

Before Social Epistemology: On the Limited Efficacy of ‘The Scandal’

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I come to Social Epistemology (SE) from the disciplines commonly known as Political Science and International Relations (IR), having originally been trained in the natural sciences. Given the division of labour within the modern Academy, and the way knowledge and science are traditionally addressed (if at all) within social science and humanities curricula and research, the road to SE was unsurprisingly long, if unnecessarily painful. Having now firmly ‘landed’, SE certainly feels like an intellectual home — not merely the place where I can find answers to my questions and develop my research interests, but where such questions and interests are actually *conceivable* and *legitimate*.

But my *academic* home is different. In the daily routine of researching and teaching about world politics and social/international theory, the disjunction between the consensus among social epistemologists — the very consensus that makes this Collective capable of formulating and pursuing a ‘collective vision’ — and the parameters of the conversations going on in my field about theory and its relation to empirical work, is sometimes difficult to manage. Outside of the SE community, the premises of SE are not only contested, but also often inconceivable; its constitutive theoretical traditions and the empirical literature it draws on and produces are either completely invisible or, worse, misunderstood. This makes successful communication and exchange dependent on a constant process of (self-)clarification that needs to take into account not merely one’s interlocutors’ frame of understanding, but also the cognitive, institutional, and social ‘stakes’ associated with everyone’s (including one’s own) intellectual convictions.

I am aware that a certain personal ‘style’, ‘technique’ or ‘strategy’ of argumentation and persuasion is required to efficiently get past some psychological, intellectual, or dispositional resistances to the mindset and project of SE. But at a deeper level, there clearly are structural factors that seem to constantly defeat the possibility and progress of sociological and empirically-based normative thinking about thought, knowledge, and science. And given the essentially reflexive nature of SE, it seems to me that the task of assessing its own conditions of (im)possibility within the Academy and intellectual life more generally should be an ongoing one, rather than just a necessary critical first step for establishing its foundations against the classical, dominant view — which has indeed already been successfully done! At least I feel this is something that needs to be pursued within the different disciplines, especially because I believe that SE should ideally serve as a foundation for my own field, rather than merely an independent endeavour growing alongside it. So my first contribution to the Collective’s posts is somehow a move ‘backwards’ and ‘below’ the SE consensus. And since this move entails going back to the ‘basics’ — which are not necessarily viewed as basic at all outside of SE — I will focus here more on the sociology of knowledge/science component of SE than its normative dimension.

On the Relationship of Philosophy and Sociology

I should start by saying that it is still not clear to me how the relationship and differences between philosophy and sociology need to be negotiated when it comes to the analysis and evaluation of social life, especially given the different and evolving understandings of these disciplines' respective distinctiveness and mission (e.g., how their boundaries, methodologies, and mutual influence are differently defined and enacted within the Anglo-American and Continental traditions). What is clearer to me at this point is that while there is evidence of fruitful engagement between 'philosophers' and 'sociologists', the limits of such an engagement always end up coinciding with the borders of 'Anglo-American' and analytical philosophy, which still constitutes a referential framework for epistemological discussions and debates in the social sciences, and permeates all 'political theory' as it is construed outside of Continental traditions. That the idealist, *a priori*, and logical-deductive mode of thinking that characterizes this type of philosophy makes it impermeable to the very notion, and overall project, of a sociology of knowledge (and more broadly, to a sociology of thought, ideas, and cognition) is something that was noted early on by sociologists, whether they were interested in 'ideology' and 'knowledge', or simply trying to establish the foundations of 'positive thought'. But its resilience (and stubbornness) remains puzzling to me, given the development of sociological studies of knowledge over at least the last century.

As an 'interested participant' in the social sciences, I see the dominant idealist view as a serious obstacle to the development of the sociology of knowledge — and by extension, social epistemology — as a foundation for an alternative (reflexive and empowering) way of thinking about and practicing the social sciences, *and* becoming a socially useful scholar. And I confess that idealism makes me lose most of my interpretivist and constructionist sensibilities, and triggers my deep-rooted (French-) positivist reflexes. So whenever a colleague raises an eyebrow or laughs at my mentioning such strange things as 'historical epistemology', 'the sociology of logic', or the social conditions of possibility of a given philosophical '-ism', I can only see this as another manifestation of the fact that neither knowledge, nor thought, have yet been seriously and systematically addressed as 'social phenomena' endowed with real ontological status that *could* — let alone *should*, as per Durkheim's rule — be 'treated as things'.

While I understand that philosophers might not feel compelled to treat anything as a social phenomenon, theorists who work within the social sciences, and who either actively contribute to the philosophy of social science as it pertains to their field, or draw on it for their research, can be expected to take social science seriously, and seriously enough to extend sociological thinking to their own conceptual and methodological tools. And yet the dominance of the classical philosophical view within the social sciences creates a disjunction between social scientists/theorists' acceptance of knowledge as a social phenomenon in ontological terms, and their implicit or explicit rejection of its social status at the epistemological level of inquiry.

One obvious indicator of this disjunction is the extent to which theoretical or empirical studies about the relation of knowledge to social interests, social order, and power actually impact the epistemological discussions of those fields — such as my own —

where such studies have gained some measure of authority. For example, even when Feminist (especially Standpoint), Constructivist, Marxist, Post-structuralist, Critical (Frankfurt-School-style), or Post-colonial approaches are considered relevant and informative with respect to how given social structures and processes enable given cognitive configurations and systems, there is always a limit to how such relevance is brought to bear on meta-theoretical and epistemic discussions. So one can very well accept, say, Foucault's analysis and conclusions on the constitution of psychiatry as a cognitive field, and use this analysis to illuminate other social aspects of 'power-knowledge' at work, but the logical step of extending such analysis to the philosophy of science and epistemology (and one's own discipline) is difficult to initiate and pursue. The sociological hardly and rarely 'trickles up', as if these cognitive fields were outside of social reality and history. And without this necessary step, it is not clear to me what a 'critical' or 'reflexive' scholarship would mean at all.

Meta-Theory and Normativity

For some mysterious reason, the assumption remains that discussions of meta-theory should themselves be theory-driven or theoretical (and hence self-contained and self-sustained) rather than empirically-grounded, as if idealist regress in analysis were a conceptual or methodological necessity (it certainly appears to be a *logical* necessity for epistemologists, and so idealism begets idealism, and the analytical reinforces the analytical). The typical reaction on the classical side (as noted by Steve Fuller early on) is still very much what I encounter in my daily interactions: the sociology of knowledge/science cannot tell us anything useful about epistemic or epistemological questions; it doesn't provide us with a 'demarcation' criterion between knowledge/science and opinion/non-science, nor does/can it tell us what knowledge/science 'are', etc... I see this posture permeating all meta-theoretical and philosophical discussions in my field. Not only epistemological discussions wherein the Bachelardian alternative, for example, is completely ignored (even by post-structuralists, who are presumably more likely to want to explore the origins of their thought), but almost any discussion pertaining to the realm of ideas and values.

When theorists, for instance, gather to discuss what a theory is, and how to produce 'better' theories, they take their cues from the classical debates and categories of the philosophy of science (and end up reaching the same dead-ends), most of which start from some *a priori* notion, principle, relation, or standard of validity, measure, and inference. It is never clear whether and how these models have informed the actual development of *real* and 'good' social theories, or why one would not rather turn to the *actual* history of sociological explanations in order to critically induce the criteria or conditions that make a social theory a 'good' or useful one (which is what a Bachelardian posture would entail if it were applied systematically to all the constituents of scientific practice).

Such questions are implicitly rejected on the basis that what *is* cannot inform what *ought to be*. Indeed it seems to me that when classical philosophers/epistemologists, and those who follow their lead, ask what knowledge 'is', they really are asking a different, i.e., normative, question. This same idealism, whereby reality (both natural and social) is *de*

facto considered irrelevant in answering questions about the ‘nature’ of things and processes, permeates the way that political and normative theories are understood, taught, and used in the Anglo-American tradition — for example, Rawls’ theory of justice, or that peculiar field called ‘*applied ethics*’, where a view of ‘the good’ and ‘the just’ is constructed independently of any engagement with the history and sociology of norms, and then forced onto political reality to make it fit the model. I suspect that if epistemologists or political and normative philosophers in that tradition were asked what DNA ‘is’, they wouldn’t rely on their mode of reasoning to answer such a question. But somehow, when it comes to knowledge, science, theory, objectivity, values, and norms, the relation between truth and reality, thought and practice, is reversed.

I find this attitude especially problematic in political studies, where ‘power’ and ‘the political’ are considered as core objects — and sometimes even as a defining subject-matter. So a non-social and hence de-politicized understanding of thought, knowledge, and science at the epistemological level of inquiry is here not only logically incoherent, but practically (and praxically) problematic and dangerous. It is interesting that a discipline that has dealt for so long with such notions as ‘ideology’ and the ‘knowledge-power nexus’ has managed to retain so much idealism and a priori thinking when it comes to epistemic and ethical questions. Some macro-studies on the socio-institutional development of political thought in the West provide important elements to answer this question. And I’m hoping that my research on the history and sociology of the sub-field of International Relations in the UK will help me connect these broad macro-processes to the micro-level of scholars’ worldviews, value-systems, and dispositions, through a more praxeological and ethnographic approach.

Sociological Thinking and Critical Pedagogy

In the meantime, I am intuitively and perpetually drawn to foundational texts in sociology and the sociology of knowledge, and to the fact that their authors’ posture and clarifications on the one hand, and the objections and outrage their intellectual moves triggered on the other, still resonate with the contemporary situation. So when going back to Comte, Marx, Durkheim, Bachelard, as well as Weber, Scheler, and Mannheim (despite his ‘failure of nerve’), and reading their texts not merely as cognitive ‘representations’ but also as social ‘interventions’, our age does not feel so different from theirs. I sense that the sociology of knowledge is still a ‘scandal’ — even when it is only partially understood, and hence only intuitively perceived as a threat or disturbance to dominant ways of thinking and doing. But more generally, it seems to me that sociology itself is still scandalous, and its potentially socially subversive nature still very strong.

I find pedagogical practice to be especially informative as to the extent to which sociological thinking has really impacted contemporary thought, as opposed to the mere utilitarian social impact of the social sciences and their methodologies. Even when students develop affinities with constructivist or post-structuralist approaches to social reality, their cognitive reflexes remain somehow ‘below’ sociological thinking. I suspect that the way post-structuralism and postmodernism have developed into intellectual and university fashions outside of their socio-intellectual context of emergence is partly responsible for this. Perhaps a more important factor is the extent to which sociology

informs secondary education, especially in comparison to philosophy, and therefore whether sociology's 'unmasking' effect is able to efficiently operate at the formative level where total-ideology-based 'commonsense' is institutionally reinforced. Whatever the case may be, I am often perplexed by how students who can handle de/constructionist or genealogical thinking at quite a sophisticated level are puzzled by such a basic notion that such things as suicide, aesthetic preferences, love, or mathematics can be studied/considered as social phenomena. Indeed I often feel torn between the desire to offer students the most up-to-date research on issues pertaining to knowledge and power, and the feeling that what they need first and foremost is Comte's *Lectures* and Durkheim's *Rules*.

A more troubling dimension, however, is how resistance to sociological thinking seems to be related organically and in utilitarian ways to liberalism and its associated individualism and universalism. I am cautious about claiming a necessary link between sociology and 'the left', even if the birth of (European) sociology is undoubtedly connected to socialism and a more or less organic view of society (as opposed to American sociology, and early British social theorizing). But the dominant liberal ideology has certainly shaped everyday thinking about social and moral acts and facts, and what our 'commonsense' relation to social reality has become. And it certainly seems to support, and be reinforced by, analytical-idealist thought, as they both share the ability to sustain a mysterious linkage between the unattainable private realm of the individual (and her intimate thought, values, and personal preferences) and the transcendental realm of the universal (thought, values, and norms in 'the absolute') — both of which are characteristically defined as a-social, and hence as beyond the purview of sociological thought and inquiry.

With these concerns in mind, I see social epistemology as foundational for my field of study, in the sense that its overall project of connecting the sociological appraisal of knowledge and science, with a normative reflection on the social distribution and management of knowledge, provides the framework for both a critical, reflexive political sociology *and* a responsible, accountable scholarly praxis, including critical pedagogy. I therefore look forward to engaging the members of the Collective, and drawing on their insights for the promotion of the 'collective vision' despite the structural and intellectual challenges the modern Academy's division of labour has imposed on us and our students.

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