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## Sociology and its Discontents

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Sociology has, over the past years, been the object of a marked discomfort. After the continuous growth during the *trente glorieuses*, the discipline lost some of its appeal during the last decades of the twentieth century. Although significant differences exist between countries, sociologists were less in demand, they have been less prominent in the public debate, and in several countries student numbers and PhD candidates have dropped significantly. Such an apparent decline is, just like its counterpart, first of all a conjunctural fact. Disciplines pass through cycles of expansion and contraction, and even the most prestigious sciences have known periods of diminishing expectations and more or less profound crises. One of the greatest mathematicians of the eighteenth century, Lagrange, thought that, at the end of that century, there was no future for mathematics any longer. Classical mechanics had successfully been transformed into a rigorous mathematical system, and the opportunities for challenging work seemed exhausted. Mathematics was doomed, Lagrange argued, to the same fate as Arabic: a professorial chair here and there, perhaps respected as a learned specialty, but without great significance.

Comments on the current state of sociology in Europe tend to express a somewhat similar mood. Sociologists would not merely face a temporary setback, but a nothing less than a structural crisis. During the 1990s, the German weekly *Die Zeit* published a series of articles under the heading: 'Is there any use for sociology today?' The journalist and social scientist Warnfried Dettling argued that the relative absence of sociologists in the public debate was best explained by the fact that sociological analysis had lost its validity. The contemporary world is far more mobile and flexible than fixed sociological categories like family, class, or nation suggest, and the overwhelming tendencies towards individualization make sociology seem out of pace with what is actually happening.<sup>1</sup> The diagnosis may vary, but the issue at stake in this and similar debates is clear

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<sup>1</sup> Warnfried Dettling et al., *Wozu heute noch Soziologie?*, Leske & Budrich, Opladen 1996.

enough: is sociology a viable social science for the twenty-first century, or is it, on the contrary, losing its intellectual and scientific meaning?

The most far-reaching proposition in the discussion is that contemporary societies are undergoing such a profound transformation, that sociology is either bound to disappear, or to go through an equally fundamental change itself. The argument has two aspects. On the one hand, there is the question of a macro-historical social transformation, according to which contemporary social structures would fundamentally differ from previous ones. This concerns issues such as 'post-modernity', globalization, and the increasing mobility and flexibility. On the other hand, there is the micro-sociological dimension which concerns the changing identities and identifications of people, and especially their increasing independence from traditional social structures. New forms of individualization, or so the argument goes, would imply a growing irrelevance of such social structures for the feelings, thoughts and actual behaviour of people.

The best known version of the larger question is, of course, 'postmodernism'. The French philosopher Lyotard used the term to designate a new historical condition, which he famously described as the end of 'grand narratives'. None of the meta-narratives of modernity had fulfilled their promise, and it was time to replace their dogmatic claims by an attitude of playful irony, scepticism and pluralism. Lyotard did not present an analysis of the social sciences, nor did he refer to any actual social or economic transformations; his implicit reference was Marxism. When he spoke of abandoning grand narratives, his primary target were the schemes of basis and superstructure, class struggle and socialism. And when he spoke about knowledge and science – his booklet was subtitled a 'report on knowledge' – his disillusion did not pertain to particle physics or political science, but to the scientific pretensions of Marxism.<sup>2</sup> Since that was the primary context of his assertions, it is not very surprising that his message has not had very much impact in the social sciences. Lyotard's proposal to abandon grand narratives for the study of language games, did not represent a very sophisticated programme for the social sciences, and the gospel of 'postmodernism' primarily entered university departments of philosophy, literature, and cultural studies.

Although Lyotard did not present a critical assessment of the social sciences, other authors have, and in a spirit somewhat akin to that of postmodernism, Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Alain Touraine have all argued that recent social changes should imply a fundamental reorientation of sociology. Since contemporary societies are experiencing a change in their foundations, sociologists, according to Beck, can no longer continue to operate with the 'zombie categories' of traditional sociology, 'the categories which blind sociologists to

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<sup>2</sup> Nico Wilterdink, 'The Sociogenesis of Postmodernism', *Archives européennes de sociologie/European Journal of Sociology*, XLIII, 2, 190–216.

the realities of globalizing and individualizing modernities.<sup>3</sup> Globalization and individualization are the two major trends that Beck and others have opposed to the conceptual apparatus of traditional sociology. There is little doubt that the rapidly growing transnational connections represent a social change of the greatest importance. Globalization, furthermore, has not merely been added to the research agenda, it has also changed our views on the functioning of local communities and national societies during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In that sense, processes of globalization imply a rethinking of the sociological tradition. But Beck raised a more specific issue: should globalization provoke a fundamental break with the sociological tradition? Does globalization oblige us to abandon basic sociological notions like social constraint and power relations? It is not at all evident that the increasing significance of social structures at a transnational level should imply the demise of sociology, merely because the discipline has traditionally been preoccupied primarily with national societies. The only good reason why 'globalization' would imply a decline of sociology is that, somehow, in the era of globalization, social structures are becoming less and less significant; that social groups and social classes are losing their importance, that the social bonds between people more or less dissolve, leaving merely independent and freely moving and choosing individuals. That – to a certain degree at least – is Beck's suggestion: if globalization has contributed to a decline of sociological thought, it is because globalization is accompanied by strong currents of individualization, linked to a sort of the generalized mobility of people, goods and services. Indeed there is no reason why the increasing importance of transnational structures should imply a devaluation of the analytical core of the sociological tradition, unless these structures would no longer have much relevance for the highly individualized lives of people. But is that actually what is happening?

Contrary to a strangely superficial idea of sociology, the notion of individualization has, of course, been an integral part of the sociological tradition. The nineteenth century classics of the discipline, Tocqueville, Spencer, Tönnies, all wrote about individualization as one of the main trends of industrial societies. Durkheim's study of the division of labour demonstrated that in differentiated societies, social relations no longer rest on similarities but on specialization; organic solidarity prevails over mechanical solidarity, and individualism becomes the predominant common belief. For Durkheim individualism was neither a form of utilitarianism nor a methodological principle; it was a moral creed, a secular religion of which the human being is both god and believer. Individualism was the only type of collective representation suitable for highly differentiated societies. From a sociological point of view, then, individualization should not be defined as a general weakening of social ties, but as a change in the

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<sup>3</sup> Ulrich Beck, « The Cosmopolitan Society and its Enemies », in Luigi Tomasi (ed.), *New Horizons in Sociological Theory and Research*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2001, pp. 181–201.

structure of these bonds. In its most general sense, individualization refers to a 'long-term shift from local, direct, and multi-functional relations within small communities and groups, to more indirect, more specific and more differentiated relations over longer distances'.<sup>4</sup> Classical sociologists have conceived this process in slightly different ways, but the basic idea is that of a differentiation of social ties, and – in Norbert Elias' phrase – as a lengthening of the chains of interdependence.

Contrary to Ulrich Beck's assertion that sociology has implied an 'institutionalized rejection of individualism', processes of individualization have been central to sociology. But in referring to individualism Beck's conception is a very peculiar one, one that is understood independently of the social structures within which it has emerged. Beck's plea is against an analytical focus on structures and institutions, favouring a 'subject-oriented sociology'. Only such an orientation would be capable of bridging the gap between the individualizing realities of the contemporary world and the 'zombie categories' of traditional sociology. But how are we to understand current forms of individuality and individualism, while ignoring the structural and institutional conditions under which these actually exist? Can we understand such shifting sensibilities independent from, for example, the flexibilization of labour markets and the re-structuration of welfare regimes? Once we disconnect human beings from the structures they form with one another, many issues are no longer intelligible, including some of the most intimate and singular aspects of people's lives. Several recent studies have shown that while modern ideals of autonomy foster positive feelings in the case of social success, they induce negative feelings in the case of failure. Robert Castel has in that sense spoken of a 'negative individualism'; Richard Sennett, using a similar characteristic, spoke of a 'dispensable self'. It is not very fruitful, therefore, to revive the unproductive and misleading dichotomy between subject and structure, actor and system, and to redefine sociology merely as a subject-oriented discipline.

But besides such theoretical considerations, the issues at stake are also empirical. What is the empirical evidence for the assertion that the usual sociological categories explain less and less of what we observe in the social world today? Have life chances and life styles become so individualized and so fluid, that sociological variables have lost their significance? Although this is often stated, there is not much empirical evidence to sustain such a view. In a recent analysis of 30 years of national survey data in the Netherlands, the Dutch researcher Paul de Beer tried to figure out how the explanatory value of some of these variables had evolved over time. He did not find a single confirmation for the thesis of an individualization in the sense of Beck. Basic variables like age, gender, and educational level even became slightly more important during the 1990s, as

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<sup>4</sup> Nico Wilterdink, 'On Individualization', *Sociale Wetenschappen*, 38 (4) 1995, pp. 4–17.

compared to the two preceding decades.<sup>5</sup> While some of the changes contemporary societies are going through may be summarized by terms such as ‘globalization’, ‘flexibilization’ or new forms of individualization, there is nothing inherent in these changes, which would make them inaccessible to sociological analysis.

And thus the question remains: if it is not a major societal transformation, why is it that sociology seems to have lost some of its credibility? A better starting point for finding an answer is to look at the changes that universities are going through, and the shifts that are occurring in the production of knowledge. Academic disciplines compete with each other for students, research funds and prestige, and within the academic field the position of sociology has indeed been weakened by several developments.

The first major change is the proliferation of new departments that are no longer based on the structure of disciplines, but on a rather diffuse demand for vocational learning and professional expertise. The classical social sciences, not just sociology, but economics, political science and anthropology as well, have all faced increasing competition from new fields that are often simply called ‘studies’: business studies, policy studies, women’s studies, cultural studies, etc. Following the successful example of ‘area studies’, which emerged in American universities in the 1950s, the logic of academic disciplines is in these cases rejected in favour of a transdisciplinary domain of expertise. It is not the point of view of a specific discipline, – history, philosophy, sociology – which defines the identity of a department,<sup>6</sup> but a rather eclectic and pragmatic mix of professional and academic perspectives. This *transdisciplinarity*, as it is sometimes called, is generally encouraged by university managers, because these flexible ‘studies’ tend to attract larger numbers of students than the classical disciplines.

Although a student in law, political science or anthropology may roughly know what to expect from her or his studies, it is far more difficult to know what to expect from a department like ‘management, work and organisation’ or from a master program on ‘communication’ or ‘labor studies’. Nevertheless, many students, especially those who do not come from academic families, prefer such vocational or quasi-vocational studies. The most recent phase of university expansion has thus shown a general shift from *classical disciplines* to *transdisciplinary studies*. Depending on the local and the national context, sociology has lost students and staff to departments of ‘policy studies’, ‘communication studies’, ‘management and organization studies’ and the like.

<sup>5</sup> Paul De Beer, ‘Individualisering zit tussen de oren’, in Jan-Willem Duyvendak & Menno Hurenkamp (eds), *Kiezen voor de kudde*, Van Gennep, Amsterdam 2004, pp. 18–38; J. W. Duyvendak, ‘De individualisering van de samenleving en de toekomst van de sociologie’, *Sociologische Gids*, 51 (4), pp. 495–506.

<sup>6</sup> Johan Heilbron, « A Regime of Disciplines. Toward a Historical Sociology of Disciplinary Knowledge », in C. Camic & H. Joas (eds), *The Dialogical Turn. New Roles for Sociology in the Postdisciplinary Age*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham 2004, pp. 23–42.

The second development, which has challenged the position of sociology was the rapid expansion of economics and the increasing use of economic modes of analysis and policy making since the 1980s. Neo-classical economists like Gary Becker have invaded an ever growing number of areas, and a quarter of a century after Becker published his manifesto *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* (1976), it is hard to find a single social issue which has not become an established economic specialty. Cultural economics, the economics of sport, and the economics of research are only a few of the more recent examples. The economic analysis of human behaviour and other versions of rational choice theory have no doubt represented the most powerful academic challenge to sociology as a general social science.

Although neo-classical economics has a long tradition, its pioneers, Jevons, Walras, Pareto were quite conscious of its limitations. Pareto distinguished between logical and illogical actions, he did not deny the existence of other than rational actions, and acknowledged that modelling rational action implied that such models had to be cautiously applied, by successive approximations, in order to obtain increasing degrees of realism. In the time-span from Pareto to Gary Becker many of these precautions have gotten lost. The self-consciousness of rational choice theorists at the end of the twentieth century was well illustrated by the freshly converted sociologist, James Coleman, who stated that his point of departure was an 'unsocialised, entirely egoistic and rationally calculating individual who was unbound by any norms of a system.'<sup>7</sup>

The strength of the rational choice current was not merely based on its academic credentials. Its diffusion through academic institutions coincided with the rise of neo-liberalism in policy circles, thus fundamentally altering the relationship between the social sciences. Economics became the dominant social science, in academia as well as in policy institutions, and in the present constellation; sociology tends to be relegated to that of an auxiliary discipline, a specialty for analysing pressing social problems that somehow cannot be left to economists. Mobilized in times of crisis, sociologists are called upon when the established order seems in danger and when the legitimate experts are no longer in command. That situation is somewhat similar to that of the 19th century, when ruling elites needed complementary knowledge on the social question, and commissioned research on the working classes and the urban poor as a complement to main stream political models.

But the imperialism of neo-classical economics and rational choice theorizing has not been a one-way trend. Just as economists have energetically appropriated non-economic domains, sociologists have started to investigate the workings of the economy again, tackling core issues in economic theory, and the 'new economic sociology' is among the most lively areas in sociology today. There is a considerable literature on the importance of networks for the func-

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<sup>7</sup> James Coleman, *Individual Interests and Collective Action*, Cambridge University Press 1986.

tioning of the economy, a lively interdisciplinary field around the functioning of economic institutions, and a growing body of economic ethnography, which carefully dissects economic transactions in high-tech dealing rooms, urban neighbourhoods and other micro-settings. Economic sociology is a good example of one of the critical tasks for sociology today. Having emerged as a movement of defence, as a response to the imperialism of economics, economic sociology has become an essential contribution to the understanding of markets and economic institutions in contemporary societies. After so many privatization failures due to the most simplistic applications of textbook economics, there is a widely felt need for a more realistic understanding of contemporary capitalism, and for that task, sociologists cannot be missed; they can build on a rich tradition, from Weber, Simmel, Durkheim to contemporary authors like Pierre Bourdieu and Neil Fligstein. And since economic arguments and economic expertise have become relevant for all social sectors, economic sociology is much more than just another sociological specialty. In the era of neo-liberalism, the sociology of the economy is a strategic domain, not just another specialised research area, but an inevitable and general resource for sociologists.

Besides the proliferation of transdisciplinary studies and the unprecedented hegemony of economics, there has been a third, more diffuse and more complex challenge for sociology around the turn of the twenty-first century. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the social sciences have developed on the basis of a number of shared assumptions. As Immanuel Wallerstein has argued, several of these assumptions have been questioned and are forcing social scientists to re-think some of the most fundamental divisions and demarcations of their craft.<sup>8</sup> Modern social science disciplines as they emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were constructed on the basis of a three-fold dichotomy.

The social sciences were, first, founded on the dichotomy between the study of the modern civilised world, and the study of exotic cultures of primitive societies. The latter were studied by anthropology and oriental studies; they represented the study of others, disconnected from the study of our own world. At least since the post-war decolonialization, this distinction and the division of labour on which it was based can no longer be upheld. Sociology and anthropology have moved closer together, raising a number of questions about the identity of each discipline.

Within the disciplines that studied the modern world, a second distinction was established between the study of contemporary structures and the study of history. Focussed on the present, on industrializing, western democracies, the social science disciplines developed a presentist mode of analysis, without a very deep sense of history and historical change, and commonly relying on a static, or at least a short-term perspective. This was especially true of economics and

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<sup>8</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein (ed.), *Open the Social Sciences. Report of the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuration of the Social Sciences*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1996.

political science, but increasingly also for large parts of sociology. Since the demise of functionalism in sociology and the rise of various forms of historical sociology, it is no longer possible to maintain such a separation of historical disciplines and disciplines which are focussed on the present.

Within the social sciences of the contemporary world, finally, a clear-cut division was institutionalized between the study of the state, the market and civil society, between political science, economics and sociology. And there again, immense problems have arisen. How can markets be understood without studying the juridical rules and cultural conventions of market transactions, without incorporating the role of the state, among others in ensuring property rights? The privatization disaster in post-communist Russia is there to remind us of the importance of the embeddedness of market transactions, and today, institutions like the World Bank and the IMF grapple with the problem that the narrow economic definition of the economy is an obstacle to effective economic policies.

Reviewing the main lines of division between the social sciences, the disciplinary division of labour has thus been questioned in fundamental ways. When trying to evaluate the present situation, there is no simple and general solution. The disciplinary order as it was institutionalized in the course of the twentieth century can no longer be taken for granted, new forms of collaboration and exchange are needed, but we cannot voluntarily deny or simply ignore the past. Instead of arguing like Michael Gibbons and his associates that academic disciplines are a thing of the past, and that we are best advised to embrace the new extra-academic mode of production of knowledge, which is finely tuned to market demands, we need a more realistic and more critical approach. One characteristic of such a *Realpolitik of reason*, as Pierre Bourdieu called it, is to critically reanalyse and reassess the problematic heritage, the national traditions, the specific arrangements of particular research specialities and disciplinary demarcations. Those who, like Gibbons, simply ignore their past, are likely to repeat and reproduce the very schemes and routines they wish to transcend. A reflexive social science, a social science which uses its own tools to gain a better insight into its own limitations and potential, is undoubtedly one of the most precious resources for a better informed debate and a more lucid collective self-knowledge.

Another characteristic of such a *Realpolitik of reason* would be to make a better use of the variety that exists in the academic system. In his analysis of the current situation, Immanuel Wallerstein has insisted on the fact that because of this variety, there is certain confusion. The traditional disciplinary order, based on the above mentioned antinomies, no longer commands the wide support it once had. The same can be said of the epistemological divisions, most notably the one between ideographic and nomothetic disciplines, between humanistic, interpretative approaches to the social world and the approaches driven by the quest for invariable laws. Based as it was on Newtonian mechanics, the nomo-



thetic conception of science has been superseded in various parts of the natural sciences as well, in evolutionary and dynamic theories as well as in interdisciplinary fields like the study of complex systems. Certain parts of the natural sciences have thus come closer to issues with which we are very familiar in the social sciences, issues like irreversibility, unpredictability, and uncertainty. In cultural studies there has been a similar movement, a breakdown of the barriers between the humanities and the social sciences, between interpretative and more explanatory approaches.

Viewed in this light, the current state of the social sciences might be compared to the period between 1750 and 1850, when various arrangements coexisted: older intellectual frameworks like 'moral philosophy' or 'natural law', emerging modern disciplines like 'political economy' and older state sciences like political arithmetic and statistics.<sup>9</sup> In a way, we witness a similar heterogeneity and uncertainty today.

Despite the challenges that sociology has faced and the difficulties it is encountering, the discipline is perhaps in a relatively favourable position. Sociology, after all, has never been a discipline quite like the others. Auguste Comte proposed the term, in order to overcome the excessive specialisation he observed in his days. There was a need for sociology, he argued, especially against intellectual fragmentation. Just as the then new science of biology had integrated very heterogeneous fields of study – botany, zoology, medicine – into a general science of life, sociology was to be conceived as a fundamental science of human societies. Although sociology became a very diverse enterprise, which has continuously lost parts of its object-matter to new specialties, that very dynamic has probably saved the discipline from the rigidities and the routines that are prevalent in other fields. In sociology, more than in any other social science discipline, the promise a more integrated social science has been kept alive. Sociology was, and still is, a discipline for which disciplinary divisions and intellectual fragmentation have remained a primary concern. Comte and Spencer, Weber and Durkheim, Parsons and Luhmann, Elias and Bourdieu, have all grappled with that problem. Sociology has never been a unified discipline; it has never been a well organised profession either. Within the established division of academic labour, it has always occupied an uneasy and indeed a critical position. Rather than being the queen of the sciences, as Comte imagined, it has been the bad conscience of the social science specialties, the discipline which by its very existence posed a problem for the other disciplines, and for the divisions and demarcations on which these were founded. Its professional weaknesses, its contested nature and the lack of a well organised job market, have paradoxically contributed to its intellectual vitality. What sociology lacked in social recogni-

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<sup>9</sup> Johan Heilbron, Lars Magnusson & Björn Wittrock (eds.), *The Rise of the Social Sciences and the Formation of Modernity. Conceptual Change in Context, 1750–1850*, Kluwer Academic Publications, Dordrecht 1998.

tion and stable career opportunities, it gained in intellectual autonomy, in independence from vested interests, both within and outside the academy. Pierre Bourdieu once remarked that sociology is a miraculous science, because it is a science for which there is no social demand in the same way as for other disciplines. With an allusion to Pascal, who was dear to Bourdieu,<sup>10</sup> one might therefore conclude by suggesting that it is perhaps in sociology's misery that its greatness is to be found.

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<sup>10</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Méditations pascaliennes*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1997.