

## **Sociology as Programmatically Modern**

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### **Abstract**

What is the content in sociology? One view is that this content is reflected in its usefulness, i.e., being empirical. Another view is that its content is its programmatically modernity, i.e., its ability to give meaningful answers to people in an ever changing world. Thus, in the latter view, its content is based on internal criteria.

**Keywords:** Sociology, modern, postmodern, success.

### **1. Introduction**

It is a common observation that sociology – and social science in general - is a very diverse discipline marked by “pluralism”. Sociologists use different methodologies, have different theories on society and different understanding of what sociology is (Ahrne 1997, 2007, Brante 1997). In fact, if unity in theories and methods is the criteria on what a mature science is then sociology is “immature” (cf. Collins 1998). This may appear surprising considering that sociology has existed for a very long time. It is as if the mature sociology yet has to come.

That seems so if we are considering sociology from the point of view of the unity of science and positivism as an ideal (cf. Vienna circle 1929). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century an object by its own and using the same, logical empirical testing methods was the identity marks of a science.

An indication of the plurality in sociology is that there are sociologists today who deny that sociology has an object of its own (cf. Ahrne 1997). This is surprising thinking of that it originally was the idea that sociology is a science about society that was the main argument for sociology of its French founding father, Emile Durkheim (cf. Boglind.1981). Thus there is today a tendency to understanding sociology only as a word, lacking a real content.

Given this pluralisms it might be surprising that sociology at all exists as a legitimate science. On the other hand its long life also is an indication of that there after all may exist a real content in sociology, something uniting all sociologists. What can that content be? Giving a preliminary – at least tentative - answer to this question is the aim of this modest article.

## 2. Modern

It has often been said that sociology is the science of the modern society (Aron 2001a, Wagner 2001, Isengren 1997). Since modernity is characterized by change this "modern" society constantly is in crisis and so then is sociology in a constant change and crisis. This modern character of sociology can explain the plurality in sociology. Sociology represents different responses to the ongoing crisis of society (cf. Isengren 1997). It is also a plausible explanation since after all already the classics were pluralists. Marx, Durkheim, Weber and others; Simmel, Tönnies etc (cf. Wagner 2001) had different ideas about society – what its main problem was – and what sociology is and how to make sociology, i.e., by which methods (cf. Aron 2001a/b). Then if society – and sociology – is in a constant crisis it rather would be surprising to later on find out that there is a sociological unity, i.e., that sociology all the time has been the same. Instead, in this sense, i.e., as constantly changing sociology would be a sort of mirroring – self understanding - of the changing society. Thus understood sociology is a "programmatically modern" science (Isengren 1997).

### 2.1 The Empirical

So we have two pictures of sociology: Either it is a pluralist, immature science or it is a modern, ever changing science that pluralism in turn is an indication on. Possibly there is also another optional, i.e., a third answer to this question in the idea of what a science is. This third idea can make immature pluralist sociology and programmatically modern sociology compatible as some (Collins 1998, Wagner 2001, Ahrne 1997) find the - real - content of sociology to be in the empirical. In this idea methods – questionnaires, interviews, observations – may differ in sociology but all sociologists are talking about the empirical. Thus the "(programmatically) modern content" of sociology would be reflected by its empiricism.

### 2.2 Usefulness

A strong support of this idea serves a look on the history of sociology. When sociology has been useful in society, like in France the years around 1900, in the USA in the inter war period and in Europe after the Second World War it has been empirical (Collins 1998, Wagner 2001, Olsson 1997, Thörnqvist 1997). The high days – in terms of institutions, professors, students etc - of sociology in Europe and the USA was after the Second World War. As programmatically modern sociology then could give useful answers "to the problems of democracy" (cf. Franzén and Sandstedt 1981). Following this – positivist - idea of unity in science it is the empirical in sociology that makes it into a science (Vienna circle 1929) and useful (Collins 1998, Wagner 2001) in the development of the modern society. The "classics" – Durkheim, Weber, Marx – soon became obsolete, i.e. not modern because they were not empirical in the modern sense - i.e., not being useful (cf. Wagner 2001).

## 3. Modernity

By the modern society is generally referred to the society emerging as a result of the dual revolutions, i.e., the French democratic – freedom, equality and brotherhood - and the English industrial – capitalist – revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The idea of Enlightenment – the French and Scottish – unites these revolutions (Hampton 1968, Hobsbawn.1962). Central to this time of Enlightenment was the idea that man can create a better society by using science. Thus the birth of modern science is part of the birth of the modern society (Rossi 2000).

### 3.1 The Modern Science

In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries emerged modern science (Rossi 2000). There were competing notions of science being based upon deduction or induction i.e., whether thinking or sensing would be the basis of knowledge (Shapiro1996). This discussion culminated at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the notion that science is based upon empirical testing of propositions made upon the world (cf. Vienna circle 1929). Thus the search for “empirical knowledge” became identical to modern science (Rosso.2000).

### 3.2 Modern Sociology

In the same way one may (cf. Wagner 2001, Collins 1998) describe the modern content of sociology as being its empirical content, e.g., consisting in empirical knowledge. Max Webers (1912, 1918) distinction between facts and values, “is” and “ought” - where sociology is about is and ought belongs to politics and ideology - was a timely fitting approach to this stress on the empirical, i.e., on that which “is” (cf. Lindgren 2012). So was also Durkheims talk of society in terms of “social facts” and “objectivity” timely (Durkheim 1895). The approach of other contemporary sociologists – e.g., Simmel, Tönnies, Gumplovich etc –were similarly pro-empirical. Still European sociology had a back-lash in the inter-war period.

## 4. The Back-Lash

After the First World War – and the death of Durkheim in 1917 - sociology was pushed in the background in the French society. This was in sharp difference to the prominent position of the durkheimians in the decades before. This had to do with the coming to an end of the radical anti-clerical era 1880-1910 which was marked by political reforms, e.g., of the public schools. After the war the situation was different and the progressivism of durkheimians, for some reasons did not fit in any longer. The situation for sociology was similar throughout Europe (Wagner 2001, Krogh 1993). In the USA, though sociology blossomed in the inter war period, but it was a different kind of sociology from before the war. The older sociology in the USA was influenced by Europe – many of the prominent social scientists had studied there - the new one was an American sociology, a positivist sociology (cf. Manicas 1988). Here pragmatism, i.e., usefulness and empiricism was its head marks (cf. Collins 1998). After the Second World War the empirical methods were refined using questionnaires and new methods of statistical analysis. This new, American sociology was exported to Europe where it won broad appreciation (cf. Olsson 1997, Thörnqvist 1997, Isengren 1997).

## 5. The Success

There is a general agreement on the overall picture of sociology of being in crisis during the inter war period then followed by the high days after the war but there is divergence in what its success exactly consists. To some (Wagner 2001, Ahrne 1997) it is measured in the institutionalisation of sociology – becoming a legitimate science with departments in sociology, professors, sociologist doing publicly founded research. To others (Isengren 1997) success lies in an internal criteria i.e., the development of sociology. Since sociology and society may be out of pace ups and downs in institutional terms not necessarily reflects ups and downs in sociology per se, in it self. To the latter opinion it is rather the rising number of students – not the institutionalisation - that is an indication of the success of sociology. Sociology had something important to say to people and that is why the students came to sociology. One may say that sociology has the ability of self-reflection. These different opinions are reflected in a slight difference in their timing of the success, in the late 1940s and 50s in the institutional approach and during the radical students 1960s and 70s in the internal approach.

## 6. Discussion

Today sociology is almost invisible in society. The number of students is much lower than in the high days and institutionally it is lingering on, not much in demand by the state administrations. To some (Ahrne 1997) this is because of that all the other social sciences have become sociological, i.e., they have absorbed the problem areas, methods etc that before were the exclusive domains of sociology. Thus sociology still is a success though it has become invisible. To others (Wagner 2001) it is because sociology has become postmodern – i.e. not empirical - why it is no longer in demand. Both opinions are reflections of the institutional and empirical perspectives. Thus, to both views the problem with sociology today may be that it is not fitting into society, i.e., by not being useful, i.e., empirical.

## 7. Conclusions

Then, returning to our question – what is the content of sociology? –we can give the tentative answer: it is a science of society, programmatically modern, temporarily in crisis but newer - cf. the internal criteria - totally out of pace with society (cf. my article 2012).

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