

Don't fence me in: For a pluralistic sociology¹

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Let me begin with my main conclusions: First, sociology is more science than art, although not only science, and sometimes neither. Recent decades have seen a polarization in this respect, a drift toward both science and art, with the science drift as the stronger one. Second, pluralism is perhaps sociology's most distinctive feature as an academic field, which is mostly for the good. Third, a deviant case is ideological or political pluralism which sociology has too little of, and research quality suffers as a consequence. Hopefully, ideological diversity will soon extend sociology's pluralism.

Science, art and sociology

Defining science and art in a generally accepted way is obviously difficult. Nor is it straightforward to define sociology. Elster (2007: 445) states four criteria of what is to be counted as science: (a) consensus on a body of established results, (b) cumulative progress in the production of new results, (c) clarity in exposition fostering professional communication, and (d) gradual and irrevocable relegation of classical works to historians. It would seem that the first two of these criteria – intersubjectivity and progress – are the more essential parts of the definition, while the third is a condition for and the fourth an implication of the primary two. What is art? A reasonable definition could be that art is human expressions of any form with the purpose of creating sensual, aesthetic, emotional or intellectual impressions in receiving humans (including the artist). Art may be at least partially scientific in the above sense, but it usually is not, nor is it important for it to be. While some works of art are universally acknowledged as masterpieces, the exact meaning of them is not

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generally agreed upon, but rather 'in the eye of the beholder'. Further, to the extent that art makes progress it does so in a technical (instrumental) but not essential (sensual, aesthetic, emotional or intellectual) sense. With regard to Elster's last two criteria: clarity of expression, in the sense of unequivocal messages, is a virtue in science but a vice in artwork, signifying a lack of depth and nuance; and the classics are – with some variation over space and time – a celebrated part of the core ('the cultural heritage') rather than intentionally forgotten by being pushed to the periphery.

Sociology has both science and art in its ancestry (see, e.g., Lepenies 1988). From the definitions above, it is clear that current sociology contains both scientific and artistic elements. Of all the social science disciplines, sociology is probably the most diverse and pluralistic. Economics, political science and psychology have a more clearly established core and are all closer to science and more distant from art than is sociology. Anthropology is also less diverse than sociology, but closer to art and further from science than sociology is. Given its subject matter and its history, sociology's internal diversity is not surprising; no aspect of human society falls clearly outside the discipline's domain. Nor is there any specifically sociological perspective that can be applied to this large variety of topics. While calls for de-fragmentation are recurrently made, there is no consensus in sight on what consensus to promote, which illustrates the pluralistic point.

The wide range of topics and perspectives can be seen as sociology's main asset – that there are so many interesting things to work on and so many ways to do it. Specialization can obviously spur progress, but need not be encouraged at the disciplinary level; subfield (or sub-subfield) specialization is sufficient. Many topics cut across regular disciplinary boundaries. Interdisciplinary work promotes analytical progress, for several reasons. First, mechanisms aside from those usually considered might be crucial to take into account in order to understand the topic under study. Second, cross-disciplinary grounding boosts the validity of research findings by providing independent support from several sources. Third, while within-discipline work is an important basis

for normal science (in Kuhn's sense), research across disciplinary boundaries fosters innovative leaps by exposure to foreign ways of thinking.

For sociological analysis – for sociology as science – comparison is essential. Without it there can be no explanation: causes can only be distinguished by comparing outcomes between cases where the causal factor of interest is present and absent, in line with experimental logic. Abbott (2007) has recently outlined a program for what he calls lyrical sociology, defined as non-comparative, non-narrative work: portraying the strictly local, without explicit reference to any other time or place. This is as close to art as sociology can get. Lyrical sociology can be thought of as the genre of well-crafted case studies, providing vivid description. However, sociology as art is much harder to practice successfully than is sociology as science: there are less clear rules on how to proceed, less clear criteria of peer evaluation, a larger role to be played by talent than by acquired skills, and – as a consequence – less successful intergenerational transmission. Sociology as art is a vital piece of our heritage and should be reproduced and renewed as part of the discipline's contemporary practice; we would lose part of our soul if we abandoned it. But it is exceptional rather than typical, with formidable requirements of the individuals pursuing it. The risk of failure, or at least mediocrity, is hence substantial, and mediocre sociology as art is of less use than mediocre sociology as science.

Some want to go much further in pluralism by embracing not only sociology as art but also art as sociology, which is surely going too far. For example, in discussing 'the literary turn' in social science, Brinkmann (2009) suggests that fictional and scientific knowledge are epistemologically identical: "literary/fiction and scientific/factual writings differ only concerning the authors' claims for the text" (p. 1388). He asks rhetorically if "/some/ literary writings /are/ not every inch as *true* as those of Baumann, Sennett, and Baudrillard" (p. 1391). If so, Baumann *et consortes* are novelists as much as sociologists, which may explain their popularity. A more reasonable view (see Edling and Rydgren 2011: 4) is that fiction can legitimately and usefully enter sociology, but only in the context of

discovery (as a source of ideas), never in the context of justification (assessing the correspondence between ideas and reality).

Sociology as science is the core of the discipline. All common arguments against the feasibility of a scientific sociology break down upon closer examination (see Collins 1989). Does sociology lack established findings? Do new findings fail to accumulate? Is the social world fundamentally unpredictable? Are sociological laws always reflexively overturned? Is social reality a pure social construction? The answer to all these questions is clearly no, which is hardly controversial – no serious sociologist truly believes that meaningful sociological knowledge cannot be produced. Still, pessimism about the prospects of advances in sociology is nonetheless widespread in the discipline – there is almost always a ‘crisis’ – and it is interesting to think about why. One important reason for impressions of disarray may be sociology’s tendency to impatiently ask new questions rather than carefully evaluate answers to old ones; for example, Parsons’ theoretical model was abandoned in the late 1960s not primarily because its answers had been proven wrong, but because its questions were increasingly seen as irrelevant in the transformed social and political environment (see Ahrne 2007: 74ff). Therefore, most cumulation of sociological knowledge is socially unrecognized (Collins 1999): for those who look for it, it is there to be found, but few look for it since old findings appear outdated in the light of exciting new lines of inquiry. While moving with the times is part of sociology’s identity and attraction, more persistence would likely benefit long-run advancement.

Overcoming bias

Recent years have seen not only a ‘literary turn’ in social science, but also what Elster (2007: 455) calls an ‘analytical turn’: an urge for “clarity and explicitness”. An important part of this movement has been increasingly stringent requirements of empirical evidence, not only in research, but also in policy and practice. Evidence-based medicine (Antman et al. 1992) was a pioneer in this respect (see Dixon-Woods et al. 2006: 29). In economics since the 1990s, there has been an obsession with ‘identification’ strategies (Manski 1995, Angrist and Pischke 2009), in order to move as close as

possible to the ideal of randomized experiments. In political science, King et al. (1994) forcefully and influentially claimed that qualitative empirical studies should be guided by the same logic as quantitative research. In psychology, meta-analyses indicate that the considerable variation in empirical results across different studies of similar phenomena are due more to measurement error than systematic contextual effects, suggesting a much more cumulative pattern of findings than previously recognized (Schmidt 2010). And in sociology, qualitative and quantitative research designs have tended to converge, partly under the label 'mixed methods' (Small 2009, 2011).

Where have we been going in the last few years? Objections have been raised against the general primacy of large-scale quantitative data as the basis for evidence in empirical social science. Small (2009) argues that qualitative researchers should not uncritically base their data collection strategies on inference principles from quantitative research. Since small-N studies can never satisfy these principles anyway, it is better to use other criteria, specifically developed for qualitative inquiry. His main example is sampling guided by saturation (see, e.g., Yin 2002), where new cases are added sequentially until no additional information is gained. This approach is clearly problematic. The main contribution of qualitative research is to provide more depth than is typically available in large-N studies. In this context, quick (small-N) saturation is not to be expected: if nothing new is learned after considering only a small number of cases, the acquired information is evidently not deep but shallow. A more promising way to solve inference problems in qualitative research is systematic reviews (the equivalent to meta-analysis in quantitative research). While this methodology is not yet well-developed (Dixon-Woods et al. 2006), combining information from many small-N studies into a larger set of data seems to be a sound approach. Hodson (2001) is an interesting example of combining ethnographic data from many studies in order to reach general conclusions via quantitative analysis. But it is certainly true that the logic of large-scale data analysis is not the only legitimate type of scientific empirical inquiry. Brady and Collier (2004) distinguish between data set observations (DSO) and causal process observations (CPO), where the latter is based on qualitative rather than quantitative reasoning. Systematic comparative analysis of a small number of critical

cases is often vital for the development of valid explanations; see Freedman (2008) for a discussion based on health science and Mahoney (2010) for a review of similar issues in political science.

A second kind of recent reaction to the analytical turn of the 1990s is Burawoy's (2005) call for a 'public sociology'. Burawoy distinguishes between four kinds of sociology, presupposing and supporting each other in a system of knowledge production: 'professional' sociology (mainstream research and teaching), 'critical' sociology (academic critique of mainstream approaches), 'policy' sociology (mainstream research applied to society), and 'public' sociology (critique of mainstream society). Burawoy argues that public sociology has been marginalized in recent times and needs revitalization. Not only should individual sociologists become more involved and visible in the public sphere, but the sociological collective – for instance in the form of the American Sociological Association (ASA) – should take joint political action. For example, as ASA president Burawoy successfully promoted an official collective denouncement of the Iraq war, overcoming opposition from around one third of ASA members.

As reflexive evaluation of society, public sociology can be seen as a potentially useful counterpart of the converse: society's evaluation of sociology. This is in line with the discipline's heritage of social critique. But there are obvious dangers involved, as many commentators have already noted (see, e.g., Goldberg and van den Berg 2009). First, it is hard to see anything good coming out of collective political statements by professional science associations but easy to see negative outcomes, not least a fall in social standing (if not outright ridicule) of the discipline caused by the open display of bias. Second, even for individual sociologists, how can research findings on factual matters motivate normative political views? The only reasonable ground would seem to be careful specification of how instrumental knowledge from research is associated with reflexive ideological considerations. An example from current public debate is Wilkinson and Pickett's (2009) *The spirit level: why more equal societies almost always do better*. The results of this research, if reliable (a big if in this case), might

be used as a legitimate argument for equality as a political goal. But note that the basis of the argument is instrumental rather than (as Burawoy would have it) reflexive.

What about the link in the opposite direction, from ideology to research? Political convictions are often important motives of research, but it is crucial to strictly separate ideology and research beyond the choice of topic. At the other end of the time line, unbiased research findings are much more politically useful than ideologically contaminated results, both because they are more empirically valid and because they will be taken more seriously by a larger audience. Paradoxically, therefore, science will be more politically relevant and useful the less politics and ideology play a role in the process of research.

Sociology's strongest distinguishing feature, and perhaps its largest asset, is its diversity: the wide range of substantive topics, theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches, which makes sociology an exciting place to be. In contrast, there is regrettably little diversity with regard to ideology; the range of accepted political views is too narrow. The main problem is not that an overwhelming majority of sociologists have left-wing views (see, e.g., Klein and Stern 2005), although that is of course not wholly unproblematic for a discipline concerned with understanding the larger society, but that these views influence sociological research by producing bias. For example, although productivity mechanisms are central in accounting for inequality, they tend to be ignored or dismissed in most sociological research on stratification, leaving sociology with unnecessarily weak explanations in one of their core fields. This dismissal is largely ideological, as shown by the widespread and unhesitant use of productivity criteria as soon as sociologists attend to their own practical matters (such as student selection and personnel recruitment, promotion and wage-setting). Lipset (1994) discusses the relation between politics and research in an account of American sociology in the two decades following World War II. Most of the prominent sociologists in that era, such as Merton, Parsons and Lipset himself, even such a coming alleged symbol of right-wing ideology as Davis (cf. Davis and Moore 1945), had their political sympathies to the left and were in

many cases members of socialist organizations. In the interest of scientific quality, however, such political preferences were seen as unacceptable influences on their research. The aim of sociology should be to discover how society works, not to confirm one's own preconceptions. Although in practice naïve to some extent, this is a laudable ideal that seems to have been followed with some success in the era chronicled by Lipset. The model of value-neutral research is still alive, but maybe held in less esteem than before the radical turn of the late 1960s. Hopefully, sociology will soon be able to embrace diversity in this dimension too, and so become more genuinely pluralistic.

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