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Sociology as a Science

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Sociology as a Science

Abstract

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In the time of Enlightenment the idea of science was to promote the Good society. There was yet not perceived to be a contradiction in science between at the same time being objective and progressive. A century ago, though philosophers and scientist discovered the problem language poses for science: there is a difference between the world and the words. The response from the scientist was paradoxically to defend objectivity. Thus when sociology was established as a science around the year 1900 it became inherently contradictory, i.e., at the same time being objective and geared at social reforms. (cf. Lindgren 2011) In this article is attempted an outline of a possible solution to this problem in terms of hermeneutics and phenomenology. The conclusion is: by taking understanding as the point of departure sociology can be progressive: promoting the good society and still be a science.

Sociology as a Science

The Good society

The aim of science is to promote the Good society. This is – since the time of Enlightenment - the meaning of science (cf. Kant 1784). At that time science was understood as inherently progressive: contributing to a better, good society (Hampson 1968). This progressiveness characterised also sociology a hundred years later when it was established as a science of the society (cf. Durkheim 1897). Though now objectivity also was stressed, causing a contradiction between what is – i.e., the objectivity of science - and what ought to be – politics, i.e., the concerns for ideologues. (cf. Weber 1912) Thus it seemed impossible to promote the Good society in the name of science.

Understanding and thinking

Sociology is the science of society, but what is society? Is it an object (cf. Durkheim 1895)? A very old notion of society is that it is togetherness (cf. Gadamer 1960). How can we come to an answer to the question of what the society is? First we must make society into a problem. A precondition for answering the question is that society can be something different from the given society that we live in and how this is conceived (Kant 1784).

The idea that things can be different makes critical thinking possible (cf. Kant 1781, 1784). Critical thinking by necessity starts with the notion that there is a difference between that what “is given” and that what can be. In general we just repeat that which we have been taught but in order to think – e.g., about society - we must discover the

difference between that which “is”: the “given” and that which “can be”. One may say that thinking starts with this difference and is spontaneously, by nature is “critical”.¹

Is or ought

One might believe that this is obvious to everyone interested in science and social science but on the contrary: it is not so. In “society” – and science - society is presented up-side down (cf. Marx 1857). In science a since then long lasting distinction was made at the beginning of the 20th century between that which “is” and that which “ought” to be. Max Weber, an early German sociologist said that science deals with “is” while “ought” belongs to ideology and politics. (Weber 1912)

For our purpose, elaborating on the meaning of sociology as a science of society it is useful to refer to Wilhelm Dilthey (1893), a German contemporary of Weber who made a distinction between “science” and “the human science”. He declared “nature we explain, culture we understand” (Eliasson 1988). In this time, at the end of the 19th century the idea was emerging that maybe there is a difference between social – or Human – science and science, i.e., science about nature? Those propagating “positivism” soon claimed that there is but only one kind of science and knowledge is empirically tested propositions about the world (Carnap 1928, Vienna circle 1929). Though there since then have been many different opinions about science – Mach, Russell, Wittgenstein, to name only those following the

¹ That is why “critical theory” by definition is anti-positivism. Cf. Krogh 1984.

“positivist” track (cf. Johansson and Liedman 1993) – the distinction between “is” and “ought” still holds today: it is not challenged. No matter if “the object” of science is nature or culture, science still is about “is” and “is” is “empirical”. Weber (1918) supported the “positivists” by claiming that social science is about “is”. To Weber society was ridden by value-conflicts but this science could not do anything about. Thus, a critique of society – an imagining that the given society can be different; can be changed – to him is not-science but instead something political, ideological. That which distinguishes science is its “value-freedom”. (Weber 1912)

What is “is”?

There is a problem though with this little word “is”, something which other German speaking philosophers and scientists had discovered at the same time – Mach, Herz and most explicitly Gottlob Frege (1891) - and analytical philosophers have struggled with this little word ever since. The problem they – only “sub consciously” (Freud 1917) though, since they never gave up the opposite idea - discovered is that there is a difference between the world and the words. Since then first the logical-positivists and then the analytical philosophers – e.g., Russell, Wittgenstein² – and later the post-modernists – e.g., Rorty, Derrida - have struggled with the troublesome relationship between the words: language and the “empirical” world. The first mentioned - “analytical positivists” is a good name we can give them all since they all - have in wane been trying to save “science” by establishing a connection between the words and the world. The outcome of post-modernism is also positivism: as “post-positivism” – in practice – though they have resigned to the world of language (cf. Derrida 1965).

Still, these early German philosophers discovered something fundamental for our understanding of the every-day world: that words and phenomena are different things and that there is also “meaning”. Then, when we talk use language there are three things present; the language/words, the things/phenomena and the meaning. Communication: talking takes place within language and language is self-referring: tautological.³ In themselves words have no meaning they are empty; a “tree” is a “tree” etc.

² Cf. Jalink and Toulmin, Kraft 1969.

³ Especially the late Wittgenstein made this clear, as “language-games” in his philosophical investigations, 1953 but it is tacitly acknowledged in any attempt to construct, create a language, cf. Kraft 1969.

The things they sometimes refer to⁴ have different words in different languages and the things thus have nothing to do with the words. There is also “meaning”, something we want to “understand”, communicate etc. The meaning – and the phenomena/things - is beyond, before etc the words: language.⁵ Thus “is” is only a word and that is why we must look somewhere else than in this word for the meaning of society.

Phenomena and meaning

Then the “understanding” of Dilthey (1893) is still an alternative to “empirical science/positivism”. Following Dilthey human science is about “understanding culture” i.e., “society”. In order to understand society we can also use phenomenology.

At the time of Dilthey and Weber, Edmund Husserl was developing his new science of “phenomenology”. Husserl (1900, 1913) said that we have to go to “the things themselves”. In order to do so we must do “a phenomenological reduction”, that is we must free ourselves of social interpretations. Then the things appear “in themselves”: as they really are: in their essence/meaning. In the sensuous experience: in “looking” one can look beyond the phenomena and experience the real thing, as a feeling of truth: understanding (Husserl 1900). Thus – by combining hermeneutics and phenomenology – especially in the way Heidegger (1927, 1949) and Gadamer (1960) later did - we can say that knowledge, as truth is a relationship between the thing/phenomenon and its meaning. Understanding thus is a sensuous experience (Husserl 1900) where we use our bodies doing the “thinking” – i.e., in order to go beyond, before etc language: Understanding – and not understanding - is sensuously experiencing the relationship between the phenomena/thing and their meaning.

The meaning of society

Thus, in order to be scientific, i.e., to understand the society we must overcome the world of words: language. Then, in order to promote the Good society we can use ourselves; our feelings of society in changing society. We also need to play with the words: language in order to overcome the given society: to think differently i.e., critically (Lindgren 2009).⁶

⁴ Frege used the word “bedeutung” for this relationship and the analytical philosophers have stuck to this “meaning of meaning”, cf., the late Wittgenstein.

⁵ This is part of what I have tried to develop in my books from 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009.

⁶ Critical thinking then includes; language, phenomena/things/feelings and meaning

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