

On the Coming End of Sociology

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WE BOTH PARTICIPATED at the ISA World Conference in Sociology in Toronto in 2018 and arrived more or less at the same conclusion as the Future Theory Panel that preceded it: We've changed epoch. Sociology is gone. Not that sociology is gone as an academic operation or disciplinary organization. But the field has, for quite some time now, been losing its substance, core, and identity, rendering it hollow and shallow, ready to be probed with a Nietzschean hammer. Exactly a century ago, Paul Valéry opened his reflections on the crisis of the spirit, with the words: "We, civilizations, we know by now that we're mortal." Like Nineveh, Elam, and Babylon, disciplines come and go. Sociology emerged in the nineteenth century as a self-reflection and self-observation of metropolitan modernity and Western civilization. It came into being during the first wave of modern globalization (1850 to 1914), contributed actively to the second wave (1914 to 1989), but will probably not survive the third wave (1989 to 2050). Like phrenology and Orientalism, metaphysics and aesthetics, sociology has reached its end. In this ending, sociology has played a major part itself, since it has stood by watching its domain be invaded and absorbed by scores of other fields and intellectual movements, from rational choice to poststructuralism. It has become difficult to draw any lines between sociology and journalism. Like everything else in polarized societies, the field has also become a battleground of advocacy, shaped and usurped by

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the ideological politics of social movements in a way no mathematics or astronomy would.

One result is specialization to the point where it is no longer recognizable what the specialty is a specialty of. Next to all special sociologies (RC1: military sociology, RC2: economic sociology . . . RC 56: historical sociology, RC 57: visual sociology), we now also have poetic sociology, cultural sociology, analytic sociology, and public sociology with more general ambitions. What makes any and all of these sociologies “sociology” is no longer in question. This question is not about titles and labels. It is about what our field is in its core. Just think: if one practices sociology as poetic sociology, would the opposite be “epic” sociology? If cultural, then also a-cultural? If analytic, then also synthetic? If public, then private? There is no good way to decide, and we should therefore avoid observing ourselves in the way of such distinctions.

During the reign of the “orthodox consensus” in U.S. sociology, the discipline’s core was organizations and stratification. Is there another possibility for a core, an identity, for sociology? Bourdieu has become the new hegemon, but concerns about class and domination are no longer the prerogative of sociology. Although the triad of field, habitus and symbolic violence is always and everywhere applicable, it only represents “a particular case of the possible.” As a critical inversion of functionalism, with its dialectics of internalization and exteriorization or socialization and domination, it somehow remains tied to the 1970s. The theories of late modernity (Giddens, Beck, and Bauman, but also Castells, Boltanski, and Sassen) that succeeded it have themselves largely been superseded by accelerating, intersecting processes of social deinstitutionalization, deconstruction, deinstitutionalization, desocialization, and individualization—to the point that we do not know anymore if the concepts of society, the social, the individual, and socialization are still valid after 2001, 2008, and 2016. If one takes them away from the sociological arsenal, domination possibly remains as the only contender. But if that’s the case, then sociology vanishes, because like power, domination is everywhere and there’s no reason to think that sociology will be able to monopolize and hegemonize (dominate?) the social sciences. The question of the future of theory is therefore not only a timely, but also a critical one for sociology. If sociology is to retain its relevance, it will have to renegotiate its relation to the old social sciences and the new humanities.

The ongoing erosion of sociology’s intellectual core and substance does not mean there will not be another world conference. Nor that the discipline, along with its practitioners, will be eradicated from academic programs or institutions, or disappear altogether from the curriculum (as happened in Japan). Rather, it means that, as a discipline, sociology is no longer up to its task of “conceptually grasping its own time” (Hegel). Nor does it seem to know anymore how to examine itself in its own, that is, sociological terms. To be able to account for itself in and on its own terms

is rare, for any science. Physics cannot do it, as physics is nothing physical. Biology cannot observe itself in biological terms, since it does not consist of molecules, cells, or organisms. Darwinism is not the result of natural selection, and becoming an economist is not a matter of rational choice. But sociology can account for itself in its own terms. It should be, but is not, able and willing to consider the consequences of being a self-referential observer.

At the conference, we were struck by the absence of any grand theory. The only theory worthy of this label, Luhmann's systems theory, continues to be largely ignored or misunderstood as an AGIL-type Parsonsian classification and ordering apparatus. We had the impression that routine and normal science practitioners, working, as they unfailingly keep doing, on narrow puzzles within closed horizons, and unfazed apparently by what is occurring in their larger field, were not intellectuals. In turn, the intellectuals, denouncing Eurocentrism, racism, and other conceptual genocides, not on sociological, but ideological grounds, were disconnected from some of the more promising developments in sociology, such as relational sociology, pragmatism, and phenomenological network analysis of culture.

We do not think, however, that more "public" or "civic" sociology will do, since the major distinction should be between good and bad sociology, not public or private, or cultural/noncultural. The problem goes deeper to the heart of the discipline. We have become a discipline without substance, without a social ontology, without any thinking about what makes social reality social, and what makes it real. The task ahead is formidable. We need to reinvent sociology and rethink it as an important part of the new social sciences and the new humanities. We cannot persist in practicing sociology as a leftover from metaphysics. We speak of "actors" and "persons," "Subjects" and "Intersubjectivity," consciousness and agency, but we do so unthinkingly, mindlessly, having lost our ability to regard these not as firm and evident building blocks, but as the foundational mysteries they are. We continue to invoke "society" as transcendental presupposition and empirical object of the discipline, without noting the circularity of the investigation, the metaphysical baggage of the resource or the historical index of the topics of sociology. Like Tarski's sinking ship, we need to reconstruct society, deconstruct sociology, and reassemble the social sciences plank by plank—all without being able to dock in a safe harbor.

To renew our field, we need more modesty, ambition, and hope. More modesty, because sociology is only a subsystem within the system of science, which is itself a subsystem of society. Add to that the many axes of fragmentation within the field along ideological, regional, national, gender, sexual, ethnic, and color lines. There is no coherent "sociology" left; it has lost its very idea. If only we could change society, culture, and persons, not to mention capitalism, with a piece of muckraking, we would not be in the mess we are in. We have nothing against engaged and engaging writ-

ing, but the problem with a lot of the genre is that it is first and foremost engaged with itself and with its competitors in the academic field.

We need more ambition because only an interdisciplinary social science in dialogue with the “Studies” and philosophy can make us relevant again as the reflexive medium of societies on the edge. And definitely more joy because the litany of denunciations of domination and the plethora of hypercritiques of exploitation have transformed sociology into a “melancholy science.”

When we look at the current situation of sociology, we see four fragmentations—two internal ones and two external ones.

1. The first fragmentation within sociology is that between teaching and research, which reproduces itself in various divisions, such as theory and methods, concepts and techniques, abstractions, and operationalizations. On one hand, we have the instruction of classical and contemporary sociological theory (SOC 101: Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel; SOC 201: Bourdieu, Giddens, Habermas, sometimes also Luhmann, though granted, his work is definitely more difficult to instruct). The introductory courses are given at the beginning of the curriculum to students who are generally too young and too unprepared to grasp their significance. The result is rather predictable: Sociology is identified with a positivist, objectivist, and determinist account of society (culled from the first chapter of *The Rules of Sociological Method*), an iron-cage vision of modernity (extracted from the final pages of *The Protestant Ethic*) and a trenchant, yet stereotypical critique of neoliberal capitalism (inspired by the Communist Manifesto). On the other hand, there is hands-on training for empirical research, both qualitative (participant observation, interviews, life histories, etc.) and quantitative (multiple regression, correspondence analysis, geodata, etc.), which is required from both researchers and research apprentices alike. This research is increasingly grant and data-driven, opening the field to corporate encroachment and technocratic information engineering.
2. Those who define themselves primarily as empirical researchers (ethnographers and stats people) are not really bothered by theoretical and conceptual issues. All too often, theories have a merely decorative and ceremonial significance for them. Conceptual issues are quickly resolved and dissolved through a series of obligatory references to a few contemporary schools of thought (French pragmatism, actor-network theory, critical theory). Hence, a second fragmentation. It results from the conflicts and tussles between anathematizing sociological schools (cultural sociology vs. structural sociology, critical vs. systems theory, rational choice vs. neoinstitutionalism) that are unable to come to even

a minimal consensus about the very essence of sociology. Do we really know what an “actor” is or a “person”? Have we really advanced beyond seeing them in the metaphysical way, as minds plus bodies? Can we say, in good faith, that we now have a better idea of “consciousness” than Hegel, a more formidable notion of “meaning” than Heidegger, a clearer sense of what constitutes a “social relation,” a “community” or a “society” than Kant? “Multiple paradigmatisis” has now become so acute that it is hard to see what the nanoapproach of conversation analysis has in common with the mega-approach of world systems theory. Apart from a nominal adherence to sociology, within the discipline, there is not even a minimal consensus about the units of analysis, basic ontology or elementary concepts. In fact, what passes for “social ontology” does not seem to come to terms with the very idea of ontology, as the traditional core of metaphysics, nor its relation to epistemology and logics. At best, there is mutual indifference and tolerance; at worst, confrontation and agonistics between the various camps that are primarily engaged in encampment and enclosure, in securing and defending a regional fiefdom, however small and insignificant.

3. To those two divisions within the discipline itself, we should add two others that emerge at the boundaries between sociology and its environment. This third fragmentation comes about when empirical work is conducted in response to theoretical perspectives that are unrelated to sociology as such and have no truck with the discipline, even if they investigate social life. Sociologists’ work is indeed increasingly carried out with implicit or explicit reference to what we will call “the Studies”—a loosely woven tapestry of literary criticism, deconstructionist rhetoric, and various “postisms.” The Studies scrutinize and criticize texts, knowledges, representations, epistemes, and ideologies to disclose the economic, political, patriarchal, racial, and other structures of domination these consciously or unconsciously support and reinforce. The pervasive and perverse influence of the structures at the intersection of class, caste, racial, and sexual domination on scientific, philosophical, and common sense discourses, ideologies and epistemes is, supposedly, demonstrated when absences in the texts are decoded as invisible signs of the ominous presence of power.

One of the conspicuous features of the Studies is that they are largely anti-, inter-, or transdisciplinary. Historians, philosophers, literary critics, political scientists, anthropologists, and sociologists practice them with or without reference to the sociological tradition. Most of their work derives from “French Theory” (Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, etc.). The export and re-import of radical ideas from the Left Bank to the West Bank has profoundly transformed the new humanities and opened them up to the social

sciences. Nowadays, research on global capitalism, technoscience, social movements, or individualization is carried out as much in departments of comparative literature as in departments of sociology.

4. To these three fragmentations—the double internal fragmentation between theory and empiricism and between rival theoretical schools, and the external fragmentation between sociology, history, literary criticism, and philosophy—one might add a fourth one, which overlaps and strengthens the dissipative tendencies: between the social sciences on the one hand and moral and political philosophy on the other. While moral and political philosophy has become more social, dealing with issues such as democracy, justice, equality, identity, care, and sympathy, sociology has increasingly turned its back to philosophy.

The idea that sociology might be just another stream of thought of the nineteenth or early twentieth century, like philosophical anthropology, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, hermeneutics, or pragmatism, is almost sacrilegious. Like sociology, all of those offshoots of neo-Kantian post-Hegelianism worked out an encompassing vision of human reality by means of a programmatic substitution of the transcendental subject—Man, the unconscious, consciousness, language, practice, or society standing in for the *a priori*, but now historicized, socialized, relativized, vitalized, or, in short, detranscendentalized. Unlike sociology, however, none succeeded in convincing the others that they were doing science.

The very idea of founding a new discipline is not a scientific one, but a metascientific and philosophical one. By saying this, we do not mean to plunge sociology back into its perennial humus. Rather the reverse. To be able to weather the crisis, sociology has to court the crisis, open itself from within to its environment, and question the foundations on which it stands—and falls. If sociology as a discipline is to be up to its historical task and to analyze the momentous social change that is deconstructing, one by one, all of its presuppositions and destroying all of its central concepts, it has to dare once again to ask the fundamental questions and put itself into question and into crisis. Not to end on a negative note, we would like to suggest, however, that sociology will only have a future if it conceives of itself as a subdiscipline of the new social sciences and humanities. Compared to neighboring disciplines, it is a contracting field. It is no longer at the intellectual cutting edge of the social sciences, but by questioning its own historical, social, political, cultural, and personal presuppositions, it can perhaps contribute to a timely renewal of the social and human sciences—before the budgets get axed.