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What Is the Sociology of Knowledge?

The Theoretical Status of the Sociology of Knowledge

What is the sociology of knowledge? A discipline? A subdiscipline? A distinct sphere of problems? An idea of a theoretical perspective in cultivating the social sciences? A formula of interpretation? A *sui generis* method of social reflection?

In other words, how can one define the subject matter of one's analysis if one's interest in the sociology of knowledge is declared? The embarrassment caused by that question is fully realized when we find that the convenient supposition that in engaging in the sociology of knowledge we engage in a distinct discipline or just a subdiscipline is not legitimate. The sociology of knowledge may be called a subdiscipline only by way of a stylistic abbreviation. The problem begins already when we want to determine whether it is a subdiscipline of sociology or philosophy. The last question is, however, of lesser importance since the status of subdiscipline is greatly problematic in the case of the sociology of knowledge.

The sociology of knowledge does not investigate its own subject matter and does not use its own methods. Nor has it been institutionalized sufficiently to secure theoretical autonomy: there are, for instance, no handbooks of the sociology of knowledge, and university departments are exceptional cases.

The sociology of knowledge has been dominated by metatheoretical or theoretical reflection (singled out by Mannheim as the theory of the sociology of knowledge), while research practice (singled out by Mannheim as the applied sociology of knowledge) is almost absent.

But if the sociology of knowledge is not a full-fledged subdiscipline then what is it?

Let us analyse several possibilities indicated at the outset, beginning with the suggestion that the sociology of knowledge is a certain sphere of problems. This formulation implies the assumption that it is a sphere which is to a large extent autonomous. A sphere of problems can usually be described by certain questions which are typical of it. How is that in the case of the sociology of knowledge? There is no doubt that there are questions which have been decisive for the emergence of the very idea of sociology of knowledge. One such question, for instance, is the problem of the types of knowledge dependent on the social and cultural conditions under which knowledge comes to being. That issue absorbed the attention of Max Scheler, who in a sense invented the term sociology of knowledge.

But while we can point to certain questions typical of the sociology

of knowledge that way of defining its problems lacks precision. It is probably just impossible to exhaust the list of the questions which can emerge within its sphere.

For such an interpretation of the sociology of knowledge its scope remains open all the time. It has never been strictly defined. On the contrary. The sociology of knowledge meant by Max Scheler was modified already by his earliest followers, beginning with Karl Mannheim. In the literature of the subject attention is drawn to the fact that, for instance, Mannheim considerably increased the extent to which knowledge is determined by socio-economic conditions. While Scheler thought that the emergence of a definite idea in a given place and at a given time depends on those conditions, Mannheim maintained that not only the emergence of that idea but its content as well are determined by them. It would be reckless to dismiss that modification as one of small significance. In fact, only that modification introduced by Mannheim has accounted for both the majority of the theoretical troubles of the sociology of knowledge and its inspiratory force. But at the same time Mannheim's formula is responsible for the abandonment on many ideas to be found in Scheler's original concept.

This digression helps us realize how difficult it is to go beyond that very general definition of the range of problems of the sociology of knowledge which says that it is concerned with problems related to the social context of knowledge.

Another endeavour to define in greater detail the general sphere of problems of the sociology of knowledge could consist in a reconstruction of its problems in a manner specific to the history of social thought. The path leading to such a reconstruction can be seen in an analysis of the works by various authors who deliberately use the common label of *sociology of knowledge*. The problems of the sociology of knowledge conceived in this way could, of course, be extended so as to cover its various anticipations found in the various authors whose ideas came ahead of the coining of the term itself. But when proceeding in this way we are not in a position unambiguously to define the sphere of problems for which we are looking.

But the reconstruction of the historically observable ways of interpreting the sociology of knowledge does not, of course, preclude a completely new formula for that postulated discipline. This has been confirmed by history. Numerous declarations concerned with research in the sociology of knowledge do not show the autonomy of that sphere of reflection. On the contrary, they can suggest that the sociology of knowledge is an orientation which sometimes crops up within other disciplines. If, however, such or other author makes use of the term sociology of knowledge, he must in most cases precisely define the range of the problems in which he is interested.

Thus the answer to the question about what the sociology of knowledge is, which states that it is a certain sphere of problems is clearly insufficient. It does not even demarcate the area suggested in that way. The latter can only be described in very general terms, which does not enable one to identify the sociology of knowledge from the theoretical point of view.

Let us now reflect on whether the sociology of knowledge is not to be interpreted as a specific theory of intellectual production. Specific

in the sense that it investigates all intellectual production in its social aspect.¹

For such an interpretation the sociology of knowledge becomes a social theory of cognition. First of all, when speaking about knowledge we then refer to the entire symbolic content of the human mind and to the mechanism of interaction with the external world, which is typical of man. Knowledge understood in this way is above all a result of socialization processes, including all educational operations. Thus both the concept of knowledge and the social problems of the latter are absorbed by the conception of man. Hence the attempts to cultivate such a sociology of knowledge on the one hand refer to the broadest meanings of the initial terms (especially that of knowledge) and on the other arbitrarily narrow down the range of problems to a certain selected sphere. An example is provided by P. Berger and T. Luckmann, at least for one of the many possible interpretations of their work. The study of social problems of knowledge becomes in their book an analysis of the game of rival influences upon human consciousness and the content of the human mind (Berger, Luckmann 1966).

Thus the interpretation of the sociology of knowledge as the social theory of intellectual production results in arbitrary conceptualizations of selected problems of social anthropology. The term sociology of knowledge accordingly became an auxiliary label used to single out a group of problems from another subdisciplines whose status is already recognized. In other words, the sociology of knowledge ceases to aspire to theoretical autonomy. But then the question arises whether such aspirations are necessary, and above all, whether they are well grounded. One could after all treat the sociology of knowledge as a *sui generis* theoretical perspective in the cultivation of the social sciences, as a certain requirement concerned with interpretation, or even as a method of social reflection. The formulations render, in different ways, the same intuition relative to the interpretation of the sociology of knowledge. Let us inspect this suggestion more closely.

The social sciences abound in peculiarities which essentially reflect upon their theoretical status (Ossowski 1967). Methodological reflection concerned with those disciplines has incessantly to cope with adjusting the ideal of what is scientific to their theoretical aspirations (Mokrzycki 1980). While all perception of the real world assumes at least some concepts by means of which that real world may become a subject matter of discourse, the perception of the social world is in a special situation. Reference to the social world of the definite concepts, behind which we usually find an already assumed theory of that world, creates facts which actively work upon the real world, including their influence upon the researcher himself.

It is to be noted that the situation described in the scientific reflection on the social world has its analogue in the current thinking about that world. In other words, in both the scientific and the common per-

¹ It must be noted here that while one cannot imagine human knowledge without connections with, and even dependence upon, its social context, it is nevertheless not difficult to indicate such its aspects which can be examined regardless of that context. For instance, we do not question individual predispositions determined by the genetic endowment of the individual. It is true that such endowment also has its source outside the individual in question, but references to the socialization of man have a different sense.

ception of the social world we have to do with one and the same mechanism: conceptual categories formulated by man and the interpretation of facts by means of those categories are always interdependent. At the same time it is obvious that man does not create his concepts as an isolated individual; they are a results of his social existence. They are a result of socialization processes, beliefs imposed upon the individual by his group, common aspirations and interests, etc. These reflections produce not so much the suggestion, known from the literature of the subject, that the social world is created (even though this is quite obvious in the case of such reasoning) as the observation that what determines the form of social knowledge is not the sphere of "the real world" external to the cognizing subject (because that sphere is not attainable as such) but the socially determined thinking about the real world. In other words, what we know is determined not so much by "the world" which is external to us as by its socially grounded and socially transmitted image.

The sociology of knowledge which emerges in such a constellation of problems could be superficially interpreted as a substitute of epistemology, that is as a reflection on the sources of our knowledge. We have, therefore, to explain that that would not be a correct interpretation. The sociology of knowledge in the said setting of problems does not question the existence of other factors that influence the formation and the shape of knowledge. In particular, it does not question the existence of a "material substratum" of knowledge. It does assume, however, that neither its methods nor its interests reach beyond the social circumstances under which knowledge is formed. At the same time it states that that fragment of the sphere of problems which is accessible to the sociology of knowledge suffices to confirm the constitutive character of the said social circumstances.

Such ambitions can be detected in the said book by Berger and Luckmann, which offers a quite different interpretation of their book than that suggested above. By the way, there may be much more such interpretations, which do not exclude one another.

Let us reflect now on the theoretical and/or practical importance of the last-named perspective. The most obvious answer to the question would be to point to the fact that that perspective explains the formation of knowledge by referring to definite social mechanisms and their underlying reasons. But I have drawn the readers' attention to the close interdependence between those mechanisms and the knowledge shaped by them.

It is, therefore, easy to modify our interests and to focus them, instead on knowledge, on the mechanisms whereby that knowledge is produced and on the reasons which accompany the process. If so, then the question about the process of knowledge formation begins to function as an instrument: the process ceases to be treated as the final object of research. It turns out that processes related to the functioning of knowledge can be treated as a *sui generis* theory of society, which in any case enables us to answer the fundamental questions which are posed to any theory of society. It explains both the principle whereby societies continue their existence and the sources and process of change. In the light of such theory knowledge is understood instrumentally as subordinated to the social goals: the durability of, or change in, a given social group. Thus the sociology of knowledge becomes a method of analysing society.

Such a reversal of the relation between the theory of society and the sociology of knowledge is also possible if we adopt one of the many possible interpretations of the book by Berger and Luckmann. Treating the sociology of knowledge as a method in social research need not eliminate the advantages which the sociology of knowledge has for the reflection on knowledge—regardless of other theoretical goals which are than treated as the principal ones.

Thus the question about what the sociology of knowledge is admits of different answers. Hence the answers discussed above do not in the least exclude one another even though each is based on a different underlying conception of the cultivation of that “subdiscipline,” so that none of them suffices for a precise definition of the theoretical status of the sociology of knowledge. This situation, while it raises problems related to the theoretical identity of the sociology of knowledge, shows its potentialities as a source of inspiration. By the way, that inspiration has already left its traces in the various theoretical conceptions of the social sciences.

Thus it turns out that while it is difficult to answer the question about what the sociology of knowledge is, it is not difficult to explain what purposes it can serve.² Self-evidently, the comments made above do not pretend to be arguments in favour of the advantages of the sociology of knowledge, but merely indicate the possible paths for argumentation.

Now that we have stated in the foregoing preliminary remarks that the sociology of knowledge is an idea, a certain requirement, and even a perspective of social reflection, it seems to the point to turn our attention to such issues as the genealogy of that idea (in its both theoretical and historical sense) and its further fortunes and prospects. Let us first examine the circumstances under which the sociology of knowledge was born.

The genealogy of the sociology of knowledge

The intellectual and emotional unrest in the late 19th century, manifested, for instance, in the opinions of F. Nietzsche, gained in strength after the events in the first quarter of the present century. World War I made an incredible number of victims. Empires which still not much earlier seemed to have been models of stability were crushed. The age-old monarchy in Russia was replaced by the rule of the masses, convinced that such was the destiny of history, much earlier formulated by Marx in a complex social, economic, and philosophical doctrine. Following the defeat of Germany in World War I the previous euphoria of the major part of the German people was replaced by disappointment and frustration.

² It is even more difficult to demonstrate what the applied sociology of knowledge is. There are practically no sociologists of knowledge who would investigate empirically, at least under that label, the connections between knowledge and its social context. For instance, in the book by Berger and Luckmann there is the characteristic discrepancy between their requirement that the sociology of knowledge be empirical in character and the content of their book. Likewise, the chapter concerned with “empirical sociology of knowledge” in *Wissenssoziologie* (ed. by Nico Stehr and Volker Meja, Opladen 1981) is the shortest of all and practically does not report on the practical studies within that discipline.

Such were the events that shaped the atmosphere of the period in which the idea of sociology of knowledge came to be formulated in Germany. Max Scheler, who used that term for the first time in 1924, confirmed even by his biography the quaking of the signposts that indicated the course of life of the earlier generations.

The circumstances under which the new discipline was born were extraordinary enough to be mentioned here, although it would be difficult to state in unambiguous terms what was the possible relationship between them and the birth of the sociology of knowledge. What one can think in those matters remains guesswork. The sociology of knowledge from its very inception was a manifestation, on the one hand, of the destabilization of human cognition, the image of the world, and social order and on the other, of the intention to save the role of the cognitive activity of man as the foundation of human hopes for order and the effectiveness of practical actions. Both functions referred to the ambivalent needs which the events in those times must have developed in their contemporaries.

When looking for the basic assumption of the sociology of knowledge we have to begin with the essential facts that determine the specific characteristics of man. It is also worth bearing in mind that some of those facts are merely elements of the expanded characteristics of human beings. Two facts are of particular importance for our present analyses: man's ability to make use of symbols, and his necessity of living in society. These two characteristics are closely interconnected. The use of symbols, including language as the most essential symbolic system, is social in character, which is to say that it is possible only in society, owing to society, and with the help of society. By using symbols the individual refers to a societally produced symbolic universe and to societally produced rules of communication. In order to make use of symbols the individual must learn that from other members of society. In fact, we can describe many mechanisms of the social functioning of man by characterizing his symbolic world (Niżnik 1985).

The use of symbols is a condition of the survival of man and a condition of his activeness. It is by means of symbols that man articulates his knowledge, which determines the field and scope of his practical and theoretical activity. Only those elements of the material world around man are accessible to him which are grasped by his knowledge—in the sense that only that part of the world is the area of his conscious activity and the formulation and attainment of goals (Cackowski 1979).

Thus the very existence of knowledge depends on society, and society in turn can survive only owing to knowledge. By acquiring knowledge the individual also avails himself of collective experience (Childe 1956). It must be emphasized in this connection that when writing about knowledge we mean the most general sense of that word, that is "what we know." That meaning has its closest empirical equivalent in the everyday knowledge of an average member of society. Such knowledge, next to what is termed current knowledge, includes elements of its various systematic forms such as science, religion (which also is knowledge at least from a certain point of view), myths, and astrology. Those particular forms of systematized knowledge are in most cases handled by specialized categories of people: scientists, priests, astrologers, etc. But usually elements of that knowledge penetrate to various extent,

or are deliberately transferred into, the main body of knowledge of the average member of society.

In any case when studying the relation between knowledge and society we must realize the fact that knowledge occurs in various forms which are historically and culturally variable. At the same time we must make distinctions among the various forms of the differentiation of society: historical, cultural, and economic.

The dependence of knowledge on the social conditions of its birth seems self-evident already in the light of these brief comments. When speaking about social conditions I mean the entire complex of historical, cultural, and material conditions which combine to form the existential foundations of knowledge. The statement that knowledge depends on the existential circumstances of its birth is the initial and basic thesis of the sociology of knowledge. The study of that dependence is, in turn, its basic programme. The paradox of the sociology of knowledge consists in the fact that its initial thesis, so obvious today, has been a product of centuries of philosophical reflection; at the same time, its programme proves very difficult to carry out.

Even though the problems in question appeared incidentally in the early period of the history of philosophy, the idea of the new discipline was formulated only by Max Scheler in 1924. The circumstances in which that proposal was made are quite instructive, and they will be discussed later. At this moment I shall concern myself briefly with two theoretical breakthroughs which made that proposal possible at all. Those breakthroughs were the work of two thinkers, Immanuel Kant and Karl Marx. This is not to say that works by other authors were without significance for the birth of the discipline in question. The turns in thinking about human cognitive activity which took place under the influence of Kant and Marx were most strongly marked, and their impact upon further epistemological influence was decisive.

The first breakthrough consisted in the transition from the objective to the subjective conception of cognition. Kant, being aware of the importance of that change in the treatment of the problem called it "a Copernican revolution" himself.

The second breakthrough consisted in the transition from the conception of the (cognizing) subject as an isolated individual to the conception of the subject as the individual who emerges from his social existence. The quintessence of the Marxian conception of cognition takes the form of some of his pithy formulations. The statement that "existence determines consciousness" abounds in meanings and deserves to be treated as the axis along which Marxian philosophy is to be interpreted (Rainko 1981). But the role of that thesis makes itself felt already at the beginning of our effort to interpret that philosophy when we try to reconstruct the Marxian conception of cognition, and in particular the Marxian conception of the cognizing subject.

That radical change in the interpretation of the cognizing subject is particularly clear in the sixth thesis on Feuerbach, which states that man is not an abstraction inherent in the individual but the totality of social relations (Marx 1961). It would be difficult to argue at this moment whether that formulation has an epistemological, an anthropological, or still other meaning. The complex character of Marxian reflection makes us interpret that reflection in its various aspects. Moreover, the long controversy over whether we have to make a distinction between

the young and the mature Marx has provided many arguments in favour of the integral character of Marx's work.

Marx's role in the emergence of the sociology of knowledge is, of course, not confined to the epistemological breakthrough discussed above. Its detailed discussion would require a separate analysis.³ At this point we are interested in the most general epistemological assumptions which, it seems, were the essential condition of the formulation of the basic problem in the sociology of knowledge. When going back to the two said turning points in epistemology we have to note that the road from the former (Kantian) to the latter (Marxian) was not straight from the theoretical point of view. Kant emphasized the identity of the epistemological categories that are proper to the human mind. Man's cognitive apparatus was (in Kant's opinion) a property characteristic of his species, and there was no place for the relativization of cognition to its social conditions. The concentration of attention on natural science, typical for the epistemological tradition, and fascination with the achievements of natural science in Kant's times, especially with Newtonian physics, also were not without importance.

This is why when referring to two epistemological breakthroughs which produced theoretical conditions for the emergence of the sociology of knowledge I am far from suggesting that Marx continued the ideas to be found in Kantian philosophy. The contribution of those two authors to the shaping of the theoretical perspective in which it was possible to ask about the connection between knowledge and the existential conditions of its birth cannot be illustrated as any unidirectional line of development. On the contrary, the breakthrough achieved by Marx was a result of his conscious opposition to the individualistically and idealistically oriented tradition of German philosophy.

But Marx was himself a product of that tradition, and some its elements were decisive for the final shaping of his ideas. Thus, although he took over the heritage of Hegel and dismissed Kantian individualism and formalism in the conception of cognition, he nevertheless retained the subject-oriented approach to the process of cognition. Although he preserved the Hegelian opinion on the unity of Man and Nature he rejected the substantiation of that unity, which referred to the role of spirit or reason, in favour of the substantiation based on the concept of work and praxis. J. Habermas suggests that Nature which precedes human history plays, in Marx's conception, the theoretical role of the Kantian thing in itself (Habermas 1971, p. 34).

Hence only the idea that the results of cognition are co-determined by the endowment of the cognizing subject made it possible to investigate in detail the activeness of that subject and also the claim that such activeness is determined societally. It is perhaps just because of that the earlier anticipations of the problems of the sociology of knowledge, such as Francis Bacon's conception of idols, had not such repercussions as Max Scheler's paper had.

The response to Scheler's suggestion, who proposed *Wissenssoziologie* as a new discipline, was in fact a result of the convergence of ideas advanced by the various authors who were Scheler's contemporaries or were just a little earlier than him.

³ In J. Niżnik, *Socjologia wiedzy. Zarys historii i problematyki* [Sociology of Knowledge. Outline of History and Problems], a book in preparation for KiW.

At that time Marxism was a doctrine which provoked both violent social changes and theoretical discussions. The controversy over the distinct character of the social sciences and humanities was still lively; it resulted, among other things, in the category of understanding (*Verstehen*) as the form and method of cognition, and in the relativization of the effects of cognition to history.

F. Nietzsche almost dramatically undermined the values embedded in European culture for centuries. M. Durkheim convincingly showed how society creates human reality and supervises the individual perception of the world.

V. Pareto in his conception of social élites presented the mechanism of the domination in society of given ideas. M. Weber brilliantly illustrated the creative power of ideas in his book on Protestant ethics and the rise of capitalism, and also took up the discussion of the problem which in its foundations had the essential issue resulting from the sociology of knowledge: on what the validity of knowledge or its objective character consists in a situation in which values are inevitably involved in research work.

While the validity and even the possibility of existence of the new discipline was being questioned from its very inception, the theses formulated by Scheler and later by Mannheim were quickly assimilated by the social sciences and the humanities to become almost current statements. That role of the sociology of knowledge, which consists basically on a thorough modification of the methodological consciousness of scholars, especially in the social sciences, has been from the very beginning at variance with advances in specialized research in that sphere. In fact one can have the impression that that discipline is merely marking time.

It seems that the causes of that state of affairs are to be sought in the very formulations of the basic problems that define its sphere of research. Some of the earliest critics were right in forecasting that the manner of formulation and the nature of those problems do not promise quick solutions, if any solutions are possible at all (Grünwald 1985).

Thus in the case of the sociology of knowledge we have to do with problems of unquestionable importance and with statements that exert essential influence upon the various disciplines, but at the same time those problems remain ill-defined and the statements lack precision. If we define the sphere of the sociology of knowledge as the study of the relationships between knowledge and its social context, then it is self-evident that both the concept of knowledge and the understanding of that social context admit of various interpretations. If, on the other hand, we take the statement on the conditioning of knowledge by the social context in which it has developed to be the principal thesis of the sociology of knowledge, then the "sphere of uncertainty" is enlarged by the interpretation of that conditioning.

In other words, the suggestion concerning the connections between knowledge and its social context or existential foundations, taken in itself, is both convincing and abounding in theoretical (epistemological, methodological, etc.) consequences, but any attempt to make that suggestion more precise remains questionable or breeds doubt. Further, when studying the dependence of knowledge upon its existential foundations we would have to treat that relation as symmetrical, which is to say that the dependence of certain social systems upon knowledge should

also be within the sphere of interests of the sociology of knowledge. That trend is developing dynamically in the form of the theory of advertising and the theory of propaganda. To some extent it has also been taken into account by the so-called phenomenological trend in the sociology of knowledge (Berger, Luckmann 1966). But if we treat it as an integral part of the sociology of knowledge then the range of problems of that discipline, and hence also the list of problems that are still unsolved and do not promise a quick solution, either, expands considerably.

One can also have the impression that the vitality of the sociology of knowledge and its constant impact upon the social sciences are, among other things, due to its "errors." Formulation of questions to which no satisfactory answer is possible, and formulation of theses which undermine the meanings of the terms used in them, are just such "errors." Now the sociology of knowledge suggests that the social context of cognition affects the results of cognition, which is to say that it modifies or even distorts the knowledge thus obtained. It is further claimed that that impact is inevitable, because all knowledge develops in a given social context. What then is that modification or deformation of knowledge to mean in the situation when knowledge that is not conditioned societally is simply unthinkable? In most cases this question results in the requirement that all knowledge should be referred to its existential foundations and that its dependence upon those foundations should be indicated as precisely as that is possible, which need not invalidate the knowledge in question. Such a solution has been suggested by Mannheim in his conception of relationism. It can also be found, in a logically expanded form, already in the works of Max Weber. But the hundreds of pages dedicated to the criticism, comments, and extension of that proposal show that it is not so much a solution as a source of new problems.

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