalism, Marxism, structuralism, post-structuralism, symbolic interactionism, rational choice, etc.) translate philosophical worldviews into the language of social theory. Through elaboration of some of the central problems of the social sciences, such as the relation between agency and structure (sociology), culture and practice (anthropology), event and system (history), government and policy (political science) or individual preferences and market structure (economics); social theory traverses the various disciplines and systematises some of the possibilities within the field, realising thus a particular version of general sociology. It typically does so by articulating a series of interrelated concepts, like norms and roles, discourse and power, habitus and field, communication and system or intersectionality and coloniality, for instance, that crosscut the disciplinary divisions into a system of reference that defines what is important in social life, what should be investigated, and how.

Social theories are sensitising devices that conceptually frame what is observable and pre-structure the data, because if these are to be integrated into the general framework of reference, they have to be construed in such a way that the observations are already saturated by the social theory. Both Mannheim and Bourdieu insist on this point and exemplify it in their work. Through systematic comparison of the basic assumptions, central concepts and guiding problems, the multiplicity of social theories can perhaps be somewhat reduced, but not eliminated (Hondrich and Matthes 1978). To the extent that comparison between social theories heightens awareness of differences, it also keeps the phantasms of a single unifying theory at bay. The recent controversy in Germany between ‘analytic sociologists’ who wanted to split off from the German Society for Sociology by setting up a rival Academy of Sociology has unintentionally underscored the pluralism within the discipline. Currently, those who imagine that a combination of rational choice and quantitative methods would turn sociology into a real science, are facing strong opposing winds and are unable to convince the diverse camps from the field of German sociology that a monoparadigmatic sociology is possible, let alone desirable (Schmitz et al., 2019).

Unlike social theory, which transcends and includes the various disciplines of the social sciences in its conceptual elaboration, sociological theories are strictly disciplinary. Taking their cues less from the metaphysical and more from the empirical environment of the sciences, they operate with a concept of experience that is much narrower than what Dilthey, Dewey, Husserl or Mannheim, who was influenced by all these philosophers, understood by it. They did not reduce the thicket of experience to an observable that can be objectivated and shared; maintaining the connection to existence, they tried to re-capture its complexity and access it through a multiplicity of methods (including art). Sociological theories are more specialised and have a more limited remit than social theory. They lie somewhere between the working hypotheses of empirical research and the general systems of the grand theorist (Merton 1968: 39-72). They bring the latter’s abstractions down to specific areas of society, fill the sensitising concepts with empirical content, compare the observations that can be seen from the different perspectives on a same object and systematise the concepts in a theory of the middle range. Thus, for example, a sociological theory of bureaucracy is an analysis of various monocratic organisations from various perspectives (Weberian, Durkheimian, Marxist, but also functionalist, game theory, rational choice, etc.); a comparison of the data about formal and informal relations; and the organisation of these into a more encompassing, yet limited framework. Sociological theories of the family, marriage, elites, education, work, class, contentious politics, war, etc. do the same. They generalise and systematise the conclusions of empirical research in a sociological theory that is object specific, yet for that reason these sociological theories are also uniquely able to Mertonise the different social theories in what may be called a paradigm.

To avoid the impression that social theory is uncoupled from empirical research, it is necessary to emphasise that theories of the middle range are the building blocks of theories of society (*Gesellschafstheorie*), the last concept on our list. We have presented the relations between metatheory, social theory and sociological theories in more deductive fashion, but the vector can easily be reversed so that instead of percolating down, empirical research moves up and the data are reassembled into a theory of contemporary society. Ideally, a theory of society is entirely covered by theories of the middle range. The ideal has not been realised yet. Theories of society remain up till now empirically underdetermined, says Gesa Lindeman (2009:24) with a remarkable sense of understatement. Theories of society or societal theories bear on the historical dynamics of societies as a whole, but with a special attention to recent developments, tendencies and challenges of contemporary societies. They extrapolate the empirical data and fit them together in a grand narrative of social change that typically finds its end point in the present. Thus, for instance, a theory of contemporary society will integrate research on the structural transformation of the public sphere, the knowledge society, digital technologies, the rise of neoliberalism and platform capitalism, postmodern lifestyles, mounting inequality and the declining welfare state, immigration and climate change, pandemics and public health, etc. into a comprehensive vision of late modernity.

Like social theory, the theory of late modern society is interdisciplinary and incorporates research from global history, cultural geography, social anthropology, economics, political sciences, religious studies, literature and psychology. Unlike social theory, which builds up its concepts in relative isolation from historical events, societal theories have only limited historical validity. Starting from the present, theorists like Ulrich Beck, Hartmut Rosa or Luc Boltanski look back with Marx, Weber and Polanyi to the origins of modernity, paint large-scale frescoes of social systems and construct a world-historical narrative about the structural, cultural and personal transformations of the last centuries that have come to a head in the last decades, if not in the last years. Societal theories thrive in and on crises. Formulated by relatively unattached intellectuals with a sense of impending change, they bring the malaise of social groups into expression and into the public sphere. The societal problems they diagnose are the spur that lead to a revision of the master narratives about the past, present and future of late industrial-capitalist societies. Since the emergence of sociology, industrialism and capitalism have served as the master narratives, the first one focusing on science and technology, the second one on markets and states. Since the 1980´s, the prefix post has been introduced to signify the breakdown, first of the grand narratives of sociology (post-modernism, post-industrialism, post-colonialism) and then of the basic arrangements of societies themselves (Anthropocene). At the same time as the Marxist philosophy of history collapsed, its explanatory purchase increased. Capitalism has become the default explanation of the after effects of colonialism (systemic racism), the resurgence of authoritarianisms (populism) and ecological emergencies (climate change). In its more militant versions, neoliberalism becomes the main culprit for processes that have been zillions of years in the making.

**Conclusion: A Diagnosis of Our Time**

Sociology has a great future behind it. It has gone through various crises. More than once, its ending has been somewhat prematurely announced (Vandenberghe and Fuchs 2019). Each time, it has rebounded. While a sociology of sociology might be able to refer to new modes of knowledge production (Mode 2) and funding (third stream) to explain why new generations of sociology students, especially in the United States, England and France, are increasingly turning – or turned – away from text-based theory to explore new themes (coloniality, intersectionality, positionality) and new problems (inequality, racism, ecology) (Holmwood 2011), it cannot predict the future. Given the state of disarray of the world, the general disorientation of our youth and the public demand for big picture theories of society, sociology may well rebound once again.

It should be noted, however, that while social theory (in the broad sense) has moved out of sociology, it is now mainly produced in Critical Theory and the Studies, as evidenced by the catalogues of Verso and Duke University Press. Both derive from the crises of Marxism. The first had to absorb the breakdown of Hegel’s philosophy of history after 1918, the second the collapse of historical materialism after 1968. While the Studies have fully incorporated the lessons of post-structuralism, Critical Theory has remained within the matrix of post-Hegelian neo-Kantism. Both Critical Theory and the Studies reject the disciplinary fragmentation of the social sciences and the departmentalisation of knowledge.

In his inaugural lecture of 1931, Max Horkheimer presented an overview of the situation of social philosophy in Germany and outlined the tasks of the future Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. He called for a permanent collaboration of philosophers, sociologists, economists, political scientists, historians and psychologists to pursue interdisciplinary research on the connection between the economic life of society, the psychical development of individuals, and the changes in the realm of culture (Horkheimer 1993:11). The results of research would be theoretically elaborated and dialectically presented by a social philosophy that has all the characteristics of a dynamic historical sociology of the present that takes its cues from Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness* (Vandenberghe 1997-98, II, part 1). Like Horkheimer, Mannheim, who was his colleague and rival in Frankfurt, also tried to recompose Hegel’s philosophy of the mind, albeit in a more empirical mode.

By the Studies I mean to refer in the first place to the gamut of post-structuralist approaches (cultural studies, gender studies, post-colonial studies, critical race studies, etc.) that are inspired by French Theory (especially Foucault, Deleuze and Derrida), whose precepts they operationalise (Moebius 2012:10) as it were in empirical investigations. They introduce the principle of difference to radicalise the critique of the relations of domination that tie knowledge and power together into a discursive formations that produce subjects. While the Studies can also refer to more specialised protocols of interdisciplinary research on specified topics and themes (like heritage, crime or football) at the middle range, I understand the Studies here as developments in continental philosophy and the new humanities that deconstruct inherited categories of thought and apply their readings to areas and themes (like class, gender and race) that used to fall within the domain of the social sciences. Through generalisation and radicalisation, they extend the critique of domination to Critical Theory itself. From the perspective of the Global South, the Frankfurt School appears indeed as a rather provincial, not to say municipal version of critical theory.

It may be impossible to recompose the whole of society when it has fallen apart, but one should nevertheless try. It is not only society that becomes autonomous in modernity. Culture and history became too (Mannheim 1982:37-54). Just as the natural sciences, the social sciences and the human sciences were separated from philosophy. They became organised into various disciplines and allocated to different departments. No matter how much the disciplines are differentiated into separate compartments, each responsible for the study of a particular domain of reality (society, culture, history), reality is not really compartmentalised in the same fashion. This does not mean that it is not compartmentaliseable at all or that the disciplines lack any foundation *in rebus*. The distinction between the various domains of reality are analytical ones. In reality, the social, the cultural and the historical are inseparable and are co-constitutive of each other. The domains continuously leak into each other and any attempt to disentangle them epistemologically in disciplinary silos will only lead to a hypostasis of one’s own regional ontology.

The division between the disciplines of the social sciences is largely arbitrary. Mannheim’s (1952:15-73) structural analysis of epistemology reminds us that if the results of research are to be valid, the epistemological justification of the social sciences needs to be existentially grounded in the ontological domain about which knowledge is claimed. The partition of the social sciences lacks a secure ontological basis. History, sociology, anthropology, economics, etc. may adopt all the trappings of the scientific disciplines (scientific journals with peer review, specialised literatures and vocabularies, techniques and methodologies), they cannot capture the ontological complexity of human existence. The problem is not that categories such as the social, the political, the cultural or the economic are specious. Drawing on critical realism, William Carroll (2013:10) correctly observes that what they refer to, however, are not levels of reality requiring distinctive theories and methods of analysis, but historically specific facets of social science’s object - the human condition, in all its diversity.

Sociology’s desperate attempts to police its boundaries through methodological restrictions are symptoms of a disciplinary identity crisis. Overwhelmed by the speed of societal change that the digitalisation of the world has brought about, shaken by the accumulation of multivarious crises it had not seen arriving, stirred by the newest social movements to which it pays lip service, but whose demands it cannot theoretically accommodate, stretched on its boundaries by Critical Theory and the Studies, sociologists cave in at the same time as they retract their theoretical ambitions and cut the lifeline to philosophy. It is ironical that the very social processes of late modernity sociology is supposed to study scientifically undermine its disciplinary identity. Commodification of culture, colonisation and politicisation of lifeworlds, time-space compression, globalisation, and climate change further erode the historical bases for narrowly disciplinary knowledge of the human condition (id.:16). It is thus no wonder that to orient oneself in turbulent times and obtain a self-clarification of the epoch, one has to have recourse to researchers from other disciplines (like Zizek, Butler, Negri, Fraser but also Mignolo, Mbembe, Spivak and many others). The work of Bruno Latour is exceptional, though it must be said that by the time he started thinking about ecology, critical zones and the politics of the Earth, he had already moved beyond sociology back to anthropology. Creatively as ever, he redefined the latter as the study of people who live in the Anthropocene (Latour 2017).

The world spirit has moved on once again. Sociology is no longer the central discipline of the social sciences. To understand the present, a new alliance between philosophy, the social sciences and the humanities is needed (Caillé and Vandenberghe 2020). As professional sociologists are no longer interested in philosophy or in the humanities, the latter two should perhaps take up the lead and propose a theoretically informed diagnosis of our time, to borrow the title from Mannheim’s (1943) celebrated war time essays. It is time again to join the sociological analysis of the contemporary constellation to a critical analysis of social pathologies in a diagnosis of the epoch that is simultaneously totalising and idiographic. The typically German genre of the *Zeitdiagnose* presupposes a general sociology, a social theory and theory of society, even if it addresses itself to a larger public (Nassehi 2001). The advantage of a general theory of society is that it is overarching – to reclaim a term that is used to disparage totalising approaches in sociology. Like the belvedere, it allows to widen the horizon and to see the landscape in all its extent: the mountain ranges, the valleys, the rivers that are invisible from the lower observatories only become visible from the top. What we need is a new dynamic synthesis, like the one Karl Mannheim proposed in *Ideology and Utopia* as an alternative to the Marxist philosophy of history. In this vision of a general, dynamic and historical sociology, the painter is an unattached intellectual who floats freely between disciplines to try to understand what is happening in the world, with nature, with culture and with societies when there is no longer (or not yet) a philosophy of history.

**Acknowledgements**

I would to thank Fran Collyer for commissioning and copy-editing this chapter, the two anonymous reviewers for commenting on it and the friends from the Sociofilo Lab in Rio de Janeiro for critical support and animated discussion notwithstanding the distance. The first reactions seem to confirm the observation from the colleagues from the department of literature: 'Nothing stimulates the production of theory like the proclamation of its own death' (McQuillan et al., 1999:ix).

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