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Thinking Sociologically

The central question of sociology, one could say, is: in what sense does it matter that in whatever they do or may do people are dependent on other people; in what sense does it matter that they live always (and cannot but live) in the company of, in communication with, in an exchange with, in competition with, in co-operation with other human beings? It is this kind of question (and not a separate collection of people or events selected for the purpose of study, nor some set of human actions neglected by other lines of investigation) that constitutes the particular area of sociological discussion and defines sociology as a relatively autonomous branch of human and social sciences. Sociology, we may conclude, is first and foremost a *way of thinking* about the human world; in principle one can also think about the same world in different ways.

Among these other ways from which the sociological way of thinking is set apart, a special place is occupied by so-called *common sense*. Perhaps more than other branches of scholarship, sociology finds its relation with common sense (that rich yet disorganized, non-systematic, often inarticulate and ineffable

knowledge we use to conduct our daily business of life) fraught with problems decisive for its standing and practice.

Indeed, few sciences are concerned with spelling out their relationship to common sense; most do not even notice that common sense exists, let alone that it presents a problem. Most sciences settle for defining themselves in terms of boundaries that separate them from or bridges that connect them with other sciences – respectable, systematic lines of inquiry like themselves. They do not feel they share enough ground with common sense to bother with drawing boundaries or building bridges. Their indifference is, one must admit, well justified. Common sense has next to nothing to say of the matters of which physics, or chemistry, or astronomy, or geology speak (and whatever it has to say on such matters comes courtesy of those sciences themselves, in so far as they manage to make their recondite findings graspable and intelligible for lay people). The subjects dealt with by physics or astronomy hardly ever appear within the sight of ordinary men and women: inside, so to speak, your and my daily experience. And so we, the non-experts, the ordinary people, cannot form opinions about such matters unless aided – indeed, instructed – by the scientists. The objects explored by sciences like the ones we have mentioned appear only under very special circumstances, to which lay people have no access: on the screen of a multi-million-dollar accelerator, in the lens of a gigantic telescope, at the bottom of a thousand-feet-deep shaft. Only the scientists can see them and experiment with them; these objects and events are a monopolistic possession of the given branch of science (or even of its selected practitioners), a property not shared with anybody who is not a member of the profession. Being the sole owners of the experience which provides the raw material for their study, the scientists are in full control over the way the material is processed, analysed, interpreted. Products of such processing would have to withstand the critical scrutiny of other scientists – but their scrutiny only. They will not have to compete with public opinion, common sense or any other form in which non-specialist views may appear, for the simple reason that there is no public opinion and no commonsensical point of view in the matters they study and pronounce upon.

With sociology it is quite different. In sociological study there are no equivalents of giant accelerators or radiotelescopes. All experience which provides raw material for sociological findings – the stuff of which sociological knowledge is made – is the experience of ordinary people in ordinary, daily life; an experience accessible in principle, though not always in practice, to everybody; and experience that, before it came under the magnifying glass of a sociologist, had already been lived by someone else – a non-sociologist, a person not trained in the use of sociological language and seeing things from a sociological point of view. All of us live in the company of other people, after all, and interact with each other. All of us have learned only too well that what we get depends on what other people do. All of us have gone more than once through the agonizing experience of a communication breakdown with friends and strangers. Anything sociology talks about was already there in our lives. And it must have been, otherwise we should be unable to conduct our business of life. To live in the company of other people, we need a lot of knowledge; and common sense is the name of that knowledge.

Deeply immersed in our daily routines, though, we hardly ever pause to think about the meaning of what we have gone through; even less often have we the opportunity to compare our private experience with the fate of others, to see the social in the *individual*, the general in the *particular*; this is precisely what sociologists can do for us. We would expect them to show us how our individual *biographies* intertwine with the *history* we share with fellow human beings. And

yet whether or not the sociologists get that far, they have no other point to start from than the daily experience of life they share with you and me – from that raw knowledge that saturates the daily life of each one of us. For this reason alone the sociologists, however hard they might have tried to follow the example of the physicists and the biologists and stand aside from the object of their study (that is, look at your and my life experience as an object 'out there', as a detached and impartial observer would do), cannot break off completely from their insider's knowledge of the experience they try to comprehend. However hard they might try, sociologists are bound to remain on both sides of the experience they strive to interpret, inside and outside at the same time. (Note how often the sociologists use the personal pronoun 'we' when they report their findings and formulate their general propositions. That 'we' stands for an 'object' that includes those who study and those whom they study. Can you imagine a physicist using 'we' of themselves and the molecules? Or astronomers using 'we' to generalize about themselves and the stars?)

There is more still to the special relationship between sociology and common sense. The phenomena observed and theorized upon by modern physicists or astronomers come in an innocent and pristine form, unprocessed, free from labels, ready-made definitions and prior interpretations (that is, except such interpretations as had been given them in advance by the physicists who set the experiments that made them appear). They wait for the physicist or the astronomer to name them, to set them among other phenomena and combine them into an orderly whole: in short, to give them *meaning*. But there are few, if any, sociological equivalents of such clean and unused phenomena which have never been given meaning before. Those human actions and interactions that sociologists explore had all been given names and theorized about, in however diffuse, poorly articulated form, by the actors themselves. Before sociologists started looking at them, they were objects of commonsensical knowledge. Families, organizations, kinship networks, neighbourhoods, cities and villages, nations and churches and any other groupings held together by regular human interaction have already been given meaning and significance by the actors, so that the actors consciously address them in their actions as bearers of such meanings. Lay actors and professional sociologists would have to use the same names, the same language when speaking of them. Each term sociologists may use will already have been heavily burdened with meanings it was given by the commonsensical knowledge of 'ordinary' people like you and me.

For the reason explained above, sociology is much too intimately related to common sense to afford that lofty equanimity with which sciences like chemistry or geology can treat it. You and I are allowed to speak of human interdependence and human interaction, and to speak with authority. Don't we all practise invitation to everybody to join, but no clearly marked borders or effective border guards either. With poorly defined borders whose security is not guaranteed in advance (unlike sciences that explore objects inaccessible to lay experience), the sovereignty of sociology over social knowledge, its right to make authoritative pronouncements on the subject, may always be contested. This is why drawing a boundary between sociological knowledge proper and the common sense that is always full of sociological ideas is such an important matter for the identity of sociology as a cohesive body of knowledge; and why sociologists pay this matter more attention than other scientists.

We can think of at least four quite seminal differences between the ways in which sociology and common sense – your and my 'raw' knowledge of the business of life – treat the topic they share: human experience.

To start with, sociology (unlike common sense) makes an effort to subordin-

ate itself to the rigorous rules of *responsible speech*, which is assumed to be an attribute of science (as distinct from other, reputedly more relaxed and less vigilantly self-controlled, forms of knowledge). This means that the sociologists are expected to take great care to distinguish – in a fashion clear and visible to anybody – between the statements corroborated by available evidence and such propositions as can only claim the status of a provisional, untested *soley*. Sociologists would refrain from misrepresenting ideas that are grounded solely in their beliefs (even the most ardent and emotionally intense beliefs) as tested findings carrying the widely respected authority of science. The rules of responsible speech demand that one's 'workshop' – the whole procedure that has led to the final conclusions and is claimed to guarantee their credibility – be wide open to an unlimited public scrutiny; a standing invitation ought to be extended to everyone to reproduce the test and, be this the case, prove the findings wrong. Responsible speech must also relate to other statements made on its topic; it cannot simply dismiss or pass by in silence other views that have been voiced, however sharply they are opposed to it and hence inconvenient. It is hoped that once the rules of responsible speech are honestly and meticulously observed, the trustworthiness, reliability and eventually also the practical usefulness of the ensuing propositions will be greatly enhanced, even if not fully guaranteed. Our shared faith in the credibility of beliefs counter-signed by science is to a great extent grounded in the hope that the scientists will indeed follow the rules of responsible speech, and that the scientific profession as a whole will see to it that every single member of the profession does so on every occasion. As to the scientists themselves, they point to the virtues of responsible speech as an argument in favour of the superiority of the knowledge they offer.

The second difference is related to the *size of the field* from which the material for judgement is drawn. For most of us, as non-professionals, such a field is confined to our own life-world: things we do, people we meet, purposes we set for our own pursuits and guess other people set for theirs. Rarely, if at all, do we make an effort to lift ourselves above the level of our daily concerns to broaden the horizon of experience, as this would require time and resources most of us can ill afford or do not feel like spending on such effort. And yet, given the tremendous variety of life-conditions, each experience based solely on an individual life-world is necessarily partial and most likely one-sided. Such shortcomings can be rectified only if one brings together and sets against each other experiences drawn from a multitude of life-worlds. Only then will the incompleteness of individual experience be revealed, as will be the complex network of dependencies and interconnections in which it is entangled – a network which reaches far beyond the realm which could be scanned from the vantage point of a singular biography. The overall result of such a broadening of horizons will be the discovery of the intimate link between individual biography and wide social processes the individual may be unaware of and surely unable to control. It is for this reason that the sociologists' pursuit of a perspective wider than the one offered by an individual life-world makes a great difference – not just a quantitative difference (more data, more facts, statistics instead of single cases), but a difference in the quality and the uses of knowledge. For people like you or me, who pursue our respective aims in life and struggle for more control over our plight, sociological knowledge has something to offer that common sense cannot.

The third difference between sociology and common sense pertains to the way in which each one goes about *making sense* of human reality: how each one goes about explaining to its own satisfaction why this rather than that happened or is the case. I imagine that you (much as myself) know from your own experience

that you are 'the author' of your actions; you know that what you do (though not necessarily the results of your actions) is an effect of your intention, hope or purpose. You normally do as you do in order to achieve a state of affairs you desire, whether you wish to possess an object, to receive an accolade from your teachers or to put an end to your friends' teasing. Quite naturally, the way you think of your action serves you as a model for making sense of all other actions. You explain such actions to yourself by imputing to others intentions you know from your own experience. This is, to be sure, the only way we can make sense of the human world around us as long as we draw our tools of explanation solely from within our respective life-worlds. We tend to perceive everything that happens in the world at large as an outcome of somebody's intentional action. We look for the persons responsible for what has happened and, once we have found them, we believe our inquiry has been completed. We assume somebody's goodwill has behind every event we like and somebody's ill intentions behind every event we dislike. We would find it difficult to accept that a situation was not an effect of intentional action of an identifiable 'somebody'; and we would not lightly give up our conviction that any unwelcome condition could be remedied if only someone, somewhere, wished to take the right action. Those who more than anyone else interpret the world for us – politicians, journalists, commercial advertisers – tune in to this tendency of ours and speak of the 'needs of the state' or 'demands of the economy', as if the state or the economy were made to the measure of individual persons like ourselves and could have needs or make demands. On the other hand, they portray the complex problems of nations, states and economic systems (deeply seated in the very structures of such figurations) as the effects of the thoughts and deeds of a few individuals one can name, put in front of a camera and interview. Sociology stands in opposition to such a personalized world-view.... When thinking sociologically, one attempts to make sense of the human condition through analysing the manifold webs of human interdependency – that toughest of realities which explains both our motives and the effects of their activation.

Finally, let us recall that the power of common sense over the way we understand the world and ourselves (the immunity of common sense to questioning, its capacity for self-confirmation) depends on the apparently self-evident character of its precepts. This in turn rests on the routine, monotonous nature of daily life, which informs our common sense while being simultaneously informed by it. As long as we go through the routine and habitualized motions which fill most of our daily business, we do not need much self-scrutiny and self-analysis. When repeated often enough, things tend to become familiar, and familiar things are self-explanatory; they present no problems and arouse no curiosity. In a way, they remain invisible. Questions are not asked, as people are satisfied that 'things are as they are', 'people are as they are', and there is precious little one can do about it. Familiarity is the staunchest enemy of inquisitiveness and criticism – and thus also of innovation and the courage to change. In an encounter with that familiar world ruled by habits and reproachfully reasserting beliefs, sociology acts as a meddlesome and often irritating stranger. It disturbs the comfortably quiet way of life by asking questions no one among the 'locals' remembers being asked, let alone answered. Such questions make evident things into puzzles: they *defamiliarize* the familiar. Suddenly, the daily way of life must come under scrutiny. It now appears to be just one of the possible ways, not the one and only, not the 'natural', way of life....

One could say that the main service the art of thinking sociologically may render to each and every one of us is to make us more *sensitive*; it may sharpen up our senses, open our eyes wider so that we can explore human conditions

which thus far had remained all but invisible. Once we understand better how the apparently natural, inevitable, eternal aspects of our lives have been brought into being through the exercise of human power and human resources, we will find it hard to accept once more that they are immune and impenetrable to human action – our own action included. Sociological thinking is, one may say, a *hitherto* oppressive in its apparent fixity; it shows it as a world which could be different from what it is now. It can be argued that the art of sociological thinking tends to widen the scope, the daring and the practical effectiveness of your and my *freedom*. Once the art has been learned and mastered, the individual may well become just a bit less manipulable, more resilient to oppression and regulation from outside, more likely to resist being fixed by forces that claim to be irresistible.

To think sociologically means to understand a little more fully the people around us, their cravings and dreams, their worries and their misery. We may then better appreciate the human individuals in them and perhaps even have more respect for their rights to do what we ourselves are doing and to cherish doing it: their rights to choose and practise the way of life they prefer, to select their life-projects, to define themselves and – last but not least – vehemently defend their dignity. We may realize that in doing all those things other people come across the same kind of obstacles as we do and know the bitterness of frustration as well as we do. Eventually, sociological thinking may well promote solidarity between us, a solidarity grounded in mutual understanding and respect, solidarity in our joint resistance to suffering and shared condemnation of the cruelty that causes it. If this effect is achieved, the cause of freedom will be strengthened by being elevated to the rank of a *common* cause.

Thinking sociologically may also help us to understand other forms of life, inaccessible to our direct experience and all too often entering the commonsensical knowledge only as stereotypes – one-sided, tendentious caricatures of the way people different from ourselves (distant people, or people kept at a distance by our distaste or suspicion) live. An insight into the inner logic and meaning of the forms of life other than our own may well prompt us to think again about the alleged toughness of the boundary that has been drawn between ourselves and others, between 'us' and 'them'. Above all, it may prompt us to doubt that boundary's natural, preordained character. This new understanding may well make our communication with the 'other' easier than before, and more likely to lead to mutual agreement. It may replace fear and antagonism with tolerance. This would also contribute to our freedom, as there are no guarantees of my freedom stronger than the freedom of all, and that means also of such people as may have chosen to use their freedom to embark on a life different from my own. Only under such conditions may our own freedom to choose be exercised.