From sociology to historical social science: prospects and obstacles

ABSTRACT

Analysis is provided of the roots of sociology and its links with historical optimism. Particular focus is placed by such a sociology upon the origins of modernity and problems of urban disorder. Sociology’s golden age was in the immediate postwar period. But since the 1960s, ‘globalization’, the sciences of complexity and cultural studies have transformed the context for sociology (especially transforming the so-called ‘two cultures’). The article concludes with some wide-ranging recommendations as to how sociology should be developed into a re-unified, historical social science on a truly global scale.

KEYWORDS: Complexity; cultural studies; modernity; world-system; science

When we entered the nineteenth century, neither social science nor sociology existed, at least in institutional form, or even as terms in intellectual discourse. When we entered the twentieth century, social science was a vague term encompassing a zone of intellectual concern, and sociology was the name of a nascent organized discipline that was beginning to receive official university sanction in a few Western countries. As we enter the twenty-first century, sociology is an organized course of study in most universities of the world, but social science remains a vague term encompassing a zone of intellectual concern.

The golden era of sociology as a discipline was probably 1945–1965, when its scientific tasks seemed clear, its future guaranteed, and its intellectual leaders sure of themselves. This rosy moment did not last. Since 1965, sociologists have scattered along many, quite divergent paths. This has created much dismay within sociology about the presumed future of the field and has led to much external social critique. As for the views of the intellectual leaders of the field, it is unclear that any such leaders exist, at least in the sense that they did in the two decades following the Second World War.

In a recent article, I traced what I claimed was the heritage of sociology as a culture, that is, as a set of premises widely shared among persons who call themselves sociologists. I then proceeded to outline what I thought
were the significant challenges to this culture, challenges so extensive that
they might require rethinking, indeed unthinking, some of our basic
premises.\(^1\) I believe that, as a result of the changes both in the world-system
as we know it and in the world of knowledge, the intellectual questions that
we pose ourselves will be quite different in the twenty-first century than
those posed for the last 150 years at least.

The era in which sociology was born and has lived until recently was su-
fused with historical optimism, based on widespread confidence in the
unlimited virtue and endless future development of technology. It was an
era in which intellectuals believed in human progress not only as something
that was good in itself but as something that was historically inevitable. No
doubt there occurred many disputes about the nature of this earthly para-
dise towards which we were all said to be heading, but in retrospect these
arguments seem quite secondary to the self-confidence, some might say the
arrogance, that people felt about the strides they were taking forward. The
multiple questions that sociologists posed centred around two central
issues: the origins of the great historical trek which the modern world was
said to have undertaken; and how human societies could cope with the col-
lateral damage that this trek had wrought.

We were interested in the origins of the great historical trek for a number
of reasons. A clear account would not only enable us to explain current dis-
crepancies in good fortune, but could also justify their function as a neces-
sary part of the process. The self-serving quality of such justification was
alleviated somewhat by the theorizing that allowed us to claim in addition
that any such advantages were temporary, since everyone was destined to
move forward eventually to the same desirable end. An intelligent account
of the trek might even help us, it was thought, collectively to speed up the
process. And assuredly, it could help us keep our eye on the ball as to where
we were supposed to be, indeed ought to be, heading.

What resulted were alternative ‘grand narratives’. The principal such
narrative, the dominant one, was the liberal view of the world, the so-called
Whig interpretation of history. In this vision, humanity aspired to live in an
individualist free society, which involved minimizing structures of overrule
and maximizing variety of choice, thereby enabling all persons to realize
their innate talents in a system that rejected the legitimacy of inherited priv-
ileges. In this vision, the world was already well on its way to achieving this
goal, especially in certain Western countries, but sooner or later all the rest
of the world would catch up.

That this liberal vision constituted the self-satisfied view of those with
economic and increasingly with social privilege was evident from the begin-
ing. But because the liberal vision insisted that it was universal in objec-
tive, and that therefore everyone could potentially benefit, it had an
attractiveness that went beyond its progenitors. Sociologists built on this
vision to create the concept of modernity, which term was designed to
denote the more recent of two alternatives in a binary conceptualization of
the world’s social possibilities: contract rather than status, *Gesellschaft* rather
than *Gemeinschaft*, organic rather than mechanical solidarity, and so forth. These binary concepts permitted us to create elaborate descriptions of the modern world and the ways in which it was said to differ from ‘traditional society.’ Eventually we could engage in much quantitative measurement to elaborate the description. Since the results were built into the concepts, the data seemed to confirm the vision.

There existed two main dissenting variations on the liberal grand narrative. One was conservative; one was radical. The conservative dissent expressed doubts about the inevitability of the liberal vision, and even more about its desirability. There were conservative sociologists, to be sure. But sociology as a field was not very receptive to their message, and never gave their theoretical ideas much space. In order to survive in intellectual milieus, conservatives had to renounce their more reactionary instincts and remold their arguments into a version that incorporated an evolutionary process, although to be sure it was one that none the less maintained the desirability and inevitability of hierarchy in the final outcome. Hegelian thought offered a logic on which such theses could be built, and its emphasis on the State was compatible with the ever-spreading sense of national identities.

The main radical alternative was Marxism, which offered a variant of the liberal vision that was more coherent than that provided by conservatism, but it was also one that was less different from liberalism. Essentially, Marxism laid emphasis on the fact that the present era was not the ultimate but only the penultimate moment in historical progress. This revision of the scenario had important consequences for the analysis of the present (‘class conflict’) and for political action (‘revolution’), but Marxism shared with liberalism the belief in the centrality of a binary conceptualization of the present, and of the inevitability of progress.

The second major concern of sociologists was with the collateral damage of the march toward progress. Everyone seemed to agree that in the shift from pre-modernity to modernity (however they were defined), individuals and groups were often hurt, at least in the short run. People were said to be alienated, or their lives were disrupted, or they had lost their social compass. As a result, they engaged in activities and held attitudes that were ‘anti-social,’ again at least in the short run.

This assumption of generalized disarray, usually described as urban disorder, gave rise to the daily bread and butter of the world’s sociologists. They studied deviance, poverty, crime, and all the other ‘maladies’ attributed to the transition from pre-modernity to modernity. But since it was assumed by almost everyone that these maladies were historically transitional, they were also assumed to be reparable. The self-image of sociologists as social workers, or as the theorists of social workers, provides a key to the real definition of the activity of sociologists. Indeed, the world of the financial sponsors (states, foundations and so on) was particularly attracted to this concern of sociologists, without which sociologists would have received even less financial support than they in fact did.
The two concerns – the origin of modernity and the problem of urban disorder – have not disappeared from the writings and thinking of the world’s sociologists. But these concerns do seem a bit quaint today, not least to sociologists themselves. On the one hand, many, perhaps most, sociologists have moved on to various ‘post’-concerns: post-industrialism, post-modernity, post-colonialism. Modernity suddenly seems to be the past, not the present. As for urban disorder, far from disappearing as it had long been argued would happen, it seems to be escalating. And while sociologists have not ceased to be social workers, they have certainly become more circumspect and less sure that any of their remedies will have the beneficial effects they are intended to have. The biographic turnabout of James S. Coleman on how to overcome racial differentials in education was an outstanding and salutary lesson.

The current buzz-word to describe the contemporary situation is ‘globalization’. Personally, I think it is meaningless as an analytic concept and serves primarily as a term of political exhortation (see Wallerstein 2000). It represents however an insistence, which seems to have resonance with both intellectuals and the general public, that something very new is happening these days. This fits in with the syndrome of ‘post’-concepts. This sense coincides with the vague angst that seems to accompany the coming of a new millennium. It is marvellously symbolic that the dominant Western countries concentrated their angst this time not on the second coming of Christ as they did in 1000 AD but on the Y2K phenomenon.

The spokespersons of the neo-liberal creed, that is, the priests of the ruling classes to be blunt, screech reassurance about a glorious future. On television we are told that there are now a million new millionaires in the USA emerging merely from the computer industry. We are not told that the economic polarization of the world-system continues to zoom upward at an amazing pace. The reassurances are no doubt being received with considerable skepticism. The political stability of the world-system is however less threatened by the skepticism with which the unwashed masses receive the balderdash that television purveys to them about their prospects of each becoming a millionaire, as it is by the fact that these same unwashed masses are no longer sure that the antisystemic movements that have spoken in their name can, or even want to, implement an alternative glorious future.

So one major question before us is whether the twenty-first century promises a linear thrust forward of technology and modernity (whether called globalization or post-modernity or whatever) or whether it portends a collapse of the existing world-system. This is a debate about how to interpret the reality within which we live, that may also hide a debate about the reality within which we want to live. But how can we answer such a question? When we entered the twentieth century, there seemed little doubt about how we could answer such questions. Science – by which we meant Newtonian, determinist, linear, time-reversible science – was accepted as the only legitimate mode of responding to such questions. The only alternative to science was thought to be a theological one, and what distinguished
modern civilization, it was argued, was the rejection of the relevance of theology for explanations of the world of reality. The good was one domain, and the true was quite another.

What has happened in the last thirty years has been the emergence of a third mode of explanation, neither Newtonian and determinist nor theological. It is the mode of the sciences of complexity, which argue that phenomena are complex and explanations are complex. Processes are only temporarily linear. They reach points in their history when they bifurcate, become chaotic, and then organize themselves into new systems. And, it is argued, these processes are indeterminate in the sense that the outcomes are intrinsically impossible to predict, and are a function of the actual complex historical input during the bifurcation processes. To the extent that we take such propositions seriously, it changes the way we answer the question of whether we are entering a period of the summum of ‘modernity,’ or the moment of its breakdown (and therefore bifurcation).

Today therefore we are arguing not only about the descriptive state of the world but about how we can know the descriptive state of the world. It is not an easy argument, and tempers risk becoming frayed. And we may find ourselves in culs-de-sac such as the recent science wars and culture wars. What we need is some calmer reflection about the possibilities and priorities of social thought and about the organization of our scholarly activities. I therefore turn from the purely intellectual questions of what issues we should be addressing and with what tools we should be addressing them (the theoretical and epistemological questions) to how we can best organize ourselves to pursue our work.

The first problem is the oppressive effect of the division of knowledge into the so-called two cultures. This is a theoretical and methodological schema that has dominated the structures of knowledge for the past two centuries and has interfered mightily with the possibilities of intelligent and useful scholarship concerning social realities. It is the consequence of what has been termed the ‘divorce’ between science and philosophy, which occurred more or less definitively in the second half of the eighteenth century.

This divorce was the culmination of a process whereby Western social thought had sought to liberate itself from the constraints of Christian theology. The process of liberation took place essentially in two successive steps. First, the philosophers proclaimed the autonomy of their endeavours from theology, insisting that humans could use their mental capacities to reason to arrive at true perceptions of reality. This claim was part of the wider rise of secularism, and was made with vigour and with considerable success as of the sixteenth century.

In the period of philosophy’s successful assertion of its autonomy, 1500–1750, the terms philosophy and science still were being utilized almost interchangeably. The title, for example, of Newton’s principal work, published in 1686, was *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*. But those we call today natural scientists were not satisfied with this lack of distinction
and wished to treat all metaphysical assertions (by which they meant non-empirical, non-verifiable assertions) as being irrelevant to the search for truth. Metaphysics, they argued, was simply speculation, a claim of authority over knowledge that was as illegitimate as the claims of the Church.

The natural scientists won acceptance for their claims. The Western world, which by then had become the centre of a capitalist world-economy that would come to encompass the entire globe in the nineteenth century, enthroned a scientific epistemology as the preferred mode of knowledge. In defensive retreat, a counter-view, a different epistemology, hermeneutic and humanistic, asserted itself as ‘non-scientific’ and laid battle. The result was the partition of the world of knowledge. Relinquishing to the natural scientists the domain of the world of ‘nature’, the humanities (as they came to be called) laid exclusive claim to the world of arts and letters. And thus, for the first time in human history, a sharp distinction was made between the true and the beautiful (despite Keats’ wistful, lingering claim that it was not so).

And where did the world of social reality lay in this hostile truce? There was no agreement there. Both sides in this new war of ideas, science versus philosophy/humanities, sought to lay claim to this arena of knowledge. What came to be called social science was thus torn apart from the outset in a vicious struggle between those who would be nomothetic (that is, scientific/scientific) and those who would be idiographic (that is, hermeneutic/humanistic), the so-called Methodenstreit. As the two cultures became institutionalized in the renewed and revised university system that dates from the mid-nineteenth century and still is the governing model, the social sciences split into a series of so-called disciplines, some of which (economics, political science, and sociology) identified themselves primarily with the nomothetic camp and others (history, anthropology, Oriental studies) primarily with the idiographic camp, although virtually none of the disciplines was without some internal dissent (see Wallerstein et al. 1996).

The two cultures divide is still very much with us. None the less, it has come under serious attack in the last thirty years for the first time in two centuries. The origin of this questioning of the two cultures model is not to be found from within the social sciences, to our shame no doubt. It is the result of a pincer movement that was unplanned, and which has only begun to be noticed in the last decade.

On the one side there has arisen within the natural sciences (and mathematics) the so-called sciences of complexity. The ideas these scientists have put forth are not new. Many of them were adumbrated in the late nineteenth century (notably by Poincaré), but they did not have an organizational impact until the 1970s. Basically, the sciences of complexity have challenged the fundamental model of modern science, sometimes called the Baconian/Cartesian/Newtonian model, which was determinist, reductionist, and linear. The new group argues that this older and dominant model, far from describing the totality of natural phenomena, in fact is
descriptive of very special and limited cases. The scientists of complexity invert almost all the premises of Newtonian mechanics, insisting on the ‘arrow of time’ and the ‘end of certainties.’ Quite aside from the intellectual debate, what is to be noticed is that the scientists of complexity have now grown to be a significant minority of the total and are steadily gaining ground within the community of natural scientists.

The other side of the pincer movement is constituted by what has come to be called cultural studies, a movement that originated in the humanities (philosophy, literary studies). As had the sciences of complexity, it too took as its initial target the dominant view within its own camp, in this case those that insisted that there existed aesthetic canons, passed down through the generations, that reflected valid universal judgments about the world of cultural artifacts. The critics of the concept of canons are insisting that aesthetic judgments are particularistic not universal, and that they are socially-rooted and constantly evolving, reflecting social positions and continuing power struggles. They have thereby historicized and relativized the study of ‘culture’. This movement coincided with and was reinforced by the demands of many non-dominant groups for recognition within the university system both as objects and as subjects of study – women, plus innumerable class, racial, ethnic, and sexual groups socially oppressed and defined as ‘minorities’. Once again, the thing to notice is how important this group (cultural studies) has become within the faculties of the humanities.

The social sciences have not been unaffected by these two movements – the sciences of complexity and cultural studies. Still the discussion within the social sciences has largely centred on how to incorporate the new wisdom, or conversely how to resist the new heresies. We have not adequately reflected on what these movements are doing to the structures of knowledge as such. The world of knowledge is being transformed from a centrifugal model to a centripetal model. From circa 1850 to circa 1970, the world university system had separate faculties of the natural sciences and of humanities pulling epistemologically in opposite directions, with the social sciences located in-between and being pulled apart by these two strong forces.

Today, we have scientists of complexity using language more consonant with the discourse of social science (the arrow of time) and advocates of cultural studies doing the same (social-rootedness of values and aesthetic judgments). Both these groups are growing in strength. The model is becoming centripetal in the sense that the two extremes (science and the humanities) are moving in the direction of the in-between centre (social science), and to some degree on the centre’s terms.

For those of us who think that the two cultures metaphor has been an intellectual disaster, this is a moment of joy but also of great responsibility. For while it can be said, from an Olympian perspective, that the sciences and the humanities are each moving in the direction of the other, they are doing so amidst enormous confusion, and to be sure in endless variations,
some of which turn out to be in fact mere avatars of the old epistemologies they claimed they were abandoning. Perhaps social scientists can help to clarify the issues and thereby promote a new synthesis which would reuni-
fy the epistemological bases of the structures of knowledge. Perhaps not, but we shall not know unless we try.

The second issue before us is how to move the concept of substantive rationality into the centre of our work. The concept of substantive rationality (Rationalität materiel) was put forth by Max Weber in contrast to formal rationality, in order to argue that formal rationality (the optimal means to given ends) was not the only form of rationality. Weber says of substantive rationality that it is ‘full of ambiguities’. He uses it to mean the application of ‘certain criteria of ultimate ends, whether they be ethical, political, utilitarian, hedonistic, feudal (ständisch), egalitarian, or whatever’ in order to measure the consequences of economic action in terms of these values.2

Weber himself was ambivalent about the relative priority of formal and substantive rationality, as he was ambivalent about the Methodenstreit. But, as is typical of so much of Weber’s writings, many of his exponents have eliminated the ambiguities and misappropriated his views for political ends. Weber calls upon us in his final essays to operate on the ethics of responsibility, and it would seem to follow that we must analyse and underline the outcomes of social action and not merely the intentions or the means utilized. As the concept of formal rationality has been dissolving in the latter half of the twentieth century into a dubiously universal criterion of highly subjective choices, and we have come to discover that beneath every choice in terms of formal rationality lurks someone’s value preferences, the table has begun to turn. Instead of formal rationality representing objective reality and substantive rationality subjective preferences, it now seems that it is within substantive rationality that we shall have to search for what is trans-subjective, there if anywhere.

It is not that anyone can decree what is substantively rational, and it certainly cannot be adjudicated by any kind of experimental process. But in so far as we are using the term ‘rational’ to describe something, we must be referring to some process of reflection, and therefore of discussion, debate, relative consensus, and much adjudication, which can bring us closer to defining what is substantively rational.

Far from this being a task for some specialized group of wise (and iso-
lated) philosophers, it should be seen as the central task of social science, which can utilize its empirical investigations to eliminate implausible altern-
atives, to test the real consequences of proposed paths of action, and can thereby create a sound framework for what in the end remains a metaphys-
ical, that is a political, debate. However, in a world in which hypothetically the two cultures divide would have been transcended, this should not worry us, much less terrify us. It does mean we have to renounce the naïve rhetoric about value-neutral research, and work hard to replace it with a set of operationally plausible constraints on turning scholarship into propaganda.
This brings us then to the third organizational problem, the disciplinary categories into which social science was divided in the late nineteenth century. These boundaries are today organizationally very strong at the very same time that they have lost most of their historic intellectual justification. What is happening is very simple. One can draw a curve of the number of intellectual categories into which social science is divided, measured for the present moment by the names of university departments (and national/international associations of scholars) as well as by library and bookseller categories. We do not of course have similar data for the beginning of this process, say from 1750 on or even from 1850 on. We do have the names of chairs in the major universities. The curve of subdivisions of social science seems to look U-shaped. In the beginning there were a very large number of categories. The process from 1850 to 1950 involved the reduction of this very large group to a very small number. Since 1950, the curve has been rising again, as ‘new’ disciplines became recognized, if not universally, at least in significant segments of the world academic community. I believe this number will continue to increase in the decades to come, and indeed at a more rapid pace.

The concept of separate disciplines only makes sense, however, if the number is small. When the number becomes large, we are really talking, at most, of areas of scholarly activity which momentarily bring various researchers together. If we ‘teach’ such narrow areas to graduate students, \textit{a fortiori} if we give them Ph.D.’s in these restricted fields, we are essentially crippling the ability of the students to think as social scientists. We are turning them into skilled technicians. Of course, the organizational problem is control of access to employment. But the intellectual result is collective blinkers.

There are three scenarios possible. We continue to patch together the organizational structure of the social sciences, until one day it collapses under its own weight. This seems to be what has been happening up to now. Perhaps it can continue. I think it is both improbable and implausible to sit back and wait. Or we can expect the intrusion of a \textit{deus ex machina}, more probably multiple \textit{dei ex machina}, to reorganize the social sciences for us. There are in fact candidates for this role, some of them even eager candidates. They are to be found in ministries of education and university administrations. The principal motivation of such bureaucrats would probably be rationalization in order to reduce costs, although they would no doubt clothe this intention in academic pap. What we could expect from their intrusion is a panoply of different results in different institutions, which might further add to the confusion.

The third scenario, perhaps less likely but probably more desirable, is that social scientists themselves take the lead in reunifying and redividing social science so as to create a more intelligent division of labour, one that would permit significant intellectual advance in the twenty-first century. I think such a reunification could only be achieved on the basis of
considering that we are all pursuing a singular task, which I call historical social science, to underline that it must be based on the epistemological assumption that all useful descriptions of social reality are necessarily simultaneously ‘historical’ (that is, they take into account not only the specificity of the situation but the continual and endless changes in the structures under study as well as in their environing structures) and ‘social scientific’ (that is, they search for structural explanations of the longue durée, the explanations for which, however, are not and cannot be eternal). In short, process would be at the centre of the methodology.

In such a reunified (and eventually redivided) social science, it would not be possible to assume a significant divide between economic, political, and sociocultural arenas (no ceteris paribus clauses allowed, even provisionally). And we would have to be very careful about the ‘we’ and the ‘other’. Instead of drawing a line between the modern and the pre-modern, the civilized and the barbaric, the advanced and the backward (which we continue to do in so many subtle and not so subtle ways), historical social scientists have to incorporate the tension of universal–particular into the centre of their work, and subject all zones, all groups, all strata to the same kind of critical analysis.

All of this is easier said than done. It will never be done unless and until historical social science becomes a truly global exercise. Today, for obvious economic reasons, the bulk of social science is done in a small corner, the rich corner, of the globe. This distorts our analysis, and the distortion is structural not individual. No amount of virtuous self-discipline on the part of individual scholars will correct this situation. It is not a matter of inviting a few more social scientists from Asia or Eastern Europe or Latin America to a colloquium or to teach in a Western university. It requires the systematic displacement of funding. It requires that Western scholars, whether they are accomplished scientists or graduate students, enter into contact with the rest of the world, less to teach than to learn. It requires that they feel that they have something to learn, and more than some pious talk about ‘traditional’ values. It requires that all social scientists are able to read scholarly work in five to seven languages, so that they are truly aware of the range of knowledge at their disposition. It requires in short a genuine social transformation of world social science. I am only moderately optimistic that this might happen in the next 25–50 years.

The prospects of a transformation are at best fifty-fifty. And the obstacles are obvious. At the most fundamental level, a transformation of the world of knowledge is intrinsically linked to the process of transformation of the world-system itself. At a more local and personal level, there are enormous numbers of persons who have vested interests in maintaining the present situation and particularly of its worst aspects. Furthermore, many of these people are in gatekeeper positions – and not only in the Western universities. Still, this is the beginning of a new millennium. And if that is in no ways magic, ritualistically it forces reflection. And I remain enough of a child of
the Enlightenment to believe that reflection can be useful and consequential.

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NOTES

1. See Wallerstein 1999a. This article reproduces my Presidential Address to the XIVth World Congress of Sociology, Montreal, 26 July 1998.

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