A Comprehensive Lecture On The Evolution Of Sociology: From Its Inception To Contemporary Developments

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Abstract:
This paper develops an extended theoretical discussion based on an excerpt from a chapter in the volume authored by J. P. Gibbs and E. Sheldon, Science and Sociology: Predictive Power Is the Name of the Game (2018). Starting from their critical diagnosis, the article addresses the long-term evolution of sociology as a scientific discipline, from its foundational aspirations toward explanatory and predictive rigor to its contemporary methodological and epistemological fragmentation. Gibbs and Sheldon argue that, in recent decades, sociology has progressively distanced itself from the standards of cumulative scientific knowledge, increasingly privileging localized assessments of social realities grounded in demographic analyses, survey-based research, and ethnographic descriptions, often at the expense of generalization and predictive capacity.

Building on this argument, the present paper situates sociology within its broader historical and intellectual trajectory, highlighting key moments in its development, major theoretical paradigms, and recurrent tensions between explanation, interpretation, and application. Particular attention is given to the comparison between sociological reasoning and epistemological models derived from the natural sciences, especially with regard to prediction, falsifiability, and theory-driven research. By examining selected empirical situations and conceptual analogies drawn from the natural sciences, the paper explores the extent to which sociology can reclaim or reformulate its scientific ambitions without disregarding the complexity and contextuality of social phenomena.

Keywords: *sociology, societies, science, researchers, knowledge*

I. Introduction

Positivist sociology, established by Auguste Comte, aimed to emulate the empirical natural sciences by adopting their methods and using them to study social phenomena and human behavior. Durkheim strengthened this perspective by contending that social reality is perceived through our senses, but it exists outside of human consciousness. It possesses objectivity, is situated within the system, follows unchangeable laws of nature, and can be grasped through empirical knowledge. Every

individual in the society has a similar understanding of reality as they all have common meanings (Sarantacos, 1998: 36).

In a different context and beyond the functionalism, these meanings remain constant and motivate social actors to maintain the social order through an unspoken agreement.

Regarding human presence, humans are rational individuals who are guided by social norms; their behavior is acquired through observation and controlled by external factors that yield the same results (identical causes lead to identical outcomes).

The positivist approach is manifested in the paradigm of social facts, which encompasses a range of theories, including functionalism. Those who adhere to this model focus not only on social phenomena but also on their effects on human thinking and actions (Ritzer, 2011: 11).

The deductive method is central to the analysis of positivist sociology and nomothetic legal theories. It rejects the rhetoric of common sense, the researcher must use objective rigor to arrive at causal laws for him.

Conversely, within non-positivist sociology, multiple currents and theoretical frameworks emphasize interpretation and the construction of meaning. For instance, ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism adopt a formative epistemology, rejecting structuralist models. Instead, they center on discourse and interaction in everyday life, emphasizing individual agency and distancing themselves from the influence of social structures and their coercive power.

In the 1960, a reevaluation of sociological theories and their intellectual and political frameworks took place due to the epistemological and methodological conflict between the dualities of structure and action, quantitative and qualitative, objective and subjective. A. Gouldner, in his book "The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology" (1970), argues that it is currently impossible to consider the intellectual field of society as a logically coherent and universally accepted entity by the scientific community.

In his book "Science and Sociology", Gibbs J.P., known as such in the United States, argues that sociology has undergone a shift in recent decades, becoming less scientific and more focused on subjective evaluations, oversimplification, and even irony. The sociological project has emphasized the potential for promoting social change, aiming to create a positive impact on the world, while overlooking the underlying moral presumption of this pursuit and implying that sociologists possess the knowledge to alter society.

The subtitle of his book, "Predictive power is the name of the Game," implies the need to revisit the roots of positivist sociology in order to establish it as a legitimate science. This is because all sciences are validated by their capacity to predict and uncover the truth. However, the question remains: can sociology achieve this?

The experience of societies under totalitarian regimes provides a relevant empirical ground for reflecting on the relationship between structural constraint and the internalization of social norms. Studies on everyday life in communist Romania

highlight how social reality was organized through a complex set of institutional, symbolic, and discursive mechanisms that generated both behavioral conformity and informal adaptations at the micro-social level (Cioacă, 2019). In this context, "social facts" were manifested not only as explicit rules or visible institutions but also as internalized everyday practices, routines, and survival strategies developed by individuals in response to systemic constraints. The sociological analysis of daily life under communism thus demonstrates that the objectivity of social structures does not exclude subjective interpretation; rather, it implies a complex relationship between structural determination and individual agency. Such empirical examples support the idea that sociology must combine explanatory approaches oriented toward regularities with interpretive analyses of the meanings constructed by social actors, particularly in historical contexts shaped by ideology and extensive social control.

2. Assertion is not facts

In the introduction, we discussed the social fact model, which draws inspiration from Durkheim's rese arch. This model serves to establish sociology as a scientific discipline by utilizing a series of categories that shape cognitive frameworks. These categories and structures are social facts, and within the realm of scientific activities, the proposition that sociology should examine and analyze them is a scientific claim, made with the understanding that it will be evaluated based on the data gathered to determine its ability to make accurate predictions for researchers. L. Fleck asserts that facts should be regarded as something specific, immutable, and separate from scientists' personal interpretation (Fleck, 1979: 98).

When conducting such assessments, researchers must connect their definitions to the data they collect in order to evaluate the claims. Following Ekland and Gibbs (p. 04), this process manifests as epistemic statements—cognitive expressions that encode knowledge claims about the data and their relationship to the phenomena under study.

Regarding K. Cetina (1999), the conventional definition of the knowledge society emphasizes knowledge and perceives it as information about scientific beliefs, technological applications, or possibly intellectual property. The idea being defended here is the alteration of emphasis on knowledge within structures, processes, and environments that shape specific cognitive frameworks (Cetina, 1999: 8). This refers to how this knowledge is generated in specific contexts controlled by cultural understandings.

The positivist school has always emphasized the remarkable achievements of the natural sciences in aligning with the social division of labor, and it is undeniable that this assertion holds true. However, this social division could not exist without the material production linked to the bourgeoisie (Adorno, 2000: 100).

This goes against Gibbs' claim that the notion of science having an ideological bias is unfounded (Ekland and Gibbs, p xi), as science is meant to be impartial and rely on scientific methods to analyze and explain reality. However, can sociology achieve the same level of objectivity?

H.S. Becker, in an interview, confesses that the researcher cannot separate his political beliefs from his sociological work, thereby raising the fundamental question of whose side we are on? (Becker, 2014: 41). To address this issue, one strategy is to associate ourselves with specific groups, even if we may not initially desire to, such as minorities, gangs, the mentally ill, or stigmatized individuals. By doing so, we can be categorized within a particular group that may ultimately serve the interests of others.

3.   What about the danger of sociology?

In his book "Le Danger Sociologique 2018," French sociologist G. Bronner explores the precarious state of sociology. He highlights the scientific deviation and lack of commitment to a rigorous methodology among certain sociologists, resulting in the decline of sociology and its scientific credibility. N. Henrich, in an interview, argued that critical sociology, which originated from the German Frankfurt School and included the work of Bourdieu, is no longer relevant due to the presence of unjustified ideologies that hinder scientific thinking.

While presenting research and studies, it is now possible to have different methodological and epistemological perspectives. However, it is crucial to avoid making biased judgments about the unscientific nature of sociology solely based on our own ideology or position, as this would render science stagnant. We can vividly recall the wise words of philosopher of science Ferdinand P. Feyerabend, author of the book "Against Method," when he states that scientific progress would not have been possible if some researchers had not deliberately or inadvertently broken methodological frameworks (Feyerabend, 1993: 132).

We see a sociological danger in the prevailing cognitive code influenced by currents like postmodernism. This code is further strengthened by scientific journals and a group of researchers who impose restrictions on knowledge production, rendering science sterile. These individuals can be referred to as the guardians of the temple. Their goal is to impose strict limits on knowledge production through institutionalized practices, and Feyerabend's idea of breaking these frameworks applies to not only physics but also the humanities and social sciences.

The foundation of Brunner can be traced back to Elisabeth E. Teissier, who defended her doctoral thesis on horoscopes and astrology under the guidance of French sociologist Mafessoli M.

Accepting this work, which is unrelated to sociology, drew criticism towards him. Next, an anonymous sociologist attempted to submit an article to *Societé* magazine, which happened to be edited by the same sociologist. The article was about L'autolib, a complimentary delivery service in Paris. The authors of the article made an effort to transition from modernist to postmodernist knowledge. However, they later revealed that the article was actually a deliberate hoax aimed at exposing the flaws in the field of sociology and the tendency of some academic journals to publish anything under the guise of science. Undoubtedly, this wasn't the first instance. In 1994, physicist Sokal A submitted an article to an American journal called *Social Text*. The article, titled "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative

Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," was filled with scientific concepts and quotes from postmodernists. This gave the impression that Sokal was aligned with postmodernism, particularly the relativist movement linked to cultural studies. Sokal exposed the article as a hoax after it was published, citing his intention to challenge his leftist peers who doubted the reliability of the idea of reality as perceived by relativity, asserting that only physics had the capacity to address this.

According to Sokal's previous article, he argues that Western scientific practices expose the influence of ideology behind the illusion of objectivity. It has become more evident that physical reality is not separate from social reality, but rather influenced by linguistic and social constructs (Sokal, 1996: 85).

The discourse mentioned here is commonly found in postmodernist writings, and it goes against the objective nature of science. As Sokal explains in his book "Impostures intellectuelles," this discourse is prevalent in statements that are intentionally ambiguous. For centuries, magicians, fortune tellers, and priests have used equations, unknown languages, and symbols to manipulate and deceive others, concealing the irrationality of their speech (Sokal and Bricmont, 1994: 13).

Criminologist Taylor argues that the dismantling theory has the potential to compete with and challenge traditional theories, but it has not been truly successful in providing effective and viable alternatives in the field of crime control and prevention. Some critics believe that postmodern criminology is nothing more than a set of ideas about social reality, rather than a good or understandable theory. (Morisson, 1995: 65)

Due to its inherent vagueness, the term "objectivity" lacks sufficient empirical evidence and practicality. To minimize vagueness, it is crucial to seek conceptual clarity. (Ekland and Gibbs 1998: 17).

4. Theory, testing and knowledge production

A theory comprises concepts or generalizations that aim to explain reality, and science consistently strives to examine hypotheses to make generalizations, predictions, or refutations. However, accurate and proper data control is necessary to test hypotheses effectively. Gibbs analyzed 100 articles published in the *American Journal of Sociology* from 2004 to 2014 and discovered that less than 20% of the articles conducted tests comparing the predictive power and strength of different generalizations. It was also found that only two articles constitute a distinct set of generalizations in the form of multivariate theory, generalizations made in the form of regression coefficient variables (Ekland and Gibbs, 1998: 11-12).

Giddens suggests that researchers tend to shape their hypotheses to fit their initial theoretical frameworks, and they limit their focus to areas where it is easy to test their hypotheses empirically. However, this approach can lead to a sterile dilemma in sociology, making it unrealistic (Giddens, 1971: 29).

Some sociologists and psychologists argue that maintaining scientific rigor in the discipline necessitates quantifying social phenomena and disregarding immeasurable factors. However, a truly scientific mindset entails striving to approach the truth as closely as possible given the circumstances.

If we cannot achieve a certain level of precision, it becomes risky to adopt a neutral stance, especially for those who refuse to study certain phenomena due to the inability to measure variables. This refusal ultimately leads to the stagnation of sociology (Anderski, 1975: 88).

In the early days of the Chicago School, interpretive sociology and ethnographic studies aimed to conduct various investigations and research by focusing on understanding reality through the social actor and the historical treatment of phenomena. This approach aimed to move away from the reductionism seen in empirical sciences, which isolates phenomena from their contexts. This results in a more profound comprehension of social problems, even though Gibbs argues that ethnography and field experiments are not the sole origins of vaguely stated claims in social science literature. These perspectives, such as Freudian and Marxist interpretations, are also influenced by historical contexts. (Ekland and Gibbs, 1998: 10)

In contrast, Fleck's perspective is that concepts do not arise spontaneously; rather, they are shaped by their predecessors and have ancient origins. Fleck emphasizes the importance of historical and comparative research in the field of epistemology, dismissing any epistemological approaches that do not incorporate these investigations as superficial and speculative (Fleck, 2010: 21).

5. The mission of sociology

The mission of sociology consists in the systematic investigation of contemporary society, in explaining its structure, functioning, and transformations, as well as in interpreting the social processes that shape the evolution of humanity within a global context marked by uncertainty and accelerated change (Otovescu & Otovescu, 2025: 13-19). Sociology seeks not only to describe social realities but also to identify dysfunctions, pathological or destabilizing phenomena, and the mechanisms that influence social cohesion, thus contributing to the formulation of realistic solutions for improving the human condition (Otovescu & Otovescu, 2025: 13-19).

Sociologist Emanuel Wallerstein suggests that sociologists can effectively analyze social reality by studying a significant descriptive anomaly and exploring its origins and impacts (Wallerstein, 1999: 139). Answering this question necessitates researching methods that help us comprehend society in all its complexities, without intending to manipulate or make utopian promises. However, understanding and explaining societal phenomena can encounter both epistemological and methodological challenges, as the concept of society can vary across different contexts.

T. Adorno argued in his sociology lectures that societies, such as capitalist and socialist ones, cannot be conceptualized in the same way. These societies reflect different social structures based on major sociological theories like Marxism and functionalism, each with their own concepts and conceptualizations (Adorno, 2000: 28). The proponents of these theories, with their different beliefs, aimed to experiment with these theories in real-world situations and assess their capacity to

explain different aspects of reality. This reflects the dominant empiricism in American sociology during the previous century. These experiments consistently validated certain theories, particularly functionalism, and further bolstered their credibility, as demonstrated by the work of Merton and Parsons' followers.

The disparity between the two theories could stem from functionalism being seen as reductionist, whereas Marxism takes a historical approach to depict present-day societies and some argue that these developmental stages are irrelevant for analyzing modern societies. In his book mentioned earlier, Adorno argues that the categorization of societies, such as hunter-gatherer and pastoralist, merely represents how human life is produced and sustained, and they differ from the conventional understanding of society as described by Weber's bourgeois sociology and its counterpart, capitalist society (Adorno, 2000: 29). While Dahrendorff attempts to use the concept of industrial society to encompass Western societies, it is important to note that these societies primarily revolve around economic organization, representing a specific phase in the historical progression of societies based on production, distribution, and consumption. Furthermore, they align with the political structure of the liberal state. Thus, it is evident that we are up against a critical challenge, given that the majority of sociological theories have emerged from industrialized Western societies and have primarily aimed to comprehend and examine them. However, what about the diverse societies with their own distinctive features?

In his book "New Rules of Sociological Method," sociologist Giddens assumes the responsibility of clarifying how to reinterpret the social world. He focuses on the preconceived notions of social actors within the theoretical schemes and frames of meaning. Here, Giddens discusses hermeneutic dualism, which is a highly intricate undertaking. In doing so, he aims to resolve the predicament of construction and action, as well as the challenges that have arisen with interpretive trends in sociology. Going back to the initial idea of prediction discussed in this article, which suggests a need for a revival of positivist sociology and the exploration of generalizations, Giddens asserts that constructivist analysis in the social sciences and the causal relationships represented by theoretical generalizations are not based on fixed mechanical correlations found in nature, but rather on the outcomes of human actions (Giddens, 2000, p. 270).

6. Conclusion:

In concluding this paper, we would like to point out two main positions:

The subtitle of Gibbs' book, "Predictive power is the name of the Game", alludes to a return to the origins of positivist sociology. This return comes after a tumultuous period of competing and conflicting theories that had plagued the field. Reviving this trend might be challenging, especially considering the numerous setbacks and criticisms it has faced. Mc Kraken refers to this period as the "winter of positivism," and even in its modern iteration, with E. Neurath advocating for the creation of universal propositions rooted in shared experiences, it remains a complex task.

Like any other scientific discipline, sociology relies on a framework of categories that shape knowledge structures. These categories and the associated structures constitute social realities that sociology must investigate.

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