

SUBSTANTIVE SOCIOLOGY FROM A SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE PERSPECTIVE

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SOCIOLOGY IN THEORY

Theoretically, sociology is the study of the forms of interaction through time and in space, which take place on a meaningful level between and among human beings (Blumer 1969 2). When we focus as observers on ongoing social interaction, our concepts of that action become to us rationally constructed reality based on two facts: 1) that something observable is there; 2) we now hold a resulting scheme of reality. But this observed action which is now a conceptual scheme originated in subjective meaning, corresponding to Pareto's *residues* existing in each person who produced the observed action. (Lopreato 1930 48). Social action which is observed as rational conceptual constructs has both rational and nonrational components as it is formed by interacting persons. Examining social action in this manner, we see that action which is viewed by an observer as totally rational may be based on seven components if the action is confined to a dyadic relation of two persons plus an observer. These seven components residing in both interacting persons, include Pareto's *residues and derivatives* in the first and second actors, rational and nonrational factors in the observer, plus at least one cultural directive, assuming G H Mead's (1934) *significant symbol* as a requirement for meaningful social interaction. Where more persons are interacting and are in the presence of more observers, and where more cultural factors are operating, the number of possible components in a given social action will be greatly increased in an infinite range.

Noting the possibility of a great number of cultural, rational and nonrational components of social action, with each component being infinite in scope, we perceive the magnitude of folly involved when it is insisted that social action systems are built up from totally rational, observable, countable components residing in some observer's rationally constructed reality. We see this folly compounded when these observer-formed conceptual formations are treated as mechanical, statistical components which can be randomized to form a complete social population, as so become definitive of social action for

humans, leaving out or making impossible, other components of action which are residual in the people and in their cultures. It is here that we can see these so-called action systems for what they are — ideological systems for social manipulation and repression.

OBSERVING DYADIC ACTION

With this understanding, we go back to the basic dyadic relation of interaction on a meaningful level, with one observer. We see that the dyadic action is the product of two whole persons interacting. This action is a product of the many possible components of action possessed by the persons themselves when they select from both rational and nonrational components as well as cultural directives in an existing life situation. This action is not statistically produced in random selection, but is a human product of human choice, as human beings relate to each other in an ongoing life situation in time and space. When this action is reduced to what the observer sees and counts and manipulates statistically, it is converted into a system of action produced by the observer, and forced in any manner as a directive or model of action on whole persons as complete patterns for human relations. This becomes the prerogative for defining the situation as a preparation for social action. It is torn from the interacting, knowing and choosing persons and manipulated by the self-oriented observer. Ideology and mass media facilitate this false definition of social action by reducing interacting people to rational symbol systems.

SYMBOL REDUCTIONISM

People and their interactions are reduced to symbols capable of being manipulated in flawless mathematical formulas and mass media images. These formulas and images may then be inflated in importance above social spheres, and may be hypostatized as the *ontological absolute*. This ontological absolute was produced by the observer and was inflated in the technology of the mass media into a total way of life. Humanity, at the social process level, has been robbed of the

tool of thought and the process of interaction on a meaningful level by which persons relate among themselves and to life as an ongoing process. The very means by which we, as humans, come to terms with existence have been torn from our grasp. This brings up the specter of death, where survival is no longer a matter of private concern to persons interacting with one another in conditions of life. Instead, existence is determined by some observer who adjusts people into some absolute rational scheme of existence formulated by the observer-manipulator, assisted with the technology of the mass media.

If this analysis seems extreme, consider the case where there is no observed ongoing social action, and thus no observer, and where there is only a theorist forming conceptual schemes of action which have no existence apart from the thoughts of the theorist. Then consider that these "ideal types" of action systems are magnified and forced on millions of people as directives of action by the technological systems of ideology and mass media. Here we have action systems by definition which are so far removed from social reality that they would be called psychotic delusions if manifested by an individual in the face of binding social norms.

Because binding and social norms have been destroyed or denied formulation by the forces of ideology and mass media rival definitions, these inflated rational schemes are accepted uncritically by the multitudes who act on them in good faith as if they were techniques of orientation in social reality. When people interact with one another in life conditions, where survival is in question by means of preformed definitions of action formed by some theorist, this action obviously is not socially meaningful.

A FUNCTIONALIST EXAMPLE

Functionalism offers an example, in which the basic proposition guiding functional analysis is that the functioning system itself is the prior cause of social events (Martindale 1965 154). This proposition contains a rational system ethic or *oughtness* which is to guide whole persons interacting in life situations in time and space. The ethic is fixed, and carries *oughtness*, while life situations are

relative. This reduction of the many possible components of social action, available to persons who retain free choice and ability to define the situation, to a fixed absolute is inimical to life itself. What is rational in one life situation may be irrational in another. What is irrational in one situation may be rational in another. An absolute ethic of *oughtness* cannot take this relativity into account. Only human beings can do so, where they are free to bring both rational and nonrational components of thought to bear on a specific ongoing life situation as they assess the requirements for action. Where this freedom is lost for any reason by real people in real life situations, they are in jeopardy of their lives. Thus, the *oughtness* of a structured system cancels the *isness* of existential conditions, separating the *is* and the *ought*, and exalting the *ought* as an observer's report or a theorist's construction of social reality.

CONCLUSION

We have now considered three possible bases for the structuring of sociological reality: persons acting, observers observing, and theorists theorizing. Here, the structured bases of sociology are clearly seen to be relative. This relativity of substantive sociology may be approached for understanding by means of the sociology of knowledge and the study of ideologies. This is one of the branches of the sociology of knowledge.

The sociology of knowledge arose in an effort to understand relativity in rational thought as it relates to action. It seeks to analyze the relation between knowledge and existence. "The sociology of knowledge is concerned not so much with distortions due to deliberate efforts to deceive as with the varying ways in which objects present themselves to the subject according to the differences in social settings. Thus, mental structures are inevitably differently formed in different social and historical settings." (Mannheim 1966 238)

From a sociology of knowledge perspective the structuring of reality as a basis for social action corresponds with the forms of interaction through time and space which take place on a meaningful level among humans may be studied historically in various social settings by various methods. Mannheim believes that the study of ideologies must

assume the task of unmasking the deceptions and disguises of special interest groups, and particularly those of political parties. From an ideological perspective the concern with conscious and intentional forms of the *incorrect* and the *untrue* corresponds to the rational constructs of social action by observers and theorists who structure social reality from a position of vested interest by means of mass media on a mass scale, to gain power with the aim to deceive and to manipulate people. Social interaction is studied statistically more as a device to determine public opinion than as an objective review of ongoing process of people in free social action.

The basic difference between European and American varieties of the sociology of knowledge is that "the European variant is devoted to digging up the social roots of knowledge, searching out the ways in which knowledge and thought are affected by the enviroing social stucture ... the American variant has its focus in the sociological study of popular belief. It is especially focused on *opinion* rather than *knowledge*." Merton (1968 494)

It is apparent from this perspective, that American sociologists are mainly concerned with ideology rather than scientific pursuit of knowledge. This perspective is reinforced by preoccupation with rational methods and statistical procedures along with an increasing skepticism of *nonscientific* qualitative approaches to understanding sociological data. Remembering that the substantive basis of sociology consists of *more* than observer-constructed action subject to statistical manipulation, we can see those "precise rational constructs" for what they are — ideologies.

When ideology is a conscious distortion of reality for purposes of defending a position of vested interest or projecting a rational utopia, it has lost claim to validity as scientific discipline, and is not capable of directing social action as a survival activity. When this deliberate rational distortion is introduced into sociology as a science of society and as a basis for social action, it becomes magic rather than science. Magic is defined as an extension of the order in which ideas present themselves to our minds by analogy (Fraser

1930 71). To the extent that persons acting, observers observing, or theorists theorizing, construe reality as a conscious and deliberate departure from existential reality, and as a total basis for social action, to that extent, magic is the actual basis of social action.

We have seen that the observer may depart from reality by insisting that social action is totally rational and that the theorist may depart from reality by insisting that a conceptual scheme is reality. American sociology as compared with European sociology is mainly concerned with popular belief rather than with knowledge. When we understand that for purposes of social action, what is defined as *true* is treated as true whether defined by science or magic. We see that public opinion may be a manipulated opinion, and thus, a magical interpretation. Merton's self-fulfilling prophesy explicitly sets forth the necessary conditions for this transformation where a false definition of the situation which serves as a basis for social action evokes a new behavior which makes the original false definition come to be true. Given these false definitions of substantive sociology by observers and theorists who then present these magical definitions as *total social reality*, and given the existence and power of mass media to compound and magnify these false definitions, we see the ease with which sociology may depart from the task of a knowledge-seeking science to become ideology.

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