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## THE SOCIOLOGIST OF RELIGION AS AN EXPERT: DISCUSSING WILSON'S PAPER

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One of the major qualities of Wilson's paper is to emphasize the empirical evidence of some dilemmas which the sociologist must resolve when he accepts to share social stakes with other people. In fact, introducing such questions is easier when it is done from a normative or a purely theoretical point of view, alleging an ideal sociology, than in the way we find it here. When the sociologist speaks like a normal human being committed in the field of real social interactions, his epistemological situation becomes much more complex than when he stays comfortably in his office. He has to take into account realities that the pure theoretical models may ignore. Far from us the idea of making any attempt to devaluate theoretical work. Simply, we assume that one must be aware of linking theory and practice. Theory becomes an illusion when it neglects to do so, when it declines the risk of braving out true situations. Theory is made in order to generate explanations of practices. Its first requisite is to be grounded in empirical evidences. Thus the topic of Wilson's paper is not a paradox. It stresses many theoretical questions, most of them requiring close attention.

We can conclude from Wilson's argumentation that the position of the sociologist of religion, when summoned before the court as an expert, is very uncomfortable. This, however, is not only relevant in the juridical context. There is no ideal sociological position in the real world of social intercourse. And such a proposition can be extended to any sociological speech produced in vivo, whether it be in a mediatic situation, when one has to react to social events, or in an educational one, when one has to share and clarify questions in the classroom. In vivo contexts do not allow the wide virtualities of in vitro thinking. In real life situations, one cannot avoid raising the problem of personal implication and subjective preferences inherent to any intercourse, intervention or interference with other people. There is no given objectivity, once and for all, but just a labour aiming at a relative objectivity, and depending upon the rigour of the scientist as a person of method. Objectivity is always deficient. So the scientist has to put into light its limits by criticizing his own postulates and concepts, and doing so he must not forget affective and subjective preferences he shares with other people or fights for in everyday life. Science, shall we say with some contemporary philosophers, is consciousness of error.

We shall put forward three questions in the present discussion. The first one rises directly from this epistemological concern: What is the kind of truth requested from the sociologist before the court? The second one belongs to the field of sociology of knowledge: What is the possible locus of his sociological discourse in such a situation? How can he understand the whole complexity of affinities and oppositions, friendships and antipathies, admitted or not, which are part of the dramatics played here? The third one, finally, regards the juridical value of his word, that is, the concerns with the arbitrariness of the law, or, more simply, with the purposes of court judgments.

### **1. The expert facing the “truth”**

One year ago, on the ultimate day of the episode of the Solar Temple affair, I was asked, as an expert commentator, to participate in the press conference following the drama, in fact a few hours after the discovery of the suicide of members of the sect. This *in vivo* situation was such: the spokesmen for the policemen in charge of the inquiry had to make an account of the scene they had found, and I was supposed to react as a sociologist of religion to the questions raised by a TV columnist. The press conference went quite well, the policemen assessing the results of their first investigations and speaking with great reserve. They did not hide the fact that they were personally distraught by what they had found, and accepted, from an humanitarian point of view, the questions about the children left by the members of the sect. They even confessed to be shocked by that situation, in their own vision of the world, but abstained of any value judgments. Hearing that, as anybody, I must confess I was surprised by the quality of the exposé, which had no relevance with any sociological or psychological expertise but was presented with shades of meaning, prudence and circumspection, making minimal room to apparent prejudices. What was not my confusion – fortunately, brief – when asked by the columnist: “Mr. Lemieux, what must we think about that?”

I felt as if I were thrown in a swimming pool. Yet the situation was foreseeable and quite easy to understand. On the one hand, the TV man and I, as everyone else, were confronted with the trauma of a strong emotional event. On the other hand, as a sociologist, a representative of Science, I was the one supposed to know. The columnist was thus requesting from this representative of Science no less than the truth, this concept being understood in its most uncritical meaning: What we must think (“We” being here “anybody”).

The position of the sociologist as an expert before the media is not structurally different from the one he is assigned before the court: he preserves the myth of

Science. Simply, it is less carefully phrased. Again, this position is not very far from the teaching scenario, when, as a professor, he is requested to advise on the meanings of social events. In all these situations, he is invested with almost absolute, uncritical knowledge, by those who listen to him. So, he has to put a basic question to himself: Does this knowledge – as supposed by others – have any compatibility with his scientific work? Trapped by the image of science, is not such a position contravening true science, the one which is researching, hypothesizing, interrogating, conjecturing, that is, a critical process of knowledge? Is there not a gap between the terms used to state a social phenomenon, its *énoncé*, and the statement or actual enunciation of it? Is there not a gap between the truth requested from the sociologist and the mode of production of his opinion, a mode depending upon a lot of explicit and implicit preambles, and which is relevant to the complexity of an human situation he is, like anybody, trying to understand? Then, as a sociologist and a scientist, does he not have, first, to give an account of the limits of his reasoning, discourse, and knowledge?

One could say that the scientist, as an expert, stands between two very different speaking platforms: The first one establishes the scientificity of his word, the other guarantees the political value of the same word. Scientific strictness and political correctness are not necessarily loving sisters. But, once again, if such a theoretical problematic allows to better understand the problem, it does not solve it. The theoretical distinction is not very much operational in the field of concrete social intercourse: It is as a scientist that the sociologist is requested an expert advice which, in fact, is usually also a political one. Despite careful phrasing before the court, the media or the classroom, he is torn by the epistemological dilemma which sets him an impossible goal: to make certainty with uncertainty, to state objectivity with unobjective material, depending, for a good part of it, upon commonly shared beliefs, emotions, likes and dislikes. He has to set out truth with a discourse which is, at its best, a work in progress.

So, in such a process, science is usually what is perverted, alienated to social imperatives. However honourable and legitimate these may be, science cannot dominate, nor control them. Then the injunction of truth is a drama for the alleged expert. Can it be negotiated? Is it possible to preserve a truth which is a process of knowledge, and, at the same time, to serve a truth which is a human concern?

## 2. The syndrome of Peter: to be or not to be in it

The anecdote of the Solar Temple affair also puts into light a situation common to any sociologist who has to speak about sectarian groups. The "truth" requested from him then requires specific terms. It is supposed to be shared by everybody or at least, given the conflictual situation, by all those who do not belong to the group under trial. This is, again, quite a peculiar meaning of the quest for truth, but, as we shall see, it is also a very frequent one. The expert, in this situation, is straightaway becoming the representative of the normal way of living, that normality which defines itself as not belonging to the sect or not participating in any deviant behaviour, or in anything that is associated with the group under proceedings and considered as abnormal. Thus the objectivity, consisting of not belonging to it, allows all those who are not concerned or directly affected by the positions under trial to consider themselves as normal, and, therefore, to feel as safe as possible.

The other, indeed, is threatening. The unknown quality of his nature frightens. One cannot assert he knows where it leads. People seeming to be normal (like the well-educated people of the Solar Temple) are overcome by its appeal, as if they were under the charming voice of a mermaid's song rerouting the most courageous seamen. Like Ulysses, which mast do we have to be tied to?

Wilson suggests that the contemporary position of the sociologist as an expert be opposed to the more traditional position of the theologian. "In such matters, he writes, the orthodox theologian is not only unqualified, but his very commitment to one particular denomination must engender doubts concerning his eligibility for the role of expert witness". Surely. However, we may think that this theologian, with the use of comparable arguments, has very successfully played his expert role when his Church was in the position of securing the socio-cultural framing of societies where the proceedings were going on. Medieval Inquisition, in this perspective, has been far from the juridical scarecrow the shortsighted modernists have made of it. It has consisted in making theologians experts before the courts. More precisely, it assigned them investigation powers (from the Latin word *inquisitio*: inquiring) in order to ensure the accuracy of the charge. Contrary to what is usually said about this, this systematization of procedures was not a regression but a progression of law. Historians can advance now that in Toulouse, for example, at the most troubled times of the Cathar heresy, only one out of nine defendants was ultimately prosecuted after the inquiry. The discharge of others for lack of evidence has surely saved lives and much money to the administration of Justice. In spite of former drifts of these procedures, notably in the seventeenth Century witch-hunting, theologians then played the role of experts, a role

comparable with the one requested of today's sociologists, and consisting in a secure representation of a common truth.

The medieval theologian was invested with quite inordinate powers: he could decide if there was sufficient evidence to make justice. Then he was in the position of defining the boundaries between inside and outside social normality, that is, in concrete terms, to determine criteria for normal social concerns and causes of exclusion from them. The standards for this were those of his society, of which he was an eminent member as a theologian, it being understood that his Church, when acknowledging his position, guaranteed his words, and at the same time assured its own power in this society. In other words, we must say that the credibility of this expert, to stand up to analysis, did not come from his science but from his belonging. It was dependent on the culture conferring authority upon him, in the name of certainties that prevailed in it. Today like yesterday, formal or informal social imperatives command a common identity from where justice is made, not only finding its way out of social troubles but becoming thinkable. Thus, expertising in justice making is not a fantasy. It is an elementary requisite. It allows the judge the minimal intelligence – not necessarily sufficient but the most appropriate it can be – in order to be efficient. Once, not so long ago, the main part of this intelligence was liable to theologians. Now, it is more redeemable to expertise from human sciences.

In the past, the theologian could say who was in and who was out of the sectarian group. He could decide about the dreaded deviancy of others because he presented guarantees of not being in it. Is not the scientist now exactly in the same position?

Obviously, there is a difference. The authority of the theologian was conferred by a religious institution, which is not the case of the sociologist. However, does not the organization of contemporary societies comprise such a number of myths, beliefs and implicit creeds that little consideration has to be given to this distinction? If imperatives and interdicts of contemporary societies are no more uttered out by Churches, are they less effective? Diffused from the implacable laws of the free market, as say in all seriousness clergymen of a new type, do they not impose the strongest prescriptions to ordinary people? Then, when the sociologist is requested to represent and transcribe for the judge criteria of normality and deviance in this society, is he not, knowing it or not, a servant of the suitable truth which appears in it? Does he not hold his ministry from a common religious position confronting wandering and heresy? Is he not entering a priesthood similar to the one of the medieval theologian, emphasizing mysteries of "global society", and receiving from this the dignity



of an authorized speaker? Is he not then just taking the place of traditions which are now marginalized?

The real aim of such an enterprise is indeed the designation of the other. That's why we call it the syndrom of Peter. "Were you not with him?", is he asked when Jesus is under trial. Historical christianism has made Peter's confusion a denial. Can we not see in it, also, the typical situation of any human being who is uncertain of his own quest for meaning? When torn between feelings of liking and disliking, when disturbed in his sense of security, is not this ordinary human reduced to not knowing where the other is driving him? Peter, in his difficulty to say if he is in or out of Jesus' story is a good representative of mankind. He demonstrates the unknown shared by all humanity. For the sociologist of religion, as for Peter, this ambiguous quest, from where truth arises, is extremely hard to manage.

### **3. The arbitrary nature of law: understanding is not excusing**

What is the meaning of not belonging? Today like yesterday, it is less a matter of objectivity than a matter of representation. It concerns less the reality of the world than the imagination of it. Not to be a deviant means to stay in the locus of normality, where common values and norms define identity of individuals and collectivities. This is not an objective position of knowledge, but a subjective one, as subjective as the other where somebody confesses belonging to a group, and then acknowledges a particular identity. When a case implies parties adopting a particular identity, on one hand, and a common identity, on the other hand, despite careful phrasing the sociologist of religion will always be heard from the challenge of being in or out. Consciously or not, he is involved, if not compromised, that is to say he is suspicious of positive or negative feelings about the group under trial. The unknowing common to everybody as regards the meaning of life, which brings him to question any production of meaning, is of no interest for the debate. Then, is not science necessarily reduced to a normative process, in which order of things, and no more human concerns, is the key of interpretation?

The specific occupation and craft of the sociologist consists in trying to build an explanation in which the other's quest becomes understandable. In this effort, which is never indifferent to his own quest, the main problem is not displaying or hiding his own convictions and doubts, but giving himself means to account for his own view of the other. This willingness to give account, in that respect, corresponds to an ethical requirement. It's a matter of doing so

that the other, any other, can become capable of judging things for his own benefit.

It happens, in the exercise of this effort to understand, that the sociologist develops empathy towards those he gets close to. Why not? Trying to understand, discovering the relativity, the complexity, and sometimes the suffering that is scattered along human itineraries, unveiling the survival shrewdness displayed against hazardous trails, he cannot avoid showing solidarity if he remembers his own human condition. The sociologist, at this point, does not differ from the mental health professional who, without giving way to distress for himself, comes to consider the delirium of his patient not as madness or insanity but as a means for overcoming nonsense, an incredible effort, whether it be a dead-end or not, in order to survive impossible conditions of life. When someone sees deviance as madness or criminal behavior, he deals with human beings whose history strangely reminds him of his own ... That's what can be called empathy. It is not a bias for or against, but the refusal of any prejudice, in order to give the other his chance, in view of the sentence that will be passed on him anyway.

However, once again things are not so simple in reality. Empathy, indeed, does not destroy law requirements. A human group or a society, regardless of the understanding one may develop about others, is built on the arbitrariness of a law. This one, again, is not a whim or an extravagancy. It is the elementary condition to make coexistence possible, because without it, this coexistence would be indefinitely buffeted by blind desires and fantasies. To become effective, the opportunity of living with others requires that everyone gives up something of his desire and renounces, in short, being the whole world by himself alone. In order to stand among others, one must accept the limits that make life a concrete possibility. But law, if it stands by itself, stays very frail. Then, in order to make coexistence possible, something like a total view of the world is very helpful.

Religious utopias, not only in their sectarian mode but also in their historical forms, present many figures of such an insurance about meaning. They put forward the imaginary of a totality, whether it be a cosmic order, or an intelligent machine commanding meaning, or an ideal of purity presenting itself as a necessary way to salvation. Religion, says Peter Berger, has something to do with world-maintenance. It is the "establishment, through human activity, of an all-embracing sacred order, that is, of a sacred cosmos that will be capable of maintaining itself in the ever-present face of chaos".<sup>1</sup> Religious imaginary

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1 Peter Berger (1967), *The Sacred Canopy. Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, New York: Doubleday & Company, 51.



does not hold, then, without the possibility of a totality. From there to become totalitarian, there is only one step. History shows it is very easy to walk. And law has to prevent it.

One can ask, then, about the stake of juridical contentious implying religious behaviours. Beyond contingencies that they put into light, are they not precisely depending of this dreadful totalitarianism which threatens the fragile human coexistence? This could explain why, on one hand, sects and non conformist religious experiences are so much demonized in present days, as in former times, and, on the other hand, why the expert scientist is so often requested for what he cannot do, that is reducing the intellectual debate to certainties, whereas his "science" does not accredit him more than other persons to define a prescriptive order of the world.

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