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Figurations

Newsletter of the Norbert Elias Foundation

SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT

■ CONTROVERSIAL SCIENCE: GOOD AND BAD SOCIOLOGY

Nico Wilterdink

Sociology is a controversial science: this in itself is an uncontroversial statement. Sociology is controversial in a twofold sense. Firstly, the truth-value of sociological assertions, and even the claim that sociology is a science, is often doubted and criticised by outsiders. And, secondly, sociologists among themselves strongly disagree about the truth-value, the originality and relevance of sociological assertions – or, in other words, about what is good and what is bad sociology. This lack of internal consensus undermines sociology's scientific status to the outside world, making it more controversial in the first sense.

Now sociology is by no means unique in these respects. All science is controversial in this twofold sense. Any science has its disagreements and controversies; even more, no science can progress without them. And in spite of the authority that the sciences in general acquired in modern societies as the main source of adequate and reliable knowledge, no science is free from doubts and criticisms from outsiders; scientific ideas always compete with 'lay' views. That is also true – indeed increasingly true during the past few decades – of the natural sciences. Think of the popularity of alternative medicine, or the criticisms



of the biological theory of evolution, or the recent debates on global warming and climate change.

Yet sociology, like the other social sciences, remains much more controversial, in both meanings, than the natural sciences. I will focus here on the internal controversies. What are the sources of these controversies and how have they changed over the past few decades? And then how should we assess existing controversies? Can we distinguish good from bad sociology, and on what grounds? Are there ways to overcome sociology's internal dividedness, and if so, how? These are the questions I shall discuss. It would be far-fetched to say that I will draw up a new 'balance-sheet' of sociology, to refer to Goudsblom's still informative and notable book *Sociology in the Balance* (1977), but I will try to make some moves in that direction.



Let me start with a short retrospective. Sociology has always been a divided and controversial field. Beginning in the nineteenth century as an enterprise of individual social thinkers, sociology came under the pressure to demarcate and systematise its field of study when it gradually acquired a position as a university discipline from the end of that century onwards. Introductory textbooks and overviews were written that canonised some thinkers as the founders of the discipline, and efforts at theoretical synthesis (such as Parsons 1937) were undertaken. It was particularly after the Second World War that sociology gained a foothold at European universities (following earlier developments in the USA) and expanded as an academic discipline, which gave impetus to further standardisation of theories and research methods. In the 1950s and first half of the 1960s, sociologists showed much optimism about the prospects of growth of knowledge and convergence of theories in their field. Similarly, among non-sociologists there were high expectations about the potentialities of this young dynamic science, not only in offering insights into the functioning of society, but also in contributing to social progress and solving social problems.

It was in this atmosphere of optimism that I began my studies in sociology in Amsterdam in 1964. When I graduated eight years later, the mood had changed completely. The numbers of students and graduates in sociology had grown considerably, and this growth was still going on. Institutionally, the discipline blossomed as never before; but at the same time it was in a deep theoretical crisis, which was recognised and labelled as such (Gouldner 1970). The expectation of theoretical convergence had transformed into its opposite. Sociologists declared themselves adherents of widely different and clashing viewpoints, and opposed one another in vehement ways that reminded of struggles between political parties or religious sects. In friendly academic terms, sociology was defined as a 'polyparadigmatic science' (referring to Kuhn 1970), but the question arose whether it was a science at all. In any case, this dividedness undermined sociology's reputation as a serious science. Journalists and intellectuals now often criticised or even ridiculed it for the obvious gap between its pretensions and achievements. Sociology was more controversial, in both meanings, than ever before.

It is not difficult to find a sociological explanation for this turn in sociology. It took place in the context of the turmoil of the 1960s, or, in a somewhat different periodisation, the 1960s and 1970s, when members of various groups with a relatively weak power position in Western societies (young people, workers, women, and ethnic-racial and sexual minorities) revolted against what they saw as the repressive establishment, the ruling elite or 'the system', found widespread sympathy and support from other groups, and, as both a cause and a consequence of their actions, actually improved their social position. Academic sociology was ill suited to give meaningful interpretations and explanations of these protest movements. It was even less capable of legitimising them, which was what many participants sought: they looked for frames of orientation that would give their actions broader meanings and justification, which they hoped to find in social theories that pointed out what

was wrong in contemporary society.

These theories could not be found in mainstream sociology. Postwar theoretical convergence had gone in a very different direction: toward the dominance of functionalism, which conceived society as an integrated social system whose parts contributed, in mutual support, to the stability and continuity of the system as a whole (Parsons 1951). Conflicts hardly had a place in this perspective. And if there was any attention to social change, it was mainly conceived as 'modernisation', the gradual development from a traditional to a modern – highly differentiated and rationally organised – society. In a time of turmoil, intense conflicts and confusing, unexpected changes, functionalist theory was felt to be limited, biased, inadequate and irrelevant by increasing numbers of social science students and graduates. A radical alternative that was available was a theory that had an enormous international diffusion and significance, but had been marginalised in Western social science: Marxism, with its critique of capitalism and focus on conflict and revolutionary change. Various versions of Marxism and neo-Marxism were put forward in opposition to established 'bourgeois' sociology, which was regarded as an instrument of the ruling capitalist class. In this way, sociology's growing dividedness around 1970 became highly political and ideological. This vulnerability of sociology to socio-political movements manifested a low degree of autonomy of the field and a still weakly developed scientific body of knowledge of its own.

Other alternatives to functionalism also came to the fore. American sociologists, in particular, had developed micro-interactionist approaches to everyday life,¹ which now attracted increasing interest. This current of interpretative micro-sociology was not directly related to political actions and viewpoints, but put established norms and commonsense definitions in question, and, in this way, also expressed a critical distance from dominant social institutions.² Similar attitudes could be found in the historical sociology of long-term social processes that revived in the 1970s, partly in connection with Marxism (such as Wallerstein's theory of the

rise and expansion of the modern, capitalist 'world-system'³), partly in a critical reaction that stressed the primary importance of cultural codes, symbolic constructions, mentalities, and discourses. In Amsterdam, a programme of historical-sociological research was developed under the heading of 'figurational sociology', which purported to overcome this opposition between Marxist 'materialism' on the one hand and 'idealism' or culturalism on the other. I will say more about this approach further on.



Much has changed in sociology since the 1970s, but theoretical pluralism has not diminished – on the contrary. Developments after this decade were marked by the rise and subsequent decline of several perspectives – such as Marxism and, later, postmodernism – which all left lasting traces in sociological theory and thereby contributed to increasing diversity. Students of recent textbooks in contemporary sociological theory (such as Ritzer 2000; Wallace and Wolf 2006) may easily become confused by the immense multiplication of theories in various versions and sub-versions, presented under such names as systems theory, conflict theory, critical theory, exchange theory, rational choice theory, network theory, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, constructionism, structuralism, post-structuralism, structuration theory, neo-institutional theory, modernisation theory, evolutionary theory... And this is only a selection.



Sociology, then, has remained internally divided and theoretically incoherent, now even more than ever before. Yet the feeling that sociology is in a 'crisis' seems much less prevalent among its practitioners today than forty years ago, even though this term is still used now and then to characterise the state of the discipline (see Cole 2001). In any case, today's dividedness no longer leads to party struggles with strong political and ideological overtones. Most sociologists do not define themselves as adherents of a particular theoretical view, but rather as eclecticians, who



choose among the supply of theories the ones that are useful for analysing the problems they investigate. Theories, in a much-used metaphor, are 'tools', instruments that help the sociologist to define research problems, to formulate hypothetical answers, and to analyse and interpret the research data (Kuipers and Van Venrooij 2004: 462–3). And the larger the variety the 'toolkit' can offer, the greater the likelihood that the researcher will find the appropriate tools. In this view, theoretical pluralism is helpful and advantageous rather than problematic.

From theoretical clashes to eclecticism, from a deeply felt crisis to the acceptance or even appreciation of plurality: this is how we may characterise, in a few words, sociology's development in the past forty years. It can be explained by connecting it with several trends. Part of the explanation

are changes in the external social conditions that had given rise to the intensification of theoretical clashes within social science, such as, most strikingly, the weakening to the point of disappearance of orthodox and politically organised Marxism, both on the international level and within the context of Western capitalism.⁴ Besides, intra-scientific changes have been consequential. Sociology's theoretical crisis in the 1970s, followed by an institutional crisis a decade later – when the numbers of students diminished dramatically and sociology departments had to reduce staff or even close down – stimulated not only theoretical innovations, but also a widely shared ambition to improve the discipline's damaged image as a serious science. This was done mainly by giving priority to solid empirical research. What helped in this endeavour

was the development of computer technology and software programmes that facilitated the collection and processing of large amounts of data and enabled researchers to employ new, technically sophisticated methods of analysis (not only statistical but also qualitative methods). By putting more emphasis on precise empirical research as sociology's core business, doctrinal theoretical disputes were relegated to the background.

Policy changes in universities and research funding contributed to this development. Academic researchers became more dependent on external funding, which selectively favours research that conforms to standard methodological rules. Moreover, and connected to this, scientific output as measured by publications in international (that is, Anglo-Saxon) peer reviewed scientific journals became the main basis for evaluating achievements by university staff, and increasingly important for their careers. And as most of these journals attempt to hold up particular standards of good science and sound methodology as criteria for publication, this puts pressure on academic sociologists to conform to these standards.

This development in academic sociology since the decades of the 1960s and 1970s may be characterised as one of further academicisation, scientification, or professionalisation: a growing emphasis on professional, expert knowledge based on empirical research.⁵ Most present-day sociologists will probably define themselves as professional specialists rather than broadly oriented intellectuals. And their claims of scientific expertise seem to be more accepted now than used to be the case some 30 years ago. When sociologists appear in non-specialist media today, it is less as social thinkers or critical intellectuals, and more as specialist experts and researchers. In other words, sociology became less controversial in both meanings. It became less pretentious and, at the same time, less vulnerable.

In this process of normalisation, sociology acquired a more secure, if modest, position as one academic discipline among others. Its controversial quality, compared with other disciplines, also diminished in

connection with changes in attitudes toward science and expert knowledge in general. According to several indicators, trust in the sciences as the sources of true knowledge has diminished in Western societies during the past few decades (Norris and Inglehart 2004: 67–8). This might be interpreted as part of the rise and spread of postmodernism (Lyotard 1979), or as an indication of growing irrationalism, but a more direct and more plausible explanation is to see it as a paradoxical consequence of ongoing scientification – two aspects in particular of that are the expansion of scientific education in which growing numbers of students learn to think critically about science, and the increasing media attention toward all sorts of scientific disputes. The idea that scientific knowledge is contested and marred by disagreements among the experts themselves has become widespread, and sociology's image as an internally divided field has therefore become more similar to that of other scientific fields, including the natural sciences.



But now the question: how to judge this development? Or, in subjective terms, what do I think of it? My account of sociology's development during the past few decades has been fairly neutral and perhaps even quite positive until now, but I will have to amend this with some critical remarks. First I will comment on sociology's theoretical dividedness, then on mainstream research and publications.

First of all, it has to be noted that the dividedness in sociology – and in the social sciences in general – is different from that found in the natural sciences. While controversies in the natural sciences are no less intense than in the social sciences, they mainly concern the frontiers of science, the newest theories and the interpretation of new empirical research findings, as well as applications; the disputed ideas rest on a body of knowledge that is largely undisputed. In sociology and other social sciences, on the other hand, disagreements also concern the discipline's core, the fundamentals – the nature of the discipline's field and how it should be approached, the basic concepts

and how they should be used (Collins 2001). Questions about these basics are raised again and again. In view of the fundamental differences between 'natural reality', the subject matter of the natural sciences, and human social reality, the subject matter of the social sciences, it is indeed hardly imaginable that sociology will ever become a kind of natural science, despite all efforts to attain that status. The subject matter of sociology is for humans the most familiar but also the most complex and confusing part of reality. It is only a tiny part of the universe studied by natural scientists, but at the same time enormously wide-ranging, endlessly variegated, and fast changing. Its variability and changeability are related to another distinguishing characteristic: in contrast to 'natural' reality, social reality is – partially – constituted by the meanings that humans attach to it, and sociological concepts are inevitably bound-up with these meanings.

There are, then, good reasons to suppose that theoretical pluralism in sociology will inevitably remain. The problem is not the multiplicity of middle-range theories about specific institutional spheres, such as labour relations, education, or the art world: such theories are not, or need not be, mutually exclusive. The problem of pluralism concerns theories that put competing claims on how social life in general is constituted and should be approached. These theories are perspectives or meta-theories, which may give directions to empirical research (in so far as they help to formulate research problems and interpret research outcomes) but cannot be tested by research. They are, in Popperian terms, empirically irrefutable; research outcomes cannot decide which theory is the more adequate one.

The eclecticist solution to this problem is to accord to each theory a limited scope of applicability. Some theories, for instance, offer insights into social interactions on the micro level, other ones are useful for the study of macroscopic structures, and still others suggest micro–macro links. One can hardly disagree with this position, yet it is not a satisfactory solution for the problem of pluralism. The theories do not tell us where the limits of their applicability are to be drawn; nor is

there a comprehensive, all-encompassing theory, a theory of theories, that specifies how all these theories are related to one another and what is each theory's proper place. The tool kit of theories is, on closer inspection, quite a mess. The tools are not a well-ordered set, each in its own compartment and with its own proper function, but rather a disorderly jumble. Whereas the inventors and sellers of a tool often present it as a magical instrument that can do everything, users may regard it as only an instrument to hammer some nails into some walls, and sceptical onlookers may doubt whether the nails are really fixed into the walls – or even see the tool as a functionless thing that is ready for the garbage can.

In other words, the relativistic and pacifying eclecticism that makes no choice is unable to solve the problem of theoretical pluralism. It refuses to make critical distinctions, to make statements on basic principles or insights that are common to sociology and on which sociologists could attain agreement. Is it then impossible to make such statements? Are there no basic sociological principles? Yes, there are such principles, and I will now say

something about them.



Human societies, the subject matter of sociology, consist of human beings who are basically and inevitably interdependent – materially and economically, but also emotionally and cognitively. In and through these interdependencies, human beings continuously orientate their behaviour to one another, and thereby form social relations in which they co-operate and compete, exchange information and learn from one another. They develop rules and expectations which give their social relations a certain order and continuity, but also bring about social changes which may be intended, but often are the unintended and unforeseen consequences of their joint actions. Change is inherent to human social life, and any society at any given time is a moment in an ongoing historical process.

These could be the first sentences of an elementary introduction into sociology. They are simple and very general statements, which will probably not strike anyone as remarkable. Yet they are not generally accepted, either within or outside sociology.

Sociologists will perhaps recognise them as belonging to a particular sociological perspective: figurational or process sociology, whose basic tenets were formulated by Norbert Elias in 1970 in his small book *Was ist Soziologie?* There, Elias defined sociology as the study of social figurations – that is, continuously changing networks of interdependence between human beings. He introduced the concept of figuration as a way out of the commonsensical but misleading dichotomy of 'individual' and 'society', in which the individual is conceived as autonomous, free from social constraints, and the society as either a field of impersonal forces or a personality writ large. Elias proposed the term figuration also as an alternative to the sociological concept of 'social system', with its connotations of strong integration, stability, smooth functioning and clear boundaries. And finally, the term served to cover the whole range of interdependency networks, from couples to the global society, in order to connect micro and macro levels.

Elias's ideas have been elaborated and applied in what came to be known



Nico Wilterdink, with Stephen Menell looking pleased with himself

as figurational or process sociology. The theoretical crisis of sociology around 1970 gave an impetus to this new approach, which gained wide international attention and recognition in subsequent years. In this sociological school formation, Amsterdam sociologists and in particular Johan Goudsblom (1977a; 1977b; 1987) played a crucial role. It was particularly in the Netherlands that figurational sociology grew into a major approach and research style, with Amsterdam as its centre.⁶ I was involved in this process from the start.

Yet this has not been a wholly successful development. What was originally intended as the formulation of basic viewpoints for sociology in general (as is indicated by the title of Elias's book), became socially established as a specific approach within sociology, one sociological perspective among many other ones, and identified with one name, Norbert Elias. Thus, George Ritzer in his well-known textbook *Modern Sociological Theory* (2000: 374–85) devotes just eleven pages – out of more than five hundred – to 'Norbert Elias's figurational sociology'.⁷ While the label 'figurational sociology' was never used by Elias himself, it helped to make his work internationally well known and influential in the social sciences and the humanities, and establish his reputation as one of the major social theorists of the twentieth century. It also helped to bring a number of sociologists in different countries to fruitful communication and co-operation, national and international; but in and through this same process of group formation on the basis of a shared perspective, boundaries were drawn around 'figurational sociology' as a specific perspective. This is typical of the social dynamics of theory formation in the social sciences, which is in itself sociologically explainable.

Figurational sociology, then, is for me not just one perspective among other ones, nor the perspective that should replace all the others, but rather the formulation of a number of general insights basic to sociology as such, and therefore of a set of minimum conditions for what I consider good sociology. It is not, in my view, an exclusive approach; it does not rule

out an attitude of openness toward the diversity of sociological theories. But if this attitude is eclectic, it is one of critical and selective eclecticism, which does not accept all theories as equally valid. It implies, for example, the rejection of theories that define sociology as the study of integrated, bounded and impersonal 'social systems', as well as theories that assume that social relations are based on rational decisions of autonomous, freely choosing individuals each with their own fixed preferences.⁸ Good sociology, I contend, is sociology that conforms to the basic tenets of figurational sociology, even if it does not contain terms like 'figuration' or 'interdependence', or references to Norbert Elias or other sociologists who define their approach as 'figurational' or 'processual'. 'Figurational sociology' (just like the similar expression 'relational sociology'⁹) is, in a sense, a misleading term in so far as it suggests that it is a specific sub-field within sociology.

Other theorists, like Pierre Bourdieu and Randall Collins, have developed similar perspectives.¹⁰ While using other terms, they too oppose any suggestion of a dichotomy between 'individual' and 'society', or 'subject' and 'object', they too insist that people are always part of networks of social relationships, they too regard status competition and power struggles as basic to human social life, and conceive societies as dynamic and continuously changing. Elias, Bourdieu and Collins are radical sociologists in a non-political sense; they represent a sociology that recognises that the realm of 'the social' is coercive and comprehensive, and does not stop at the skin of individual human beings but penetrates and moulds them. Good sociology is radical sociology in this sense. This does not imply social determinism; on the contrary, good sociology also recognises that individual human behaviour is partially unpredictable and exhibits changes and variations that cannot be reduced to given social conditions.

From the level of general theory I now descend to the practice of research and publications. As remarked, there is a growing emphasis in academic sociology on precise empirical research. Journals are predominantly filled with articles that report on such research and thus intend to contribute to the stock of reliable sociological knowledge. Yet this development has its drawbacks. Complex questions tend to be split up into narrow research questions that can be answered by available data and with the help of standard methods, and, as a consequence, the larger problems involving wide-ranging interconnections and long-term developments tend to disappear from sight. Qualitative – for example, ethnographic or historical – investigations, which cannot be brought into the schemes of standard methodology, tend to be displaced by quantitative research that reduces its field of study to measurable variables between which correlations are calculated. Moreover, quantitative research that is reported in social science journals increasingly comes down to the statistical analysis of a data set that has not been collected by the analysts themselves but by some private or public organisation that routinely produces large amounts of data (see Savage and Burrows 2007). For social scientists who use such data, this is an efficient way of doing research, as the costs in time and money are relatively small; but it also means that the social distance between investigators and investigated (which is always a problem in large-scale survey research) is maximised, and that the research questions and operationalisations are dependent on the given data set.

As a consequence, journal articles often present research outcomes that are of very limited value, if not trivial. Thus, to give just one example, a recent article in the reputed Dutch sociological journal *Mens en Maatschappij* presents a detailed analysis of data on paid and unpaid work among 292 married or cohabiting female employees from a 2003 survey, which concludes that among couples 'the more demanding the woman's job is, the larger her share in paid work and the smaller her share in household work are' (Pouwels *et al.*

2011: 5): a result as unremarkable as it is indisputable.

The results of such statistical analyses are by no means always indisputable, however. On the contrary, quantitative research that translates complex social phenomena into numbers raises questions of validity: do the outcomes cover the phenomena as intended? This is, for example, a problem in investigations that measure social status or reputation,¹¹ or in research that is based on respondents' self-reports about their own capacities or their happiness or well being. Thus, quantitative studies of happiness rest on a simple definition: happiness is the answer to the survey question 'are you happy?' (or a similar question such as 'how satisfied are you with your life?'). Whether it can be concluded on this basis that the Danes, the Dutch and the Icelanders are among the happiest nations in the world, as newspapers report from time to time, is questionable.¹²

The increased importance of professional research competence in sociology did improve the overall quality of research, but it also brought an overproduction of articles in which the emphasis on empirical precision and methodological rigour is at the cost of substance – articles whose

substantial conclusions are of doubtful validity, of extremely limited scope and significance, or just trivial. The procedure of evaluation and selection by 'peer review', which is now commonly used by scholarly journals, does not prevent the publication of such articles. On the contrary, since most reviewing peers are fellow specialists who do similar research, they will look for the proper references to the right specialist literature and the use of the right methodological rules as main criteria for evaluation. The selection system for scientific publications thus favours narrow specialisation and professional conformism.



Luckily, sociology still has another side: the ambition to be original, to produce really new insights that challenge established views. This ambition is of course important in any science, but takes specific, and problematic, forms in sociology (or, more broadly, social science). Firstly, the lack of conceptual clarity and theoretical consensus gives much room – too much room – for theoretical innovations, or pseudo-innovations, that contribute to the excessive theoretical pluralism just discussed. And secondly,

the goal of originality is shaped by the fact that sociologists compete not only among themselves and with other social scientists, but also with 'lay' views. Since sociology deals with a part of reality with which people are intimately familiar, the distinction between sociological knowledge and commonsense is far from self-evident. Sociologists are always confronted with the question what is the difference between their knowledge as social scientific experts and the knowledge people already have, or believe they have, on the basis of their own personal experiences and the news and opinions received from the mass media.

It is precisely because of this problematic and complicated relationship between sociological knowledge and 'lay' knowledge that some sociologists embroider the difference between the two by artificial means. One way of doing this is to suggest deep insights by the use of particular jargon and obscure language. This is an old tradition in sociology, exemplified by such diverse theorists as Talcott Parsons, Theodor Adorno and Harold Garfinkel, which comes to the fore again and again.¹³

The drive to originality – or, in less sympathetic terms, the desire to impress – may also lead to the construction of



The procession.

sharp contrasts where a nuanced position is more congruent with observed reality. This is, for example, the case when one-sided 'materialism' is attacked and replaced by an equally one-sided 'idealism', culturalism or constructionism – or the other way around.

Another way of attracting attention by contrasts is to dramatise historical change by conceiving it as a sudden transition between two hugely different epochs. An example of this type of theorising is the work of the popular German sociologist Ulrich Beck, who has set himself the task (like other sociologists) of describing, clarifying and explaining the great social transformations of the present age. Beck brings these transformations under the name of 'reflexive modernisation' (for reasons that are not quite clear), which is conceived as the transition from the 'first modernity' – the stage that culminates in tightly organised nation states with comprehensive welfare regimes – to the 'second modernity', 'the shape of which is still being negotiated' but which in any case is 'stripping away the nation- and welfare state' and produces 'a new kind of capitalism, a new kind of labour, a new kind of global order, a new kind of society, a new kind of nature, a new kind of subjectivity, a new kind of everyday life and a new kind of state'.¹⁴ *Very* new, in sum. And then he continues: 'It is now the central task of social science to investigate this meta-change, which is not happening within social structures but to them.' Apparently Beck conceives social structures as static, as opposed to social change. This makes social change sociologically unexplainable; it is unclear where it would come from if not from 'within' social structures. Beck's essentially static view of society also appears from the terminology of 'first modernity' and 'second modernity'. It is on this basis that Beck can depict current social change as an extraordinary and sudden transition from one to the other stage, a shocking, confusing, earthquake-like transformation. He projects his own static essentialism on historical reality in statements such as: 'First modern society [that is, society in the phase of the first modernity] regards itself as the end and culmination of history, a social form that will last forever' (Beck, Bonss and Lau 2003: 6). This is bad sociology,

if only because 'society' is conceived here as a thinking entity, a reflecting being. The empirical question is: who in the period of the 'first modernity' – let us say around in 1960 in the Western world – actually did think that their society would last forever?

Beck characterises the present age as one of confusion, a time in which cherished social institutions are dissolving and individual uncertainties and risks are increasing. This is not ludicrous nonsense, but other sociologists have written with more precision and subtlety about such social trends.¹⁵ It is by his simplifying exaggerations and dramatic, alarmist tone in combination with the affirmation of certain popular images expressive of widely shared feelings that Beck succeeded in attracting wide public attention, and also won prestige among sociologists. This is indicative of a remarkable and regrettable contradiction in the mechanisms of reputation formation within sociology: while strict criteria are commonly used in the evaluation of academic social research, it looks as if 'anything goes' for sociological work outside this framework. An inclination to methodological purism and finicky criticism with respect to specialist research is coupled with a huge lack of criticism with respect to theorising and longer-term diagnoses.



Beck is a 'public sociologist', who aims to make his work relevant for a wider audience by connecting it with political and normative questions. This is unquestionably an important role for sociologists. The goal of social relevance is inherent to sociology and a ground of legitimation of the discipline. Yet this ambition too has its risks. The critical public sociologist may become a preacher who for the sake of the argument simplifies and even distorts reality, neglecting careful scientific reasoning (see again, and now for the last time, Ulrich Beck). The wish to be useful may lead to one-sided identification with the interests of a specific group or segment of society, be it a powerful, policy-making public or private organisation, or an underprivileged group that struggles for emancipation. This may lead to

biased, partisan views to the point of ideological dogmatism. The classical example is orthodox Marxism, the near-removal of which from sociology after a temporary resurgence in the 1960s and 1970s is far from deplorable. Yet elements of the Marxist tradition are still useful for sociology today. One might even argue that the importance of Marxism for sociology has grown again as the world has become more 'capitalist' since the 1980s.

This momentous change in the last decades of the twentieth century found its ideological expression and legitimation in neo-liberalism or, as De Swaan (2008) has called it, 'marketism', which assumes that free market forces not hindered by state intervention guarantee economic growth and efficiency. These ideas have been underpinned and elaborated by another social science, economics, which developed abstract market models that were projected on a much more complex reality. The consequences of this thinking, and the policies and practices connected with it, have become dramatically visible in the financial and economic crisis beginning in 2008. Mainstream economics was, in the words of the critical economist Ha-Joon Chang (2010), not irrelevant but 'worse than irrelevant': it had harmful social consequences. Sociologists have often criticised the simplifying assumptions of mainstream economics.

At the time when neo-liberalism became a strong political force, a new economic sociology emerged which pointed out discrepancies between economic market models and the actual functioning of markets as networks of social interaction (Granovetter 1985; Heilbrun 2006). It is regrettable that the sociologists who developed these insights have been, on the whole, very restrained in their convincing critique of mainstream economics and mainly confined it to the academic sphere. In this way, the potential relevance of their work remained underused. Here we see a negative side of the far-reaching professionalisation and academicisation of sociology.



Three central values in sociology have been distinguished here: scientific professionalism, originality, and social relevance; or, in other words, the goals of true, new, and useful knowledge. While these values can be found in any science, they take, as we have seen, specific forms in sociology (or, more broadly, social science). The first one, scientific professionalism, has been reinforced in the past few decades. This is in itself a positive development, which, however, may be detrimental to the realisation of the other two values. It is particularly social relevance that tends to become insignificant when academic sociologists, out of career considerations, confine their publications to purely academic journals, read only by a handful of fellow specialists. The recent call for a ‘public sociology’ is a useful reaction to this trend.¹⁶

A more important objection to the professionalisation trend in sociology during the past few decades is, in my view, the limited way in which the value of scientific professionalism is usually defined and pursued: namely, as empirical research that conforms to methodological rules and refers to

the specialist literature on the given topic. Professional, scientific sociology, however, should comprise much more: the application and elaboration of a sociological perspective that adequately fits the discipline’s subject matter, human societies. This brings us back to the minimum conditions for good sociology. I shall add a few remarks to what I just said about this.

While good sociology can be quite specialist, it does not dissolve into narrow specialisms isolated from one another, such as urban or cultural or medical sociology, the sociology of work, of education or the family. It does not conceive human society as the sum of neatly demarcated and autonomous social sectors or spheres, but regards them (in so far as they are differentiated, which is historically variable) as overlapping and intertwined. Nor does it conceive ‘a society’ as an autonomous and clearly bounded whole. Good sociology, in other words, seeks understanding of social processes by making wide-ranging interconnections, by viewing social processes within broad spatial and temporal contexts, including the context of historical developments of which they are a part.¹⁷ This also means

that good sociology does not separate ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ levels, and sees them as interwoven. Finally, my last point: good sociology defines its field of study broadly; it does not draw sharp boundaries with the other social sciences, such as political science or cultural anthropology, nor with parts of the humanities (including history); and it is also open to insights from other sciences that are important for understanding human behaviour – such as, in particular, psychology and biology. It does not make itself, however, an appendage of any of those other disciplines, but incorporates insights from these fields selectively and critically.¹⁸

These are not unattainable ideals. A good deal of sociological work does comply with the minimum standards advanced here. Besides Elias, I mentioned Bourdieu and Collins; many other names could be added. We do not have to follow Elias or any other sociologist uncritically. But we do not have to start from scratch either. We can build on, and be inspired by, numerous examples of good sociology, countering the tendencies of theoretical and thematic fragmentation.



Notes

- 1 Such as symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969) and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967).
- 2 This is apparent, for example, in Howard Becker's (1963) studies of marijuana users and other outsider groups, and the work of Erving Goffman (1961) and Thomas Scheff (1966) on the treatment of mental patients.
- 3 Starting with Wallerstein (1974).
- 4 This contributed to the rise and spread of relativistic postmodernism (Wilterdink 2002).
- 5 This trend is clearly observable in the Netherlands, where sociology since its pre-war beginnings has been strongly empirical as well as policy oriented rather than theory oriented (Van Doorn 1964); this tradition was continued in a different way after the clashes and confusion of the 1960s and 1970s. It would require a systematic comparative study to assess to what extent and how the trend towards professionalisation in sociology since the 1980s took place in different countries. In Britain, for example, the impact of highly speculative, 'philosophical' theorising seems to have been stronger than in the Netherlands; see Mennell (2004: pp. 494–5).
- 6 Described by Van El (2002). For a bibliographical overview, see Kranendonk (1990).
- 7 Two of these 11 pages contain a 'biographical sketch', and another five pages give a short summary of 'the history of manners' – that is, of Elias's argument in the first volume of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (1939). Although Elias developed his figurational perspective to a large extent as an outgrowth of this work, it is not necessary to assume a fixed and inherent connection between the two.
- 8 Examples of theories of the first type are Parsons (1951) and

Luhmann (1984). Theories of the second type are found in the rational choice tradition; see for example Coleman (1986), esp. pp. 15–17. Though Coleman (1990) is more nuanced, here too individuals' characteristics (interests, preferences, and needs, as well as the orientation toward 'rational' action) tend to be taken as fixed givens rather than as formed and changing under the impact of social processes in which these individuals take part.

9 Proposed by Emirbayer (1997).

10 I refer here only to Bourdieu (1979) and Collins (2004).

11 This pertains to measurements of occupational prestige regarded as indicative of status in the society at large as well as to measurements of reputation in specific fields. An article on the ranking of authors by literary prestige illustrates how such attempts can lead to very strange, even absurd outcomes (Verboord 2003: esp. p. 278, Table 9).

12 Quantitative happiness studies have mushroomed since the 1980s. In spite of efforts at validation however, the question remains whether and to what extent variations in happiness scores based on answers to survey questions reflect real differences in happiness, satisfaction, or well-being. From the *World Database of Happiness*, compiled by the Rotterdam sociologist Ruut Veenhoven (1984), it appears that a nation's average happiness score in a given year often varies considerably, depending on the specific survey question and the number of answer categories (www.worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl). For more extensive criticism, see my review of Veenhoven in Wilterdink (1986).

13 For example, in the work of Jean Baudrillard and other post-modern thinkers, and that of Bruno Latour and his school.

14 This quotation and the next one are from Beck, Bonss and Lau (2003). While Beck wrote

this article with two other German sociologists, it is more or less representative of all his work, including the first book that made him widely known (Beck 1986) and later work, such as Beck (2007).

15 While similar objections can be advanced against Anthony Giddens's work on modernisation and modernities (such as Giddens 1991), it is in my view somewhat clearer and more precise. 'Individualisation', presented by Beck as a new phenomenon typical of the 'second modernity', is a classical sociological notion (Nisbet 1966), which should be conceived as part of long-term social processes (Wilterdink 1995). A good example of empirical work that clarifies and specifies recent changes in Western societies is that of Cas Wouters (2007) on informalisation.

16 Particularly since Michael Burawoy's (2005) presidential address to the American Sociological Association, which elicited various responses in different countries. In the Netherlands, for example, the Dutch Sociological Association organised a one-day conference on this topic in 2010 (De Vries 2011). For a critical response referring to the Dutch context, see also Engbersen (2009).

17 The widest sociological scope is that of 'human history' (Goudsblom, Jones and Mennell 1996), which may also be conceived in terms of social evolution (Lenski 2005; Wilterdink 2003).

18 This means, for example, a rejection of the socio-biological reduction of social processes to human species characteristics. In a critical review of Sanderson (2001), I advanced some objections to reductionist socio-biology: see Wilterdink (2008).

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