

THE OBJECT DOMAIN OF SOCIOLOGY: THE THERBORN APPROACH

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INTRODUCTION

Sociology as a topic of inquiry has become an increasing preoccupation in the sociology community—a situation not without critics. Bottomore implores his colleagues to refrain from "navel-gazing," with special reference to Gouldner's "reflexive sociology." Nicolaus described the sociology of sociology as an expression of scientific autism (Bottomore 1974). There is a plethora of diverging, competing, and overlapping approaches. The list would include: 1) the history of ideas school, in which Nisbet adapted Lovejoy's *unit-ideas*; 2) the sociology of knowledge; 3) the search for political or ideological values as underpinnings of sociology; and 4) the processes of institutionalization and organization features which stimulate or impede the growth and diffusion of scientific knowledge (Nisbet 1966 2; Mannheim 1971; Bramson 1961; Zeitlin 1968; Friedrichs 1970; Merton 1968; Ben-David 1971; Crane 1972; Mullins 1973; Friedkin 1978).

One of the unfortunate tendencies in this literature is the treatment of science as epiphenomenal, and to reduce science to a determinant product of class position, social milieu, *zeitgeist*, or psychological factors. However, there is another route to comprehend and evaluate competing theories, to preserve a notion of the relative autonomy of scientific practice: *Treat scientific theories on their own terms!* While the internal logical consistency of theories comprises one critical element in this mode of inquiry, another pertains to the object domains claimed for various theories. A theory is better than its rival if it has more empirical content (Lakatos & Musgrave 1970; Goudsblom 1977; Elias 1978). We will make a comparative assessment of Marx and Durkheim, based on Therborn's critical evaluation of academic society (Therborn 1976).

Therborn is a Swedish sociologist aligned to the Althusser school. He shares the concerns about the scientific status of Marxism. He is critical of those neo-Marxists who have beckoned a movement back to

philosophy, reverting from Marx to Hegel. Therborn's polemical essays are directed at the Frankfurt school for their alleged idealistic rejection of science (Therborn 1970). Here he also attacks four American theorists who are commonly seen as central practitioners of quite divergent schools, including Parsons, Mills, Friedrichs, and Gouldner. Despite their obvious differences, Therborn contends that this quartet is alike in their tendency to treat social revolutions as sociological revolutions, an idealistic inversion which can justifiably be called the American ideology (Therborn 1976 31). He sees his task as one akin to Marx's repudiation of the speculative humanism of the young Hegelians who, as Marx put it, thought men drowned in water because they were possessed by the idea of gravity (Marx 1970 36).

Therborn's argument attacks on two fronts, seeking a course between the menacing Scylla of idealism and the Charybdis of those various theoretical strains which tend to treat thought as epiphenomenal. This is evident, Therborn contends, in the Mannheim version of the sociology of knowledge. He preserves a sense of the relative autonomy of scientific production, and resists the temptation to yield to the geneological fallacy. He does not confuse the analysis of ideas with the analyst of ideas.

Unlike Marxist *Ideologiekritik* and its concern with the intrusions of ideology into scientific practice, Therborn focuses explicitly on the scientific status of three modes of inquiry by directing attention to the unique manner in which each establishes a new problematic. He poses the differences between political economy, sociology, and Marxism by articulating the distinct object domains of each. Thus, he raises the question of the relative merits of these theory clusters in the construction of an encompassing science of society.

Sciences are created with "the discovery of a particular system of determinant regularities and (with) the reproduction of that system in thought, in a theory." (Therborn 1976 415) The patterns of discovery

are complex, and not an initial gathering of information in a theoretical void, as are inductionist versions of science. Rather, Therborn's approach concurs with a late philosopher of science who called scientific observation a *theory-laden* activity (Hanson 1958 2). Theories define a proper object of investigation and provide a grid which instructs us in conceptualizing and interpreting the world.

POLITICAL ECONOMY

Therborn is convinced that both political economy, with its mechanism of the market, and sociology, whose object of inquiry he defines as the ideological community of common values and norms, merit the designation of sciences. However, Marxism, whose object of inquiry is not the capitalist mode of production, but the total social formation in which capitalism constitutes the dominant mode of production, is presumed to be a superior science because of its broad scope. The three sciences are distinct, but this does not mean that they are commensurate. In effect, Therborn sketches a Venn diagram which locates the circles as a political economy, and sociology, entirely within the larger circle designated *Marxism*.

Therborn notes that Durkheim's initial investigations led him to the German ethical economists, in particular, Schmoller and Wagner. His hostility to utilitarianism and his early conviction that society was a reality *sui generis* not only found support in the writing of these thinkers, but also exhibits obvious parallels to Marx's concerns. Therborn finds three congruencies: 1) the stress on the socio-historical determinants impinging on the individual; 2) a fundamentally materialist approach to the study of society; and 3) the objectively determined nature of the competing symbolic and referential schemes current in societies (Therborn 1976 251).

THE ROLE OF MARX

Durkheim parts company with the ethical economists and diverges from the ultimate intellectual development of Marx. His programmatic statements on the new discipline of sociology severs the linkages between economy and society. Durkheim does not

choose to investigate the laws of the economists, seeking instead to advance his conviction that a "pre-existent moral community" must establish a social order which precedes and makes possible the functioning of a market economy.

"...Marx and Engels turned to an analysis of different systems of division of labor, which they sought to theorize with the new concepts of relations and forces of production. Durkheim's sociological road was a very different one. It led not to the location and determination of the market within a series of systems of economic organization, but to an analysis of the impingement of the moral community on the laws of supply and demand, and in general to a study of how economic phenomena are determined by social norms." (Therborn 1976 253) He does not accuse Durkheim of succumbing to idealism, nor would he support the claim of Poggi that Durkheim expelled the non-normative elements from his sociology (Poggi 1972 242)

In contrast, Marx constructed a science predicated on the theoretical unity of economy and society. He rejected the base versus superstructure which Durkheim required. The central concepts of the science are historically determinant abstractions, either imported and transformed from political economy or originating from Marx himself. According to Therborn, Marx did not set forth capitalist mode of production as the object domain. Rather, it is the historical social formation within which the capitalist mode of production is the dominant economic form. Refusing to apply a division of intellectual labor like that of Durkheim, Marx offers a science which relates the levels and sectors of society to the complex totality. Therborn bases his claim for the superiority of Marxism on the claim that it allows for more empirical content.

CRITIQUE OF THERBORN

There are several potential faults in Therborn's conclusions, which might lead to a rather different assessment of the relative merits of academic sociology and Marxism. Therborn's depiction of the spatial scope of Marx's science is a corrective to economism,

but it fails to assess the temporal scope of Marx's science. The efforts of his labor in the British Museum was clearly directed at unearthing the dynamics of capitalist development, and any attempt to apply Marxian analysis to historically anterior economic modes is problematic (Heilbroner 1980 93). His treatment of the internal dynamics of various pre-capitalist economic formations, and the movement from one dominant economic form to another are extremely sketchy. Marx's depiction of capitalism was limited to the particular phase of capitalist development, and particularly the phase of a competitive market operation without large-scale state intervention.

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In contrast, Durkheim was concerned with the transition from pre-industrial societies, characterized by what he termed *mechanical solidarity*, to industrial societies where the bases of social order are predicated on *organic solidarity*. While his treatment of pre-industrial societies focuses on primitive societies at the expense of more complex pre-capitalist socio-economic formations, he does provide for the dynamics of transition by introducing the notions of increasing size and growing complexity, and the consequent demand for an ever-increasing division of labor. Capitalism is seen merely as one type of industrial society. Other types capable of incorporation in Durkheim's theory would include corporate or monopoly or late capitalism as well as the socialism of the Soviet Union. A Durkheim analysis could be implemented in situations in which the economic level has exhibited an increasing loss of autonomy in relation to the polity. But the concerns of the mature Marx about the mode and extent of the extraction of surplus value, combined with the investigation of the tendentially falling rate of profit are increasingly difficult to apply to today's situation. Such theorists as Bell (1973, 1976), Etzioni (1968), and Touraine (1971, 1973) derive more from Durkheim than from Marx. Touraine argues that in post-industrial society, economic exploitation has given way to alienation.

Operating with the definitional parameters of Therborn's concept of science, with his method of comparative evaluation of competing theories, we get rather different conclusions on the spatial and temporal scope of the theories of Durkheim and Marx. Central to the issue is the place occupied by human subjects. Therborn adheres to Althusser's call for a *theoretic anti-humanism* which excludes all discussions of human nature and the consciousness of human subjects from a science of society. According

to Therborn, Marxism establishes a science to the extent that it breaks with the Feuerbach approach of the young Marx, who sought to ground history in politics on the unfolding of the human essence. The Althusser faction argues that the task of a science of society is to discover determinant regularities in the working of the social system, and not in the psychic constitution of individual actors.

CONCLUSION

In this version of science, the Althusser faction resembles the Durkheim position. Social facts are things which are external to individual consciousness and they exert binding constraints on human action. Althusser's favorable comments on Comte may indicate his awareness of this. Although the reasons for following this track might differ, the result is the same—an objectivist science based on the model of the natural sciences. But this approach ignores the fact that the social universe is not a given object, but is produced and reproduced through human social activity. Further, it provides no inroads into an adequate analysis of human intersubjectivity. It treats social structures solely as constraints, and not as enabling structures (Giddens 1976 161). We need to assess theories not only on the basis of their spatial and temporal scope, but also on their depth.

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