

The Discovery of Society in Sociology

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Abstract

In sociology it is a custom to say that sociology began with the “discovery” of society, e.g., one has to “see” etc society in order to study society. This claim has something to it in the sense that sociology is established as a science at the same time as modern science is, i.e., around the year 1900. Sociology though is holistic at this time contrary to science being analytical. Instead the notion of “discovering” society belongs to the post war era, then, as an applied science sociology becomes a “science” and the talk of “discovering” society is appropriate. Thus we can learn from history about today’s sociology and society.

1. The “Discovery” of Society

In textbooks in sociology it is customary to say that sociology began with the discovery of society (cf. e.g. Ahrne 2008, Aron 2001, Collins 1998). Thus, sociology is the science of society, society being the study object of sociology. In this article the truth in this claim that sociology begins with the discovery of society is contested. This reflection starts with the science-part, followed by the society-part and then with the discovery-part to end in an overall reflection on this claim.

2. Sociology as a Science

Although there are those claiming that sociology has its roots in the Scottish Enlightenment (Wagner 2001) it is also reasonable to claim that it is a French and German product (cf. Aron 2001a, b, Coser 1977). Also important in sociology is that it, like science in general is established as a science at the time of the shift between the 19th and 20th centuries (cf. Shapiro 1996, Wagner 2001). Sociology was struggling to be recognized as a science – e.g. national sociological associations were founded – in the first decades of the 20th century. Though sociology was coloured by the French and German intellectual environments (cf. Coser 1977), still there was a dominant element of commonality in the attempt to become a science. To become a science sociology had to be at the same time the same as and also different from – especially in France this competition was hard - the other competitors, i.e., all other aspirants of becoming sciences. In Germany this question of similarity and difference was in the beginning discussed in the more general terms of “nature” and “culture “ (cf. Dilthey 1893). Still French and German sociologists are here possible to treat together in the first sense, i.e., in terms of their common aspiration to be scientists. Here France, with Emile Durkheim as the founder of sociology is clearly more important for the establishment of “sociology” - the Germans e.g., Weber (1912) were more generally discussing social science - as a science (Eliaeson 1981). Durkheim was resting - as we may say with the words of Newton (1642-1727) - on the shoulders of French giants, e.g., first of all on Auguste Comte (1798-1857) often recognized as “the father of sociology” and also on Saint-Simon (1760-1825). Indeed in France sociologist can here claim their roots all the way back in the middle of the 18th century, to Montesquieu (1689-1755) (cf. Aron 2001a).

-The Germans

The German sociologist though were up to date in their “philosophy of science” approach to sociology due to the then intense discussion on these matters in Germany and Austria since half a century ago or so. Stemming from this discussion positivism, as logical positivism was soon in the late 1920’s to become the most controversial but also most influential – and norm setting - conception of science for the century to follow.

- Durkheim

Still, Durkheim (cf. 1895) was not far behind since he was well aware of the German discussion of “science” from study-visits to Germany in his youth. Already in *The Methodological Rules of Sociology* (1895) he was a pronounced positivist and in his book *The Suicide* (1897) this is demonstrated in an empirical and positivist manner (Aron 2001b). There was clearly also a rhetorical purpose with this study on suicides. Here he was both claiming a scientific status, i.e., positivism for sociology and also giving his holistic version of sociology in competition with the more individual focus of psychology (cf. Aron 2001b, Wagner 2001). After all; can there be a more strong argument for “society” as the object of sociology than showing that what is considered to be the most individualistic action of all, i.e. taking one’s own life in fact is determined by society? Society is the “cause” of the suicide, i.e., the suicide is an “effect” of the society.

- The object of sociology

When it comes to the subject matter of sociology though they – the French and Germans - did not take any notice of each other, which is indicating that there is a big difference in the idea on the “object” of sociology between Emile Durkheim and the founders of the German sociological association in 1908; Georg Simmel (1858-1918.), Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936) and Max Weber (1864-1920). Distinguishing them from a Durkheim, a Mauss etc is clearly that the Germans are very methodologically driven while the French are more theoretically oriented (cf. Wagner 2001). For the French following the French rationalist tradition this comes as no surprise but the German methodology sociology is far away from the German idealist – by the positivists called speculative and metaphysical – philosophical tradition in the 19th century. The German founders are no clear-cut hermeneutics of the Dilthey (1893) kind, i.e., claiming “culture” being the object of the human science versus “nature” in science. Instead they are very rigorous, systematic in their way of “understanding” social relations. They are almost “explaining” social relations, cf. Simmel i.e., in his (1900) discussion of how money influences social relationships and Tönnies’s (1887) discussion of the difference between industrial and peasant society is likewise very systematic, law seeking, empirical. Weber, who was calling his methodology “verstehen”, i.e., “understanding” is like Simmel and Tönnies “scientific” i.e., law seeking. The social relations are a kind of “nature”, i.e., matter of facts (cf. Weber 1912).

3. Sociology and Society

When it comes to the society-part of the reflection on the establishment of sociology as a science of “society”, then as science sociology is being established around the year 1900. This beginning coincides with a political transformation, democratization as a “first crisis of modernity” (cf. Wagner 2001) i.e., a changing society.

- Capitalism and Democracy

In France the establishing of sociology takes place during the so called “the Anti-Clerical Era” 1880-1910. (cf. Boglind 1981) During these years political liberal and socialist forces gained enough strength to reform the French society in a modern, i.e., capitalist democratic direction (cf. Aron 2001b). In Germany there was an equivalent change going on in society where capitalism was forging with conservatism into a feudal kind of capitalism creating here a political ambivalence, epitomized in a notion of Germany going a “SonderWeg” - “a third path” - between feudalism (cf. Russian totalitarianism) and British dehumanized “civilisation”, i.e., capitalism. (Eliaeson 1995). Also in Europe at large there was “a Positivist Era” 1890-1930 (cf. Johnston 1983) where classical British economic theory of the free market capitalism (cf. Smith 1765) got new prominent defenders on the continent, not least in Austria and Italy (cf. Wallras and Pareto). The First World War 1914-18 is in Europe a breakpoint between feudalism and capitalism, i.e., between totalitarianism and democracy and a culmination of a struggle that had been going on for more than half of the 19th century (Hobsbawm 1962). The claim of the victory of capitalism and democracy though seems to be in the need of some reservation. Not only did the inter-war period 1918-1939 witness the rise of totalitarian regimes in Germany, Italy and elsewhere in Europe (Poulanzas 1970) but also did the new communist regime in Russia represent the beginning of an alternative communist and socialist world order. Thus the First World War rather represented the establishment of a smaller capitalist Europe and fascist, nazi and socialist alternatives.

- Capitalism and socialism

Then in The Second World War was totalitarianism in the form of fascism and nazism defeated and there was also created a parallel socialist world to the then created western world under the leadership of the Soviet Union and the USA respectively.

The years between the wars were different from those before and those years that were to come (Wagner 2001). The Second World War continued as a cold war with two blocks of countries, capitalists and communists competing with armament and a balance of terror as the uneasy guarantee of world peace.

The armament race at the same time was uniting them by promoting a common science, i.e., an instrumental rationality focusing on goals and means and the search for the maximum of efficiency. Thus society is changing and at the same time sociology appears as a legitimate science (cf. Olsson 1997, Thörnqvist 1997, Wagner 2001).

4. Sociology and the Discovery

Then, turning to the third part in our reflection, on this by sociologists alleged “discovery” of society we may start by concluding that it must be later than in the beginning of sociology around the year 1900. Though there is talk of “facts” and “objectivity” (cf. Durkheim 1895) and a “society” (cf. Tönnies 1887 and Simmel 1900), society is viewed functionally or as based upon business like instrumental market - money - relations. The founders are talking about social life, how it is changing etc. The view – i.e., the positivist idea – of society as an object that can be discovered comes later. Presumably this is a notion evolving after the Second World War.

- The USA

It is said that social science became positivistic in the USA after the First World War (Manicas 1988, Wagner 2000). While sociology was lingering on in Europe it was very vital in the inter-war period in the USA. At the same time sociology was becoming pragmatic and empirical (Manicas 1988) in its character. There were American sociologists critical to this positivism. Robert Merton – i.e., by his capitalism thesis – had already in the 1930’s provoked science by claiming the parallel between the growth of capitalism and science was no random coincidence. Later C Wright Mills (1959) asked for a different kind of sociology than the abstracted empiricism and empiricist abstraction he thought then was prevailing.

- Europe

This kind of quantitative sociology was then after the war exported to Europe where sociologists found a new role as “scientists” in the service of a reforming, i.e., a democratization of society. The notion of establishing a Welfare society became common in Europe. Here, in the 1960’s there was a notion of “a society”. Now society had become a thing, like in the exact sciences, consisting of elements e.g., sectors to be studied “objectively”. The vocabulary of Durkheim now feels appropriate. Thus, from this time on it may be stated that there is a “discovery” of a “society”, i.e., society is being viewed as an object, a thing, i.e., as something quantitative, possible to see, measure etc.

5. Conclusion

Thus the “discovery” of society belongs to an after-war context. When sociologists say that sociology starts with the discovery of society, referring to the years around 1900, in fact they are making a retrospective reading of sociology (and of society). They are describing sociology in the way it is at their own time (cf. Skinner 1985)). While doing this they are unaware of the differing historical horizons (cf. Gadamer 1960) between the sociology of then and of today. Though, by making this time-difference conscious we can recognize – i.e., understand - the working of history in sociology. In recognizing the difference between today’s and yesterday’s sociology we can understand the possibility for us, as sociologists to say something important in today’s society, for the benefit of making real the vision of the Enlightenment of a better society (cf. Hampson 1968).

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