

LIVELY SPIRIT,
DECADENT DISCIPLINE:
THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

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BACKGROUND

. It is paradoxical that scholars for whom the sociology of knowledge should have special relevance in today's world of economic and political contradictions appear to turn away from this field, doing little to develop it as a distinct, systematic discipline. The central notion of the sociology of knowledge, that ideas and beliefs are related to socio-historical circumstances, has a long history. Francis Bacon provides outlines of the field which systematic sociology of knowledge later claimed (Coser 1968 428). Though important developments occurred in France, through Durkheim, the sociology of knowledge as an area of systematic investigation and analysis is usually traced to the intellectual milieu of 19th Century German philosophers, like Hegel, and to historicists like Dilthey. Marx, building on the German historicists, gave impetus to this area of social thought, but it was not until 1924 when Max Scheler coined the term "sociology of knowledge" (Wissensoziologie), that it became identified as an independent field of study. Extensive debate among German scholars on its scope, application, and validity followed on Scheler's invention. Out of this debate arose Karl Mannheim's writings which introduced the sociology of knowledge to the English speaking world (Berger & Luckman 1967 8). Mannheim, by viewing all socio-historical knowledge as socially determined, gave the field a sociological cast. The English version of Mannheim's Ideology and Utopia appeared in the United States in 1936. The new discipline was warmly received at first, and American scholars were extensively occupied with ideologies, philosophies, and

other issues suggested by Mannheim's writings through the 1930's (Chall 1961 287). Concern with concepts and problems of the emerging field promised continued growth of a true sociology of knowledge in its narrow and traditionally defined sense. Interest continued strong into the 1940's, according to Merton, whose major essay outlining a paradigm for studying the sociology of knowledge appeared in 1949.

. With the postwar era, however, enthusiasm declined, and according to Chall's review of the trends of the postwar decade, became a "dead letter" (1961 286). He argues that the basic idea of the sociology of knowledge, that there is a symmetric relation between knowledge and society, may be found latent in all behavioral sciences, though it is a field sparingly pursued by sociologists. He notes that sociologists publish little sociology of knowledge, as evidenced in the listings in Sociological Abstracts from 1955 through 1974, shown in Table 1. Chall's claim on the relative inactivity over the postwar years is well supported. The traditional conception of the sociology of knowledge has not attracted much interest from writers and scholars. As shown by the proportion of citations, it has averaged about one percent of total production, and it has not kept pace with the proliferation of sociological writing in this period.

. The unpopularity of the sociology of knowledge is also reflected in time and space allotted to it in formal coursework in academic programs. The attention it receives at regional and national meetings gives the same impression. For the few papers offered, sociology of knowledge sessions are poorly attended. Thus, at the American Sociological Association meetings of 1978, 1200 papers were given on 100 topical areas in 230 sessions, only one of which was sociology of knowledge, with just five papers.

TABLE 1: SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE:
SOCIOLOGICAL ABSTRACTS ENTRIES
OVER TWO DECADES

Year	Total Abstracts	Percent Sociology of Knowledge
1955	980	.3
1956	952	.9
1957	1016	1.3
1958	1335	.9
1959	1669	1.8
1960	1904	1.7
1961	2323	.8
1962	2953	1.0
1963	3812	1.1
1964	6063	1.3
1965	4263	1.3
1966	5137	.8
1967	5435	1.7
1968	5730	1.2
1969	5459	1.0
1970	4888	1.4
1971	5681	1.6
1972	7181	1.2
1973	6689	.9
1974	6982	1.0

CURRENT LITERATURE

. Statements in the current literature also show that the sociology of knowledge is largely ignored by contemporary sociologists: "The sociology of knowledge has remained marginal to the discipline in this country, still regarded as an unassimilated European import, of interest only to a few colleagues with a slightly eccentric penchant for the history of ideas." (Berger 1966 105) Much of the present indifference is attributable to American sociologists' negative appraisal of scholarly work in this field. Such work has tended to be speculative, and of doubtful quality by prevailing research standards, which makes it unfashionable (Curtis & Petras 1970 27). Berger and Luckmann associate these theoretical and methodological approaches to the sociology of knowledge with its European heritage (1967 7). Another cause of neglect in the United States is the conception of the sociology of

knowledge identified with one-sided determinism. This is clearly connected with its European roots and may be traced through our importation of Mannheim, and back to the thinking of Marx. From Marx came its root proposition -- that man's consciousness is determined by his social being (Berger & Luckman 1967 5).

. Whether pro or con, sociologists in the United States think of the sociology of knowledge in Mannheim's terms. His definition of the field and the problems it assumes as its proper concern account for the scholarly work in this field. American scholars' neglect of this field is largely due to the kinds of problems it poses for study, and their dissatisfaction with the manner in which such studies are pursued. Though disdained by sociologists in the United States, these works produced in the traditional sociology of knowledge are consistent with the body of thought which was once welcomed along with its German intellectual legacy.

. Three points of weakness were identified: 1) vague or speculative theory; 2) unsatisfactory research approaches; and 3) restrictively narrow definition of the field. We will pinpoint representative problems to show how these difficulties have impeded its acceptance and progress as a discipline. The points are treated as individual elements, but they cannot be separated from the theory and methodology appropriate to the discipline. For the sociology of knowledge this is of special significance, because its problems have hinged from the beginning on issues of definition.

. The traditional concepts of the nature and scope of this field are a vestige of its early social and philosophical background. Its implied determinism, and the one-sidedness deplored by many in the United States, goes back to Marx's thesis that belief systems are merely reflections of economic and class factors. They were re-

tained in Mannheim's formulations concentrating on ideologies and their social determinants (Stark 1964 680; Coser 1977 432; Timasheff & Theodorson 1976 306). With such an orientation, it is not surprising that the theory is criticized as overly broad, as conceptually vague, and as lacking any empirical grounding. There is very little new theory constructed on the foundations laid by Scheler and Mannheim. As Berger and Luckmann put it: " .. neither Merton nor Parsons has gone in any decisive way beyond the sociology of knowledge as formulated by Mannheim .. and the same can be said of their critics .. Mills dealt with the sociology of knowledge .. in an expositional manner and without contributing to its theoretical development." (1967 12) Theory has not moved far past that which entered American thought in the 1930's, despite the polemics and redefinitions, because it is still Mannheim's theory of Wissensoziologie".

THE PROBLEM FOR METHODOLOGY

. These theoretical shortcomings have surfaced as troublesome methodological complexities. Among difficulties which have inhibited disciplinary development, the major one has been the persistence of philosophical and epistemological issues. Since its inception, efforts toward theoretical development have been marked by attempts to grapple with questions of the relativity of knowledge, the validity of thought structures, and even the validity of the discipline itself. Finding the solutions of the early thinkers was only partly satisfactory. Modern scholars who have not abandoned the field altogether have tended to deal with the problem by finding ways of excluding or avoiding epistemological concerns. These include Znaniecki, Coser, and Shils, - among others, who skirted the issue by concentrating on more limited areas of investigation (Timasheff & Theodorson 1976 312;

Berger & Luckman 1967 14). By such solutions, these authors avoided the dilemma of ideational relativity by carving out areas for study that allowed them to sidestep such issues by implicitly redefining the field. By diverting scholarly effort into areas marginal to traditional sociology of knowledge has contributed to the decline of the discipline.

. Of the three aspects considered to cause American neglect of the field, the foremost is the vexing methodological problem set by the traditional conception of the sociology of knowledge. Its works are judged poor in quality in the context of American methodological preferences. Its predilection for studies involving broadly conceived concepts and far-reaching events which suggested use of an historical method, led to speculative expositions and grandiose hypothetical schemes entirely at odds with the American propensity for carefully delineated empirical questions amenable to study by logical positivist methods (Coser & Rosenberg 1964 682).

The American sociologists' penchant for counting, classifying, operationalizing key variables, and performing statistical analysis has effectively discouraged interest in the traditional sociology of knowledge by giving it the appearance of an out-dated and unresearchable field.

. Empirical research has not flourished in this area because it demands complex designs, time-consuming procedures, and the methodological acuity and dedication to sensitive scientific inquiry which few academicians are willing to muster. Concerns of the traditional sociology of knowledge call for such methodological components as: 1) designs appropriate to investigate dynamic processes and sociocultural and ideational relations with a temporal and historical dimension; 2) analytic techniques to deal with inter-related variables at divergent conceptual levels, such as individual-

-contextual, and micro-macro applications in the same research problem; and 3) procedures for gathering and analyzing data which recognize the subjective dimension in social scientific investigations of social phenomena concerning human thought (Bogardus 1960 608) Because sociological tools of this kind are neither developed nor popular, and American research designs tend to be incompatible with the research problems of the sociology of knowledge, an impasse results.

NEGLECT OF THE FIELD

. One response to these conditions is the manifest neglect of the field of the sociology of knowledge. Few contemporary American scholars concern themselves with it, and those who do focus on theoretical issues more than on empirical research. The other tendency is the movement toward redefinition of its theoretical elements to permit a wider range of investigations. The dependent variable, which was ideology in the hands of the traditionalist who followed Mannheim has been interpreted to include an ever wider array of research problems. Expanding the meaning of the concept knowledge has directed sociological energy away from methodological questions left unresolved in the European tradition, and focused it on small scale studies which lend themselves to existing research approaches in various substantive areas. As a result, the nature of societal influences on ideas has been investigated in terms of public opinion, community studies, cultural tendencies, the role of the intellectual, and a host of other specialty areas. But this development has been dysfunctional for any hope that the sociology of knowledge might come to be recognized as a clearly delineated field in its own right. It led to proliferation of sociological specialties, each relating to central concepts in the sociology of knowledge. In spawning sub-areas

for art, music, science, and sociology itself, we have contributed to the demise of the traditional view by circumventing its development. ". These aspects of research and theory from various fields have not been brought together .. so the circuit remains incomplete, precluding development of a full sociology of knowledge." (Curtis & Petras 1970 29)

. Study in the sociology of knowledge was thwarted by the narrow definition of the field which delimited the scope of problems it posed. Research leading to empirically sound explanatory generalizations was discouraged, which hindered development as a specialized area. Lacking a precisely defined field of study in its own right, and without a distinctive body of theoretical and methodological approaches, the traditional sociology of knowledge has no appreciable status as a discipline in the United States.

LATENCY IN CURRENT SOCIOLOGY

. To say that the sociology of knowledge has all but disappeared as a distinct branch of learning in the United States does not mean that its essential thrust is no longer a viable and important part of sociology. This seeming contradiction is resolved by recognizing that our discussion was confined to the traditional view of the field. It is the discipline newly emerged from the work of European scholars and introduced to the United States through Mannheim that has been neglected, and is today in a decadent state. Although atrophied, the fundamental theme of the sociology of knowledge in the sense that knowledge and society are essentially related, has taken on new vitality as a general perspective. Its impaired development proved to be a benefit in that it freed the sociology of knowledge from its restrictive disciplinary identification and allowed it to permeate the entire range of sociological interests. The measure of its pervasive-

ness is not simply in the number of branches produced by its different concerns, but in the variety of areas in which, implicitly or explicitly, a sociology of knowledge perspective is employed, representing theory, methodology and general sociology (Coser 1977; Nisbet 1966; Sjoberg & Nett 1968; Hammond 1964; McKee 1969).

. That the sociology of knowledge would one day exist as a special orientation was anticipated by Merton (1968) who saw it as the essence of mass communication studies, and by Chall (1961) who noted its infusion into all social sciences as a latent frame of reference. Coser saw it as diffused into general sociological theory, and so often merged with other areas of research no longer recognized as the sociology of knowledge (1969 432). Coser cites the sociology of profession as and occupations, of social role, of science, which have produced research germane to the basic theme of the sociology of knowledge. Recent works on the sociology of sociology include Gouldner (1970), Friedrichs (1970), Reynolds & Reynolds (1970), and Tiryakian (1970). Elements already present in American sociology are now being recognized as consistent with the affinity between the sociology of knowledge and Meadian social psychology (Curtis & Petras 1970 373). Evidence of a marriage of these congenial traditions lies in a compilation of papers on symbolic interaction, of which three are labeled "studies in the sociology of knowledge (Denzin 1979). Closely parallel concerns are also contained in phenomenological sociology, a perspective gaining acceptance in the United States.

. The explicit redefinition by Berger & Luckman of the dependent variable as "everything that passes for knowledge in society", including everyday knowledge, provides the best evidence that the sociology of knowledge now exists more as a point of view than as a discipline (1967 3,15). "If ..

the acquisition of all knowledge, including knowledge about everyday social behavior, is considered within its scope, as in the phenomenological approach, then the sociology of knowledge loses its special domain and tends to become synonymous with sociology and social psychology .."(Timasheff & Theodorson 1976 317).

. The perspective and the message of the sociology of knowledge have been anything but stagnant. The broad range of areas infiltrated by its central theme signify its new role as a "lively spirit" in the main stream of American sociology. That its central thrust has become a viable and almost pervasive element raises the question of its current value in the discipline. Is the general acceptance of the notion that knowledge and society are related in an infinite variety of ways something more than a faddish idea? If so, does the growing commitment to a sociology of knowledge approach have important implications? The first question is answered by the large variety of areas into which this perspective has diffused. General recognition of an essential relation of knowledge to society represents a genuine and permanent step toward greater sociological sophistication. A general understanding is rapidly taking hold across the discipline that all ideas, including the ideas in social science have social roots. Its permeation, by the sociology of knowledge perspective can prove of inestimable value in the search for objective knowledge.

. Sjoberg & Nett (1968) have shown the possibilities of using the sociology of knowledge as a methodological tool to enable the scientist to avoid the biasing influence of captivity in one's own time and place. They refer to the researchers' need to examine their own thoughts and actions in light of those of scientists of other eras and other socio-cultural settings. They call for full recognition that various social forces im-

pinge on the mind of the social researcher, and argue that these should be confronted.

. The idea that powerful insight can be achieved through applying the sociology of knowledge orientation in scientific research can be generalized to all forms of sociological endeavor. If the penetration of this perspective into many areas of the discipline means that sociologists are recognizing and addressing the real and potential impact of socio-cultural influences on knowledge of every kind, we can expect a new phase in social science development.

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