

SOCIOLOGIES OF KNOWLEDGE AS RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

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PHILOSOPHICAL AND POLITICAL BASIS

Sociologies of knowledge are most adequately interpreted not as empirical theories, but as rhetorical strategies of social control. Reduction of supposedly scientific theories to devices of political persuasion is not intuitively obvious. The argument is of two stages: 1) We must demonstrate the weakness of the belief that the sociology of knowledge can be constituted as an empirical social science independent of an epistemological commitment. 2) We must show that sociologies of knowledge depend on epistemological presuppositions and are merely strategies of persuasion as rhetorical devices.

At first there seems nothing contradictory about establishing sociology of knowledge as a branch of empirical social science. Cognitive judgments can be related statistically to social position or "existential basis." No problems arise on the level of abstracted empiricism where particular studies are sharply restricted in space and time, to provide information on the distribution of opinions according to such factors as social class, ethnicity, sex and age. Results of similar studies can be compared over time to identify trends. But a major conceptual difficulty appears as soon as there is an attempt to generalize the findings of narrow gauge studies into theory. A sociology of knowledge must define its object: *knowledge*. But definitions of knowledge are relative to epistemologies. What passes for knowledge in one epistemology is excluded in another — and epistemological disparities cannot be resolved scientifically, since science is itself based on epistemological assumptions.

Any sociology of knowledge that explains the distribution of ideas in a society presupposes a description of that society to which the ideas are held relative. Among the ideas held relative to the theorist's description of society are competing descriptions of the society held by others. Any attempt to account for a competing in terms of one's own theory while claiming objectivity for oneself implies the definition of a mechanism by which the other holds false and faulty ideas. The sociology of knowledge can remain at a strictly empirical

level only so long as it adopts as descriptive categories those embedded in "common sense or in official institutional definitions. To account for disparity between official and common sense ideas about the distribution of knowledge, the theory must resort to the notion of *false consciousness*. A complication appears when competing sociologies of knowledge are forced to brand each other as instances of false consciousness even as each prescribes different methods for attaining social truth. Relative adequacy of the competitors cannot be judged on empirical grounds, but only on philosophical and political grounds, because mutually exclusive theories of truth are in question, not competing hypotheses.

Images of social structure are at least potentially frames for reference through which humans can relate to their circumstances, and as such are the substance of political persuasion or propaganda. The political or ideological propagandist claims scientific validity while competing theories are shown to result from "non-logical" factors. The job of the sociology of knowledge, from the political viewpoint, is to discredit competing visions of society by attributing to them the distorting influence of the opponent's position.

MARXISM

Marxism provides the model for the sociology of knowledge. The famous passage in the *Communist Manifesto*, that the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of the ruling class, sets the stage for inquiry into the social determination of notions about society (Marx, Engels 1955 30). Yet it is not sufficient for Marx and Engels to claim that consciousness changes with every change in the conditions of material existence. They must show how the particular contents of their opponents' ideas are related to their material conditions. The critique of philosophical idealism proceeds in two steps (Marx, Engels 1947). 1) The social, political and economic ideas resulting from an idealist perspective are criticized by a materialist philosophy. 2) The specific ideas under attack are related to class

interest. The synthesis between philosophical analysis and sociological attribution is provided by political conflict.

Marx and Engels attacked German or 'True' Socialism more passionately than competing socialist doctrines. They note that historically "true" socialism stemmed from the import of French socialist ideas into Germany and the attempt of the German literati to annex the new ideas without deserting their own philosophical viewpoint. This annexation occurred by a process of "translation" in which the concrete content of the French ideas was removed and only the inert forms remained. Beneath the French criticism of the economic functions of money, they wrote 'alienation of humanity', and beneath the French criticism of the bourgeois state they wrote 'dethronement of the category of the general' (Marx, Engels 1955 37).

Essentially, the critique of ideology is an attack on the Platonic spirit, in which the forms of perception are made prior to their contents. This critique runs parallel to the analysis of alienation in which the proletarian's labor is taken away from him, and becomes a commodity on the market. In the case of false consciousness, the ideas created to explain and transform particular situations become translated into essences that define the limits of human activity. The success of translation is particularly clear in the example of the left-wing Hegelians who actually initiated their theorizing by generalizing an existent literature. But it is also the mainspring of utopian socialism which is described as a search after a new social science and after new social laws that are meant to create the conditions of a new social order.

Marx and Engels do not try to explain why particular persons became 'true socialists' and why the human mind is so prone to the process of translating. Having shown how the 'true socialists' translated the particular into the general and then made the general regulative over the particular, they demonstrate how the doctrines of the 'true socialists' represent political and class interests. They note that 'true socialism' gradually lost its pedantic innocence when it was appropriated in the political struggle waged by the German monarchy and feudal aristocracy against the rising liberal

bourgeoisie. Marx and Engels argue that the French criticism annexed by the 'true socialists' could only apply to a situation in which bourgeois property and constitutionalism already existed. 'True socialism' spread like an epidemic because it promised to save the petty bourgeoisie from the concentration of capital and from the rise of a revolutionary proletariat, both of which would destroy it.

If 'true socialism' for Marx and Engels is an example of a process of translation from the particular to the general, their own analysis is a process of decoding the general by particularizing it. 1) The ideas under attack are empirically related to the specific political groups which use them. 2) These political groups are related to underlying economic classes defined by the 'objective' analysis of capitalism. Hence the mediation between economic structure and the ideological superstructure is political activity in which philosophies become ideologies in the service of economic interests.

Marx and Engels do not argue that 'true socialism' was directly caused by economic conditions, but that it *functioned* as a weapon in political conflict. Their critique shows that epistemologies have political consequences. Hence, philosophical idealism in its left-wing Hegelian variant is attacked on both the philosophical grounds that it translates the real into the misty realm of philosophical fantasy and on the political grounds that it serves as an instrument of reactionary policy. Ultimately, its success is attributed to the underlying class interests that it disguises and promotes.

RESSENTIMENT

The Marxian monopoly on inter-perspectival sociological criticism was broken by Scheler (1961) who coined the term *sociology of knowledge* and saw it as an essentially political tool. It would provide a foundation of all cultural politics and constitute a method of resolving the ideological conflicts prevalent in Weimar Germany just after World War I. It would allow the politicians involved in these conflicts to see the limitations of their viewpoints (Hamilton 1974 75).

But Scheler's proposed harmony was doomed to collapse because it was in direct contradiction to the Marxian insistence on conflict.

Far from healing divisions and synthesizing diverse perspectives, Scheler's sociology of knowledge constituted an attack on both positivism and Marxism in favor of an objectivist conception of absolute value weighted towards traditionally conservative beliefs. In his critique of bourgeois and socialist ideas, Scheler argues that genuine morality rests on an eternal *hierarchy of values*, and its rules of preference are as *fully objective as clearly 'evident'* as mathematical truths (Scheler 1961 72). According to Scheler the modern period represents an inversion of the eternal table of values in which such values as intelligence, courage and honesty have been placed below cunning, comfort and pleasure.

Scheler traces value inversion to the fall of medieval society. In the medieval world, each group had its exclusive task in life, its objective unity of purpose, while the soul of the modern world has been free competition, in which humans lacking fixed standards, vie to be more highly esteemed than others (Scheler 1961 5). The mechanism that mediates between value inversion and the objective axiology is *ressentiment*, or the repression of envy leading to an affirmation of one's weaknesses and a detraction from the strengths of others. Those who are most susceptible to *ressentiment* are failures who invert values in order to overcome their oppressive feelings of inferiority. Bourgeois *ressentiment* expresses the failure of the new business class to attain the aristocratic values of the nobility that it displaced, while proletarian *ressentiment* reflects failure in terms of bourgeois society. The bourgeois is a positivist who glorifies science at the expense of metaphysics and religion, and quantity at the expense of quality. The proletarian is a Marxist who seeks comfort in the world.

The structure of Scheler's interspectival critique is nearly the mirror of Marx. The objective hierarchy of values performs the same function as an ontological ground for Scheler as the structure of capitalism does for Marx and Engels, while the process of value inversion is analogous to that of translation. In both cases the interspectival critique is based on a claim that the opponent has falsified reality. What reality means to Scheler contradicts what it means to Marx and Engels. For Scheler, reality is denied when humans

turn away from objective values and base their activity on the shifting judgments of others, while for Marx and Engels it is denied when humans ignore their particular social situation and define it in terms of universal laws and abstract essences. While the practical outcome of the Marxian critique is revolution, Scheler's is resignation to one's inferiority. The debate between Marxian and Schelerian critiques of knowledge cannot be resolved by empirical test because it concerns the definition of truth and knowledge, with assumptions that must precede any empirical inquiry, and with recommendations that can only be tested in political action, not in a laboratory.

LIBERAL SYNTHESIS

The third moment in the development of the sociology of knowledge is Mannheim's liberal response to the attacks on positivism leveled by the Marxists and the conservatives. While Marx' sociology of knowledge has an economic ground and Scheler's a cultural ground, Mannheim's is based on political activity. His starting point is the intellectual crisis created by competing sociologies of knowledge each of which unmask the hidden motivations of opponents. This weapon of the reciprocal unmasking and laying bare of the unconscious sources of intellectual existence has not only destroyed confidence in particular positions, but confidence in human thought as well (Mannheim 41). Mannheim intended his sociology of knowledge to perform the functions of rehabilitating confidence in human thought by providing a new interpretation of objectivity and thereby aiding and curing a divided society.

His analysis is plagued by a persistent ambiguity stemming from his judgment that social science uses the same concrete concepts and thought models which were created for activist purposes in real life, and his relationist epistemology involving the principle that all of the elements of meaning in a given situation have reference to one another and derive their significance from this reciprocal interrelation in a given frame of thought. If social science is necessarily evaluative and political, then the situation defined by relationism is similarly value oriented and partisan. If the situation defined by relationism corresponds to objective reality, then the

concepts of social science are not those created for activist purposes.

In most of his analysis, Mannheim seems to adopt a position of value naturalism, the doctrine that values can be grounded in scientific inquiry. He critiques ideology and utopia not on the basis of an alternative political position but on the grounds that they do not accord with the requirements of reality. In this discussion of false consciousness, Mannheim states that the danger of false consciousness nowadays is not that it cannot grasp an absolute unchanging reality, but rather that it obstructs comprehension of a reality which is the outcome of constant reorganization of the mental processes which make up our worlds (Mannheim 94). Mannheim advocates a synthesis of all contemporary European ideologies, including aspects of fascism. Each ideology cannot be synthesized with all of the others in detail, because the ideologies are mutually contradictory in many respects. By implication, social reality is defined by those aspects of each image of society that can be harmonized with the others, lending Mannheim's supposedly dynamic synthesis a static and positivist cast. This 'reality' is not apprehended empirically or intuitively, but conceptually, through a synthesis of perspectives.

Mannheim traces the tendency for people to adopt absolutes for a supposed need for intellectual and moral certainty (Mannheim 87). Ideologists and utopians are those who find it necessary to seek a way out of this uncertainty of multiple alternatives. Such people may be led to embrace some immediate goal if it were absolute, but which they hope to make their problems appear concrete or real. Absolutization is an escape from freedom and responsibility; a denial of authentic existence. It consists in avowing allegiance to ideals while in actual conduct they follow other interests which they try to mask by simulating an unconscious righteousness, which is only too easily transparent. He notes that it is shocking to discover that those who claim to have discovered an absolute are usually the same ones who pretend to be superior to others. But the claim to superiority is merely the mask behind which they disguise insecurity and fear as members of declining or excluded groups.

REALITY CONSTRUCTION

The new sociologies of knowledge appearing after World War II reflect the muting of interstate ideological conflict and the consequent decline of interspectival criticism attending the rise of superpowers. *Non-evaluative social science* is intended to avoid the strategies of unmasking and debunking (Berger, Luckmann 1967). They reflect a period of nuclear confrontation in which ideological dissent was interpreted by elites as a sign of foreign subversion in which there was an effort at least in the United States to define an anti-Communist and western ideology for use in competition with Soviet Marxism in the Third World. The new sociologies of knowledge are developments of structural functionalism, which in its Parsonian variant, did not fully describe the patterns and functions of knowledge distribution. Hence they do not contain any overt theories of false consciousness, since all empirically available worlds are socially constructed. Of course, some empirically available worlds have wider scope and greater tenacity than others, and groups are characterized by processes of *universe maintenance* ranging from coercion to persuasion. The new sociologists are "one-dimensional" in the sense that they accept the given distribution of belief without criticism (Marcuse 1964). They are essays in grand theory providing sets of abstract categories transcending historical formations (Mills 1958).

The functionalist sociologies of knowledge do face the problem of explaining their rivals. As expressions of reigning rather than embattled liberalism, they must account for the marginal left and right oppositions. Despite their ontological commitment to dualism, Berger and Luckmann (1967 128) claim that social change must always be understood as standing in a dialectical relation to the history of ideas. Both idealist and materialist understandings of the relation overlook this dialectic, and thus distort history. They argue that most modern societies have a shared core universe, accepted as such, and different partial universes coexisting in a state of mutual accommodation. Outright conflict between ideologies has been replaced by varying degrees of tolerance or even cooperation. Then what accounts for the deviants who do not subscribe to a dualist interpretation of

history, and who do not accept the universe of symbols?

The notion that the intellectuals get the authorities to enforce arguments gives the intellectuals more power in the historical process than did previous sociologies of knowledge which held that intellectuals represented underlying social processes and interests. Berger and Luckmann (1967 127) said that ideologies arise when particular definitions or reality become attached to a concrete power interest. A revolutionary ideology concocted by aberrant intellectuals takes on massive reality when entire social strata become its carriers. Intellectuals, then are those who attempt to impose on others models for remaking society in detail. They repudiate the complex pluralist society in favor of symbolic coherence, and restrict diversity and often, individuality for the sake of the ideology (Holzner 1968 157). This idea is less dialectical in the sense of maintaining a tension between ideas and material conditions, as it is an updating of Scheler's conservatism. The world views of the intellectuals correspond to Scheler's realm of values, and by his notion of co-determination, the world views are chosen on the basis of a variety of situational criteria, including interest and the need for solidarity.

Parsons' functionalist sociology of knowledge does have a distinctive notion of false consciousness that he labels *fundamentalism*. Fundamentalists are those who repudiate broad and comprehensive ideological models of pluralist compromise and organizational conflict resolution in favor of either nativist and ethnocentric ideologies or moral absolutes. Criticizing the neo-anarchism of the new left, Parsons states (1969 465):

From a certain point of view, existentialism and the related 'neo-anarchist' currents may be seen as a fundamentalist pattern of that Durkheim called the 'cult of the individual'. This orientation would test the authenticity of the individual's commitments to what we have called 'valued association'.

Parsons' *valued association* is identification with the institutions of society through intermediary interest groups.

The notion of false consciousness explicit in the Parsonian sociology of knowledge and implicit in the phenomenological variants of functionalism is similar to Mannheim's

critique of absolutism. Both the left and the right are attacked for their claims to superiority and their partiality. Mannheim was struggling to protect liberal democracy from mass movements that had become carriers of totalitarian ideologies, while the new positivists defend a highly bureaucratized positivist polity in which most interests have been organized into functional relations with state agencies. The new positivists can best defend the established system by promoting the notion of *everyday life* and empirically available worlds which disguise the role of organized power concentrations in imposing symbolic universes. Berger and Luckmann and Holzner do not devote systematic attention to propaganda and advertizing as methods of reality construction, but stress the primacy of face-to-face relations and of socialization in general. Their rhetorical strategy is to marginalize those who critique the social system as a whole and whose proposals therefore cannot be subjected to pragmatic testing within that social system.

The internal social peace of the period preceding World War II was broken by a series of social developments beginning in the 1960's. The competition between the Soviet Union and the United States for control over the developing nations has been superseded by detente and the emergence of indigenous anti-imperialist ideologies and alliances in the Third World. The new social division seems to be between the industrialized and the non-industrial nations. In the United States, various liberation movements have appeared, challenging the structural and cultural biases of established institutions. Commitment to valued association in Parsons' sense has been severely questioned by large groups including racial and ethnic minorities and women. The attempts of the state to maintain order have opened up social divisions between previously repressed groups and favored groups. Rather than an a continuation of an integrated bureaucratic order, present conditions seem to promise either/or choices between greater equality and coerced exclusion, both in the United States and elsewhere. In this new situation, the liberal state will gravitate toward updated varieties of fascism or towards socialism. In this new situation, the functional sociologies of knowledge do

not represent the legitimation of a temporary cold war consensus, but an ideological weapon against structural change and in favor of an exclusionary policy of political control. Far from promoting an empirical science, they serve as a mask to conceal purposive organizational power.

SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE AS RHETORICAL STRATEGY

The intellectual step beyond Mannheim has been to return to positivism under the banner of phenomenology and functionalism, and to retreat from inter-perspectival criticism. However the embrace of *everyday life* is not value-neutral, but implies uncritical acceptance of the perspectives presently enforced by power structures. An advance beyond the classical sociologies of knowledge would insist on the partisan and value-committed nature of every perspective. It would reduce all sociologies of knowledge to strategies of political rhetoric aimed at creating either unity or division through declaring opponents to have false consciousness and explaining their falsehood by appeal to some unconscious mechanism. This is equivalent to saying that all sociologies of knowledge are ideologies.

A political sociology of knowledge would be critical, showing the value bases of each perspective and would relate these perspectives to political conflicts. It would have its own bias, determined by its critique of claims to value-neutrality and inclusiveness. It would sharpen awareness of diversity with blunt appeals to unification. Such a rhetoric can only function to sharpen conflict in a highly bureaucratized order and to revalue perspectives as instruments of social

control. While its primary thrust would be to discredit apolitical perspectives, its own bias would be anti-political or anarchist.

A political sociology of knowledge is not more inclusive than any other. It must declare as instances of false consciousness all claims to a value-neutral science of society, as well as claims to a science of history, to an objective theory of values, or to a naturalist theory of values. All of these it interprets as instruments of self-control and social control. The response to sciences of society is to rehabilitate ideology.

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