

Zeitschrift: Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Soziologie = Revue suisse de sociologie
= Swiss journal of sociology

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Soziologie

Band: 21 (1995)

Heft: 2

Artikel: How can sociology "make sense" again?

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-814760>

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HOW CAN SOCIOLOGY “MAKE SENSE” AGAIN?

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I agree with many points in P. Berger’s paper and disagree with others.

It is true that the “late sixties” have been institutionalized culturally: this can be seen in the fact that irrationalism and relativism have become positive values in many academic circles. Many social thinkers *à la mode* develop the neo-Nietzschean theme that objectivity is an illusion, that “there are no facts, merely interpretations”. They draw from it the consequence that the aim of the social sciences would be not to *explain*, but to *interpret* social phenomena and add that the quality of an interpretation should be measured not on its truth (to them a meaningless pre-postmodernist notion), but on its novelty, on its emotional power, on its power of “liberation”, etc. A historian of the social sciences¹ has recently attracted some attention presumably because his work officializes this relativistic view. To him, the greatest classical sociologists have grounded not a new scientific discipline, but a new cultural *genre* whose identity is negative: *neither* science *nor* literature. It is my diagnosis that contemporary sociology easily gives the impression of not “making sense” any more, because it has internalized the view that the social sciences should not aim at creating objective knowledge on social processes, but rather, say, “interesting”, “stimulating”, “liberating”, “provocative” essays.

Opposing such views, I believe that classical (and at least some modern) sociologists make sense because they believe in objectivity and have created objectively valid theories. But I do not accept P. Berger’s view that social-scientific theories should have a good *prediction* power. The main aim of the social sciences is not to decipher a social future which is always largely unpredictable because it depends on contingencies, but to *explain* puzzling social phenomena: sociology “makes” (really) “sense” when it succeeds in doing so.

1 Lepenies, W. (1985), *Die drei Kulturen, Soziologie zwischen Literatur und Wissenschaft*, Munich: Hanser.

Explaining

A *good explanatory* theory can be described in the following way: suppose we want to explain a phenomenon f^2 . To do so, we normally try to build a theory T , i. e. a set of statements of which f would be a consequence. Of course, beside f , other consequences f' , f'' , etc. can normally be drawn from T . Let us call C this set of consequences. We will require

$$T \text{ fi } \{f, f', f'', \dots\} \in C.$$

Thus, Huygens' theory of the pendulum is a *good* theory because it includes consequences which overlap the set of known facts about the pendulum³.

But, if these "Popperian" criteria are necessary, they are also *insufficient*. Thus, the theory of the pendulum is good, not only because it reproduces correctly the movements of any pendulum, but also because the non-empirical notions and statements composing the theory are acceptable. Thus, the notion of a "parallelogram of forces", unempirical as it is, is acceptable, because the device of representing a combination of forces by a parallelogram can be used in many circumstances. In the same way, the idea of representing light beams as billiard balls is in many circumstances an "acceptable" metaphor. In order to see that the classical "Popperian" criteria are insufficient, a simple mental experiment suffices. Suppose I develop a mythical theory such as "Jupiter has decided that... [follows a set of statements enunciating Huygens' 'laws' as they are]". The theory will be acceptable according to Popperian criteria. Its consequences will be falsifiable. It will normally not be held as scientific, though, because one of its statements cannot be accepted: Jupiter is not an acceptable notion in a scientific theory.

In other words, a theory T should not be appreciated only from the viewpoint of the quality or validity of its consequences, but also in itself, so to speak. T is a set $\{g, s(g)\}$ including concepts g and statements $s(g)$ using these concepts (in Huygens' theory one of the concepts g is the notion of the "parallelogram of forces"). Now, g as well as s have to be "acceptable".

2 I lean heavily here on Boudon, R.(1994), «Relativiser le relativisme: quand la sociologie réfute la sociologie de la science», traduit de l'anglais, *Revue Tocqueville/Tocqueville Review*, Vol XV, N° 2, 109–129.

3 Pawson R. (1989), *A Measure for Measures*, London/New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

To summarize: In my shorthand notation, explaining f means building a theory T , with:

- (1) $T = \{g, s(g)\}$
- (2) $T \Rightarrow C$
- (3) $\{f, f', f'', \dots\} \in C.$

Not only (2) and (3), but (1) as well have to be acceptable in order for T to be considered an adequate explanation of f .

If this definition of a “good scientific theory” is accepted, it is very easy to find numerous examples of such theories in the social sciences. I will consider in detail one example borrowed from classical sociology and cite briefly some others.

As any scientist, Tocqueville is concerned in his main books exclusively with explaining puzzling phenomena. Why is American religiosity puzzling? Because it contradicts the long-term historical trend observed by Comte and others whereby religious interpretations of the world would progressively give way to a-religious ones. Laïcisation and disenchantment, as Max Weber stressed along with Schiller and Balzac, appear as dominant features of the modern world. For this reason, American exceptionalism appears to Tocqueville as a puzzle, as later to Weber. “Why is American religiosity so lively, while modernity generates a general erosion of dogmatic beliefs?”, asks Tocqueville in *Democracy*.

This exception derives, he says, from a main factor: that American religious life is organized around a host of sects, in contrast to, say, France where it is ruled by a dominant Church. This difference generates a number of effects. A dominant Church cannot help being involved in politics, while it is less both attractive and feasible for sects to compete with the State in political matters. Secondly, as any centralized State, the French State tends to control directly or indirectly all important social functions, as health, education and welfare. As these functions became increasingly crucial, the French State increased its control on them. This circumstance made the competition State-Church more acute. The American State, as a consequence of its decentralized organization, could more easily leave a great part of these functions to the religious denominations. As a consequence, while a climate of competition Church-State prevailed in centralized France, complementarity reigned in the US. The Churches remained in the US a basic dimension of civil society. They impregnated everyday life, since they played a great role notably

as far as the three above mentioned functions are concerned. And as they were perceived as being above politics, they were not associated in the minds of people with the current political and ideological cleavages, and were protected against the effects of ideological change over time.

This theory T is a “good theory”. It explains well the fact f (American religiosity) since $T \Rightarrow f$. It explains also many facts f', f'', etc. (e. g. the educational and welfare system in the US remains to a large extent in the hands of the Churches, while in France the role of the Church in this respect becomes marginal over time, etc.). On the whole, many relevant facts f', f'', etc. $\in C$ are well explained by T.

On the other hand, the concepts g (dominant Church in France, etc.) as well as the statements s(g) are all unambiguous and easily acceptable. The latter are either evident empirical statements (Catholic Church is dominant in France, sects prevail in the US, etc.), or easily acceptable non-empirical “psychological” or “counterfactual” statements („competition crystallizes hostility”, „being involved in politics entails being vulnerable to political hazards”, etc.). The latter counterfactual statement is acceptable notably because it is grounded in the implicit comparison with France Tocqueville introduces in his analysis of the American situation. Comparative analysis can be defined as an indirect way of making non-empirical counterfactual statements quasi-empirical and in this fashion more “acceptable”.

Moreover, as any good scientific theory, Tocqueville’s theory still inspires research on religious phenomena in our time⁴. It can easily be combined with other available theories on the same subject, with which it stands in a relation of complementarity rather than competition. It is compatible notably with A. Smith’s theory (a more diversified religious supply is more capable of meeting a diversified demand, so that atheism will tend, other things being equal, to be more widespread in societies with a monopolistic organization of religious life). Tocqueville’s theory is compatible as well with Weber’s (religious affiliation in the US is a functional substitute of social status in European societies such as France or Germany)⁵.

4 See e. g., Chaves, M. and Cann, D. (1992), “Regulation, Pluralism, and Religious Market Structure: Explaining Religious Vitality”, *Rationality & Society*, Vol. 4, 3, 272–90.

5 Boudon, R. (1993), “European Sociology: the Identity Lost?”, in Birgitta Nedelmann et Piotr Sztompka (eds), *Sociology in Europe. In Search of Identity*, New York/Berlin, de Gruyter, 27–44.

On the whole, *Tocqueville’s theory is as scientific and objectively valid as, say, Huygens’ theory of the pendulum*. The two successfully pass the Popperian as well as the non-Popperian criteria: the psychological statements implicitly included in Tocqueville’s theory (for instance: “parents who are in a context where their children will normally be educated in religious educational institutions will unlikely develop an attitude of hostility toward religion”) are easily acceptable. If the above definition of a “good scientific theory” is accepted, Tocqueville’s theory is as valid, credible, scientific, or even *true* as Huygens’.

This example suffices to show that the social sciences can produce objectively valid theories. Many others could be cited and analyzed in the same fashion. While the phenomenon explained by Tocqueville’s theory has the logical status of a singularity, other examples where the *explanandum* is rather a general phenomenon (appearing repeatedly over time and space) can easily be found. I have shown for instance that the discussion on magical beliefs is dominated by three theories⁶: Lévy-Bruhl’s (the existence of a “primitive mentality” would explain the irrationality of rational belief); Wittgenstein’s (magical rituals are to be interpreted symbolically: as expression of a wish, not of irrational causal beliefs); Weber-Durkheim’s (they have reasons to believe in false causal relations; we have reasons not to believe in them; our reasons are better than theirs; we also believe in all kinds of ungrounded causal relations). I cannot present this discussion in more detail. But it is easy to show that the third theory is a good theory: it explains all available data; all its elementary statements are acceptable. On the contrary, the two other theories are weaker in the sense that they present either strong logical defects or are incongruent with observational data. On the whole, Weber-Durkheim’s theory is the only one where the above conditions (1) to (3) are properly satisfied. This makes this theory a “good one”, as solid, again, as Huygens’ theory on the pendulum.

At this point, we meet a challenging question: why this contradiction between the fact that most sociological theories of lasting value follow, as the theories of the hard sciences, the program (1)–(3) and the fact that so many social scientists reject it? The answer is that the social sciences raise currently *interpretative* as well as *explanatory* questions. The social scientist is in a situation of interpretation when the answers to the questions he raises are unavoidably impregnated by his subjectivity, when in other words

6 Boudon, R. (1990), *L’art de se persuader*, Paris, Fayard.

he raises questions which cannot possibly be answered by a unique, objectively valid, best answer.

Two cases should be distinguished, however. In the first one, subjectivism is unavoidable and even indispensable, while in the second one, the subjectivism of the analyst is provisional, so to speak. In this second type, the questions and answers are indistinctly of the *interpretative* and of the *explanatory* type.

Interpreting

The distinction between *interpretative* and *explanatory* situations, as well as between the two situations of interpretation can be clarified by some examples. Consider the case of a historian writing a biography⁷. He will have to use some *Leitfaden* in order to organize an innumerable set of biographical data. So, a biography is always to some extent arbitrary; it cannot be written except by giving some acts a high symptomatic value, to others less *value*: act a_1 would be characteristic of the hero, act a_2 not. By these operations of selection and differential valuation, a *unity* is given to the career of the person. These operations are grounded on certain criteria which cannot be entirely objective. Rightly, Simmel compares the writing of a biography to the painting of a portrait. The same person can inspire several portraits which can all be just as good and still *interpret* differently his or her main psychological characteristics. A biography which would be entirely objective and better than any other is properly inconceivable.

The same analysis could be applied to many other products of the social sciences. Thus a history of the French or of the Russian Revolution will always necessarily be affected by the subjectivity of the historian and by the *Zeitgeist*.

Philosophy of history is another species of this *interpretative genre*. Works in the philosophy of history synthesize innumerable historical facts from a perspective inspired to the analyst by his situation as well as by the current *Zeitgeist*. Thus, when many sociologists and historians describe *individualism* as a basic mental dimension of the modern era they integrate innumerable and fuzzy sets of features in a conceptual whole, which makes this whole more *understandable*.

⁷ I follow here Simmel G. (1892), *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie*, Munich: Duncker & Humblot; (1923, 5th. ed.).

Contemporary so-called “theories of modernity” are also products belonging typically to this interpretative *genre*: they are attempts to characterize the main differences of our time with the past ones. Though they appear rather under the label sociology, they belong to the same *genre* as the “philosophy of history”.

In the same way, when R. Benedict in her *Patterns of culture*⁸ contrasts, following a neo-Nietzschean inspiration, Apollinian and Dionysian cultures, she summarizes in a basic conceptual dyad a multitude of concrete features and distinctions. By so doing, she gives a unity to the two types of culture. But of course, other typologies could be possible and other names assigned to the types.

It should also be stressed that *interpretation* can be a moment of a wider process, that it can represent essentially a heuristic move in a theorization process oriented on the whole toward *explanation*.

This case can be easily exemplified by Tocqueville again. In his *Old Regime* he starts from the intuition that “administrative centralization” is the main distinguishing feature between England and France. He proceeds then to show that this feature explains many differences between the two societies. But each of these partial analyses takes the form of an explanatory theory exactly of the type of those I have illustrated above. The same would be true of *Democracy in America II*: The main feature of modern societies is egalitarianism (interpretation). This overall vague concept works as a source of inspiration from which Tocqueville develops many explanatory theories of the hard type described by relations (1) to (3) above.

In these last examples, the interpretative and explanatory moments of an analysis are tightly related to one another. In the first ones (biography, “philosophy of history”, etc.), interpretation is the ultimate and sole objective.

Another, essential case, different from the ones I have just mentioned, will illustrate the complexity of the interaction between “interpretation” and “explanation”. Very often a phenomenon which we want to explain is so complicated that identifying the total causal network responsible for it is impossible. However, finite fragments of this causal network can be identified and the reality and validity of these subnetworks discussed in an unambiguously scientific explanatory mode. In most cases, it will be impossible to determine precisely the relative contribution of a particular causal chain. But it will be possible, at least in some cases, to demonstrate its existence.

8 Benedict R. (1935), *Patterns of culture*, Londres: Routledge.

Much attention has been devoted, for instance, in the sociological literature to the great social and economic mutation of the 16th century. Weber suggested that Calvinism and the religious movements inspired by Calvinism have produced an ethical context favorable to the development of values congenial with capitalism. Marx insisted on the role of the Spanish-Portuguese conquest of the New World: it had generated a permanent inflation during the 16th century. Durkheim insisted on the role of the increasing division of labor: it had reinforced the development of individualism. In his own words, Tocqueville developed the same causal assumptions. Others insisted on the chain reactions produced by major technical innovations. Still others on the progressive development during the Middle Ages of economic poles of development. This list, which could be made longer, is sufficient to confirm my point. Each of the mentioned causal sequences can be and has been discussed exactly as a causal sequence is discussed in medicine or physics. The causal sequence submitted by Durkheim seems valid. The causal sequence proposed by Weber is more controversial. Still, it has given birth to a discussion exactly of the type in the hard sciences.

But the question as to the causes of the 16th century transformation is in itself by essence a question of the *interpretative* type. The relative weight of the causal chains cannot be determined. Nobody can describe the total causal network to which they belong, nor say whether ethical or economic factors were more important. In short, the general question as to what are the causes of the great transformation in the 16th century is a multiple-answer question. As to the weighting of the various causal chains, it will necessarily derive from non-objective factors. Depending on the *Zeitgeist*, "idealistic" theories as Weber's, say, or "materialistic" theories, as Marx's or White's, will for instance be more or less popular. Of course the question of the origins of modern capitalism is just an example. Many others could be cited to illustrate my point.

The main point resulting from this discussion is that the social sciences *as they are* offer hosts of examples of theories as solid and valid as Huygens' theory of pendulum, in the sense that they explain relevant observed data by sets of statements whose elements can all be considered acceptable. But I have also tried to make clear that some questions legitimately raised by the social sciences are of the *interpretative* type. As such, they cannot be answered by unique, objectively valid answers.

Hence, a "positivist" view of the social sciences would be partial, since many social-scientific theories are not of the explanatory "Huygens'" type.

But an “interpretative” view is equally unacceptable, since many social-scientific theories are of the “Huygens” type.

These distinctions have been swept away by the progressive institutionalization in many academic circles of the Nietzschean formula: there are no facts, but merely interpretations. Taking this formula literally, as “post-modernist” social scientists propose to do, leads necessarily either to a mystical (it is true because I see it so, thanks to a Revelation) or to a nihilistic view of knowledge⁹.

When such irrational views become dominant, social science cannot seriously aim at “making sense” any more.

Written in English; edited by Martha Baker, Munich.

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⁹ An idiosyncratic, subjective („it is true because I believe so”), in a word mystical as well as a nihilistic view of knowledge can equally be drawn from the Nietzschean principle that objectivity is an illusion. It would not be hard to show that most human and social scientists and philosophers *à la mode* belong to one of these two categories. See Searle (J. R.), “Rationality and Realism; What is at Stake?” *Daedalus*, Fall, 1993, 55–83 and Ferry, L. and Renaut, A. (1985), *La pensée 68*, Paris, Gallimard. Explaining this wave of irrationality which is currently inundating the human sciences is a fascinating question for the sociology of knowledge.

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