

Science and Sociology

Antoni Lindgren

Associate professor/Senior lecturer in Sociology

Department of Economy, Technology and Society

Luleå University of Technology

SE-97187 Luleå, Sweden

Tel: 46-920-491-383 E-mail: antoni.lindgren@ltu.se

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Abstract

Inherent in sociology there is a contradiction between sociology as a science and sociology as a representation of the modern society. In this article this contradiction is traced from the origin of sociology. In this origin there also is a solution to this contradiction to be rediscovered.

Keywords: Sociology, Science, Marx, Durkheim, Comte, Weber

1. Introduction

In sociology there is a contradiction between sociology as a science and sociology as a representation of the modern society. In this article this contradiction is traced from the history of sociology. In this history there is also a solution to the contradiction.

2. The origin of sociology

It is quite common to say that sociology starts with August Comte (1798-1858) (Note 1). He is considered to be “the father of sociology”. Surely there were others using the word “sociology” at that time (Note 2) but he is the one attributed to have coined the word “sociology” as the name of the new science he was developing. Though there probably were more people involved – Saint Simon, Montesquieu, to take the today well-known – it is reasonably to say that Comte was the most important creator of sociology and Emile Durkheim (1859-1917) on this foundation established sociology as a science (Note 3). Durkheim was basically propagating Comte’s ideas but in a somewhat different – more “scientifique” - language. Comte – as the creator of the Religion of Humanity – was during his life-time and for a long time after a too controversial person to be accepted by that times academic elites. So, it is reasonable to say that sociology starts with Comte and Durkheim jointly (Note 4). It was surprisingly short lived though – in Europe, in USA it lived on (Note 5). After the death of Durkheim in 1917 sociology practically disappears from the universities in Europe and is reborn after the second world war in a new form: in a marriage between positivism and functionalism (Note 6).

Still the old and the new notion of sociology have “society” in common: that sociology is about society. From this –of among other things - we can conclude that each time also has its own kind of sociology: science of society.

3. Capitalism and sociology

Another conclusion is that sociology – the science of society – is emerging at the same time as society is changing from “feudalism” into “capitalism”. This new kind of society both Comte and Durkheim are discussing as the society of their time. They call it “industrial society” and “organic society” respectively (Note 7). Another word for this society is “capitalism” – used by the French utopian socialists, Saint-Simon and by another of the “classical” sociologist Karl Marx (1818-83) (Note 8). Historically this word “capitalism” emerges at the same time as historians date the breakthrough of this new society: mid 19th century (Note 9). Still today “capitalism” – as late capitalism, financial capitalism etc - is also the word we generally know this kind of society in.

Then it seems as that “sociology”, “society” and “capitalism” are different words for the same phenomena: that which we call “society”. What we can suspect is that this seemingly coincidence of the creation of sociology as a new science – Comte - which is about society as its “object” – Durkheim - is but a self-understanding of this new kind of society: a self-understanding of capitalism. Sociology is the self-understanding of capitalism.

4. Ideology and sociology

Then, if sociology is the self-understanding of capitalism it is the ideology of capitalism. Incidentally, the notion of ideology is also a creation of the early 19th century, in France meaning people taking a “political” standpoint in terms of society and propagating this (Note 10). Comte – and Durkheim – though thought of themselves as positivists”, e.g., doing something “scientific, objective”. They thought that “science” is something objective, different from ideology. But at the same time they – as heirs of the ideas of Enlightenment – wanted to improve society, to create a Good society. Both Comte and Durkheim thought that “development” of society was something “objective” and their goal, aim was to make this development better, by reforming society. Their view of society was that the development was a harmonious process, that science – that is: sociology - could contribute to the harmonious development, to creating a consensus order (Note 11). As Frenchman – and rationalists – they believed in rationality, that reason will rule in the world and in society.

5. Science and sociology

Comte was thinking of sociology as a science in terms of positivism. He used “positivism” as a synonymous word to “sociology”. He believed that sociology as a science was about observing reality and discovering – just like Isaac Newton (1643-1727) had found laws in nature - patterns then to follow and promote. (Note 12) This resembles nature’s “science” but there is a difference: Comte was not interested in explanation – finding causes - in theoretical terms: in “metaphysics” (Note 13). He also thought that there was a development of different sciences through history, starting with astronomy, mathematic etc ending but lately with positivism/sociology and in the future culminating in a science of religion. In his late years he used the name positivism for this science-religion. Meantime there was a change in method - from analytic sciences – physics chemistry etc - to holistic sciences - with the creations of biology, sociology etc. In holistic sciences parts are explained by the whole. Though he himself did not use the word “function”, this was close – but not the intention - to his kind of understanding (Note 14).

6. The whole

The difference from functionalism follows from that Comte at the same time had a view of this whole as a whole and as a picture of Man. Man and society were the same. He used the two concepts “statics” and “dynamics”: or: “order” and “development” (Note 15). He thought that through the human history a social “order” expressing man was slowly evolving. “Progress is the development of order” - the slogan on the flag of the Religion of Humanity - was expressing this thought (Note 16).

This order, this structure: the “statics” of society was the same as the nature of man. Man is, according to Comte – and many other “philosophers” at his time and earlier - threefold: heart, will and reason or to make it simpler; characterized by “feeling”, “willing” and “reasoning” (Note 17). In society the family stands for feelings, work for expression of “the will” and at his time religion but soon positivism/sociology stands for “reason”. Just like in a single individual these faculties must be in harmony in society and this harmony: consensus is the sign of the Good society.

7. Man and sociology

Then, in Comte’s sociology there is a solution to the later contradiction in sociology. Inherent in Comte is an idea that the aim and goal of development is the human society. The goal of society is the fulfilment of man. Sociology is about observing this development of society and at the same time to promote the Good, e.g., human society. Since society is a creation of man as man the Good society is a society where people feel good e.g., love. The Good society is the “object” of the science of sociology (Note 18).

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Notes

Note 1. Nationalencyklopedin: "Comte". Bra Böcker AB. Belgien 1995.

Note 2. Nationalencyklopedin: "Comte". Bra Böcker AB. Belgien 1995.

Note 3. Cf. Lewis A. Coser: *Masters of Sociological Thought: Ideas in historical and social Context*. Har. Brace Janoviich. N.Y. 1977. George Ritzer: *sociological Theory*. McGraw-Hill. USA. 1996.. Raymond Aron: *Det sociologiska tänkandet del 1 och 2*, Argos förlag Lund 1965/67.

Note 4. Cf. Anders Boglind, Sven Eliaesson och Per Månsson (red): *Kapital, Rationalitet och social sammanhållning*. Rabén Prisma. Stockholm 1995. Boglind though credits Durkheim with the epithet "father"Op.Cit. pp.192-6.

Note 5. Anders Boglind: *Strukturalism och funktionalism in Per Månson (red)(1995): Moderna samhällsteorier*. Rabén Prisma. Stockholm.

Note 6. Cf. the critic of this sociology in: C Wright Mills (1959): *Den sociologiska visionen*. Arkiv förlag. Lund1985.

Note 7. Cf. Aron 1965. 1967.

Note 8. Boglind in Boglind et al.

Note 9. Cf. E.J. Hobsbawn. *Kapitalets tidsålder*. Tidens förlag. Kristianstad 1981.

Note 10. In France, after the French revolution 1789. Cf. Nationalencyklopedin: *ideology and Alex Callinicos: Social Theory. A Historical Introduction*. New York University Press. USA 1999, pp.59-60.

Note 11. Aron 1965, pp.103-4.

Note 12. Op. Cit.

Note 13. Coser p. 7, Aron 1965 p. 102.

Note 14. Aron 1965.

Note 15. Aron p. 87, Boglind 192-3.

Note 16. Aron 1965 .p.88.

Note 17. Cf.my book 2008 and Aron 1965. p. 90

Note 18. This is reflected in Ritzer, Coser and other tellers of the history of sociology pointing out that the early classical sociologist all were engaged in reforming society, e.g., they had a social patos. As if this is something peculiar differing the classics from the modern sociologists. Instead we should ask ourselves: what happened to the social patos of the sociologists in the 20th century?