

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

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Soziologie

Band: 22 (1996)

Heft: 3

Artikel: Sociology between universalism and diversity : some remarks on the
Alexander-Münch debate

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-814707>

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SOCIOLOGY BETWEEN UNIVERSALISM AND DIVERSITY: SOME REMARKS ON THE ALEXANDER-MÜNCH DEBATE

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In July 1994, a book edited by Birgitta Nedelmann and Piotr Sztompka and entitled *Sociology in Europe: In Search of Identity* (1993) was distributed to the participants in the World Congress of Sociology in Bielefeld. Jeffrey Alexander considered Richard Münch's contribution to that volume a challenge to "the universalist aspirations of social theory" and reacted in an angry tone. Münch replied in even sharper words¹ and other colleagues got involved in the debate, both in the *Swiss Journal of Sociology* or in *Theory*, the newsletter of the Research Committee on Social Theory of the ISA. What could first be viewed as just an overheated dispute between two individuals proved later on to reflect a wider malaise. Not only Münch's chapter on *The Contribution of German Social Theory to European Sociology*, but also the *Introduction* to the book by the editors themselves were regarded by a number of colleagues as offensive to American sociologists. Donald Levine, quoting from Nedelmann and Sztompka, wondered whether it was wise to state that European sociology must define itself "most importantly against American sociology" (1996, 13). Bryan Turner deplored "the current nationalist turn in European sociology" (1996, 22). On the other hand, George Ritzer found in Münch's piece a vindication of his own diagnosis of the McDonaldisation of American social theory (1996, 247–250).

The bystander cannot but be puzzled by such an accumulation of misunderstandings. It seems quite clear that neither Münch nor Nedelmann and Sztompka had any intention to be part of a "tradition of transatlantic academic violence". But it seems equally clear that some of our colleagues have failed to appreciate the broader context of certain incriminated sentences.

Personal rivalries or loyalties aside, what are the issues? First of all, there is the recurrent tension between universalistic aspirations and particularistic realities. If a universalistic orientation is common to all scientists, including social scientists, specific intellectual traditions and institutional contexts still play a role in the development of social theory, and will continue to do so in the future. Basically, this is a direct consequence of the distinctive character

1 Both texts were published in the *Swiss Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 21 (3), 1995. See: Alexander, 1995; Münch, 1995.

of the social sciences. It might be at variance with our scientific ideal but we have to come to terms with it once and for all. Whatever our comparative skills and international experience may be, we are very much part of the society in which we perform our professional roles, and this in turn has a strong influence on our vision of society and our conception of sociology. It does not suffice to proclaim ourselves comrades-in-arms in an international community of scholars to do away with this uncomfortable but stubborn reality. This is certainly not to say that “most sociological theories function as supporting ideologies for the struggles of their regions and nation-states”; I do not think that Münch would go for that, as Alexander suggests (1995, 542), since no serious sociologist would accept such a simplification nowadays. In many cases, however, it does really make sense to examine how the influence of certain intellectual products is related to the economic and/or political power of the region of the world in which they were created. It sounds unfair but, after all, life is unfair!

The particular society in which we live and work is a very strong socializing force, even for those who have moved around the world a great deal. And in most cases, whether we like it or not, the society in which people acquire their values and their sense of history still takes the form of a nation-state. I am not particularly fond of the nation-state and I think I have made this clear on various occasions ² but it is my opinion that we should not deceive ourselves into confusing our hopes for the future with the realities of our time. As Ritzer rightly observes, globalization theory, though highly fashionable, underestimates the continuous significance of the nation-state (1996, 247–250). The latter is still very much alive and has an undeniable impact not only on mentalities but also on the background assumptions tacitly incorporated in social theories, i. e. on this intellectual inheritance of which the late Gouldner said that it makes an imprint on a theorist “long before he becomes a theorist” ³. Recalling that sociology has developed out of various national traditions has become commonplace in Europe. This does not mean that we can speak about French, German or British sociology as if we had to deal with a homogeneous body of cumulative knowledge or with a unanimous community of scientists inspired by the same paradigmatic works, but does mean that typical sociological styles have evolved out of these various traditions. To put it briefly, the French first had to draw the line with philosophy, their German counterparts established their academic identity mostly through a debate with history while the British, facing the strong dominance of economics, put emphasis on social problems

2 See, for example: Coenen-Huther, 1995.

3 In a book that, for all its flaws, has the merit of drawing our attention to the difference between what sociologists really do and what they say, or think, they do (1970, 1972, 34).

and social inquiries. This made for various contexts of debate which continue to leave their mark on sociology today. Other national traditions are less known but of no lesser significance. Dutch sociology, originating neither in philosophy nor in history but in geography, quickly developed a strong interest in *beleid* (policy) and *beleidsrelevant onderzoek* (policy oriented research), and the history of Dutch sociology is mostly a history of commitment to policy-making. The history of Polish sociology, although quite different, is as much influenced by a specific national situation. From the very beginning, before the rebirth of the Polish state, when general sociology was first taught in 1908 by the *Towarzystwo Kursow Naukowych*, sociology was seen by the Poles as an intellectual tool for nation-building and resistance against foreign oppression.

To be sure, there are no one-way relations in such matters; we are still talking about tension, as did Nedelmann and Sztompka (1993, 9): tension between the devotion to ultimate values and the attachment to a particular identity. Various influences intermingle here: history, culture, language, institutions. The romantic concept of “one people, one language, one state” in which all these factors coincide does not fit a complex reality. All those who have an inside view of what is going on in multicultural states like Belgium or Switzerland understand that language alone is by far not the major obstacle to cooperation between sociologists who are of the same nationality but not of the same cultural background. Conversely, a shared language is no recipe for easy understanding, as shown by the relations between French, Canadian, Belgian and Swiss sociologists in the International Association of French-speaking Sociologists (AISLF). Aside from the fact that the very existence of such an association speaks volumes about the real state of a science that lays claim to universality⁴, it cannot be denied that colleagues from various nationalities are in the habit of tackling issues differently because of the specific institutional and socio-cultural contexts in which they operate.

Another point of contention is the current state of American sociology and its position in the world. It goes without saying that sociology was born in Europe. But it is equally true that sociology developed simultaneously in Europe and in the United States, and that a kind of symbiotic relation emerged through mutual exchanges. Albion Small founded the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1895; Durkheim founded the *Année sociologique* in 1897. Simmel was published in both journals. But the direction and meaning of these intellectual exchanges evolved with time. Until the 1930s, it was not uncommon for young American scholars to make a pilgrimage to Europe. Albion Small studied in Berlin and Leipzig. George Herbert Mead went to Berlin. So did Robert Park, who studied with Windelband and Simmel. Sumner spent time in Geneva,

4 As Irving Horowitz once pointed out to me.

Göttingen and Oxford. Parsons studied at the London School of Economics where he came under the influence of Malinowski and later became a regular visitor in Marianne Weber's "salon" in Heidelberg. After World War II, however, American sociologists clearly took the lead and the movement changed direction. A whole generation of European sociologists, some of them now among the most prominent in their respective countries, received a postgraduate education in American universities. The product of the earlier reception of various European traditions of thought brought to new life in the United States came back to Europe as powerful syntheses and helped European sociologists to better understand each other.

Under such circumstances, is there any reason to focus on the American sociological scene to detect "homogeneity, blandness, and mediocrity"?⁵ It should be borne in mind that the most damning assessments of the condition of American sociology came from American sociologists. Aside from other polemical aspects, one line of criticism is common to authors as different as C. Wright Mills (1959) and Peter Berger (1992, 1994): bureaucratization, standardization, parochialism, lack of imagination. I for one believe that for better or for worse, America is still taking the lead. Therefore, I would not speak of an "American disease" as does Ritzer (1996, 248) but of a stage of stagnation of institutionalized sociology on both sides of the Atlantic, of which the initial diagnosis was made in America.⁶ When I first read Mills's description of the bureaucratization of research in the 60s, I already had the feeling that it applied to Europe as well. And when, thirty years later, I read Peter Berger's indictment of a training and reward system which prevents sociologists practicing their craft in the classical vein from emerging, it was not my impression that the situation in Europe was any different. Thus, we do have a lot in common. But in an overall context of degeneration of academic life, even the "cross-Atlantic interchange" celebrated by Levine (1996, 14) is often a caricature of earlier scholarly exchanges. There is a new jet-set of conference buddies who have an renewed stake in grand theory in the most abstract form, since it spares them the trouble of engaging in serious comparative analysis.

Finally there is the language issue. Scientists need a language of communication at the international level. There is every reason to acknowledge – and to gladly acknowledge – the fact that English has become the *lingua franca* of our time. Of course, that too is unfair for those whose mother tongue is not English; but that too is a fact of life. The argument of impoverishment of

5 I agree with Levine (1996, 14) that Münch's ideal type of American sociology can be read that way.

6 A stagnation that might very well lead to disintegration, as Horowitz recently observed (1993, 1995).

communication often advanced by some of my French colleagues is baseless. Erasmus of Rotterdam wrote and corresponded in Latin. I do not think that it impaired his thinking or inhibited his contacts with other scholars of his time. But of course, Latin did not stir up the same feelings of inequity as English. Besides, there is no contradiction between the acceptance of one language as the most suitable tool for transatlantic communication and the use of other languages at the regional level. Nevertheless, the practice of sociology requires the learning of foreign languages and familiarity with foreign cultures. But many European sociologists have the feeling that the great majority of their American colleagues have stopped making that effort; even worse: that some of them take cynical advantage of their linguistic handicap. This might account in part for the "anti-American sentiment" which preoccupied Levine in Bielefeld (1996, 13). My own concern is not that American sociologists steal the show at world congresses but that they insulate themselves from other cultures while having a naïve sense of being citizens of the world. Of course, the French often give us serious reasons to voice the same fears; but this is of far less importance worldwide.

At about the same time, Sztompka (1993, 146) and myself (1993, 129) suggested that the profound changes in Central and Eastern Europe might bring about a new surge of sociological creativity. The same idea was brought up again by Nedelmann and Sztompka (1993, 1). More than any exclusionary trend, this hope of a resurgence of sociology in Europe is at the core of the controversial book which triggered the present discussion.

Original English; edited by John Bisk

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