

THE POSTMODERN CONDITION OF SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

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When Karl Mannheim¹ formulated the basis for his sociology of knowledge he engaged in a theoretical dialogue with Scheler, Luckács and particularly Marx, whom he regarded as the true founding father of that branch of the discipline. Mannheim understood that classic Western epistemology could not reflect the complex nature of reality, which can only be gained access to taking into account the social conditions from where all knowledge emerged.

His contributions to the theory of ideologies are essential to such project of epistemological refoundation, in particular the opposition between the special conception of ideology, as defined by Marxism, and the general conception that he proposes. If Marxists regard their class adversary's ideas as socially conditioned, while their own are objective and even absolute, Mannheim's general conception leads to a sort of panideologism that regards all thought as ideology, socially conditioned by the position within social structure in which it is produced.

Marxism may be characterized as a modern Enlightened project, which enquires about the relation between valid knowledge, error and social circumstances, and points to a particular social group that should find itself in the most favourable objective conditions to achieve a correct perspective on reality and set itself up as the liberating class.

Mannheim's proposal tries to refine the Marxist diagnosis in order to better grasp the complexity of reality and, therefore, is in that sense a continuation of the modern Enlightened project. In the end, it intends to correct classic epistemology so it can get closer to reality. In fact, Mannheim also identifies a particular social group as placed in objective circumstances that allow it a less biased perspective and set itself up, if not as the liberating class, at least in the keeper of the interests of all.

However, and in spite of Mannheim's desires, the sociology of knowledge that develops from his theory of ideology² opens the way for far more radical relativisms than his

¹ On the development of Mannheim's thought, its engagement with the forerunners of sociology of knowledge and its relation to Mannheim's projects for epistemological refoundation and social reconstruction, the works of Remmling (1975), Kettler, Meja & Stehr (1984) and Woldring (1987) may (even should) be read.

² Even if such sociology later breaks up with it, as Stark (1958) insists.

own. Where Mannheim intends to preserve some areas of knowledge as free of social conditioning, later theorists will put those too under sociological scrutiny³. And where Mannheim insists that the social determination of knowledge, in itself, does not imply anything regarding the validity of knowledge, so a distinction may and should be made between kinds of knowledge according to their faithfulness to reality, later thinkers will totally deny the existence of reality, suppressed by cultural representations⁴.

Mannheim, like the perspectivist Ortega (Beltran, 2000), resisted being identified with relativism, since he feared it would lead to radical skepticism. Postmodern theorists, on the contrary, stage a relativist attack on the foundations of the project of Western modernity: Lyotard (1984) documents the legitimation crisis of scientific discourse, once its mythical justification has been demolished. Baudrillard (1981, 1994) intends to certify the demise of reality and delights in showing how observation as performed by modern science modifies its own object and even exterminates it⁵. And Foucault (1969), with his archeology of knowledge, tries to reach something like absolute objectivity starting from absolute relativism, suppressing his own standpoint in the process.

This paper intends to observe postmodern theory as a perspective in the sense established by Mannheim, in order to examine it from a sociology of knowledge standpoint in what it is related to such discipline and its epistemological assumptions, studying firstly the cultural conditions in which it is produced and venturing later its hypothetical reflexivity as a self-fulfilling prophecy in a highly self-reflective intellectual milieu.

1. Postmodernity and sociology of knowledge

Postmodern theory can be related to sociology of knowledge with two different and very obvious approaches: in one hand, reviewing the contributions that might have been made from postmodern theory to sociology of knowledge as a theoretical corpus, and in the other, studying postmodern theory from a sociology of knowledge standpoint, using for example Mannheim's methodology (1976 [1936]) for the characterization and analysis of perspectives.

1. 1. Contributions to sociology of knowledge from postmodern theory

If there is one element in which postmodern theorists have continued the work of authors such as Mannheim it is the **radicalization**, and the ideological justification, of

³ Notoriously the strong programme in sociology of science. Molina Montoro (1999) offers an exhaustive critical analysis while Beltran (2000) attempts a subtle defence of it.

⁴ The most evident example would be Baudrillard, sociologically trained and whose work also emerges from an early engagement with Marxism.

⁵ Even if using controversial examples, such as the Tasadays.

the epistemological relativism implicit in its theoretical assumptions⁶, a relativism that Mannheim himself, as stated earlier, wanted to counteract claiming some areas of knowledge as free of social determination and venturing the existence of a social group, the academic intellectual elite, lacking class interests and therefore better qualified than the rest for a dispassionate observation of reality avoiding ideological distortions (such where, according to Mannheim, two of the structural guarantees for valid knowledge, if not universally, at least in the widest possible sense within social and historical circumstances).

The anthropologist Gellner devoted a book (1992) to discussing postmodern theory as the latest incarnation of a tradition of moral and epistemological relativism. Postmodern authors (and particularly, given Gellner's speciality, postmodern anthropologists) fail to fulfill their scientific task when they face the cultural diversity of societies and focus their field of study from a distorted point of view: they grant the same epistemological value to all discourses and thus they relativize science as just another discourse, another biased opinion. Reality, Gellner states, is totally opposed to such notion: in fact, the problem is not that we cannot acquire objective scientific knowledge, but that we acquire such knowledge, have the tools to produce it at our disposal, and the results are not necessarily respectful to our cultural prejudices. Our system of knowledge, according to Gellner, is unique, unstable and powerful, and its relation with other sets of ideas (that is, cultures), is not harmonic, but even corrosive.

Postmodern thought would be another episode in a long standing controversy between relativism and Enlightened rationalism: the same crossroads where Mannheim placed sociology of knowledge. Therefore, writes Gellner, it is not a matter of refuting postmodern ideas, despite all their dialectic defence mechanisms, but of refuting once and for all the underlying current that feeds them, explaining why no relativism of any kind can work. That is the reason, he argues, behind the efforts put in disqualifying a school of thought that discredits itself and which time will shortly put in its place.

One of the seminal texts of postmodern thought, Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) is identified as a "report on the state of knowledge" which defines postmodernity precisely by such state. In this sense, **postmodernity poses a challenge to sociology of knowledge**: if Lyotard's analysis is correct in its description of matters, what social factors can have contributed, directly or indirectly, to the configuration of such

⁶ Those would be the grounds for Stark's (1958) attacks, in one of the many attempts to refound sociology of knowledge avoiding any relativistic assumption. The Mannheim letters printed by Wolff (1983) seem also relevant.

epistemological landscape? The explanation that might be deduced from postmodern writings is curiously idealistic, even naively Comtean: modern Enlightened knowledge has collapsed by its own internal contradictions, it has disintegrated following its own logical dynamic, giving place to a fourth stage which succeeds religion, metaphysics and positivism, and makes equal and confuses different forms of knowledge. History is moved forward by culture, and the evolution of societies can be explained by the development of tools for knowledge. Ironically, we could deduce from such assumptions an autonomy of culture and knowledge that would contradict the relativism which is allegedly intrinsic to postmodern thought: if knowledge is developed following its own internal logic, would not that imply that in fact it is not conditioned by external factors? Of course, that is not the postmodern contention: that relativistic fourth stage is reached when the contingency of all knowledge is made evident, as well as the notion that all knowledge depends on social and historical circumstances and there is no single universal factor that can explain and unify the diversity of cultures and values while working as a control variable in the deliberation of such analyses. This paradoxical postmodern idealism is, in fact, another aspect of the fundamental contradiction that is the logical self-refutation of radical relativism. The only way to ensure a minimum validity for the perspective which argues for the relativity of all knowledge requires, ironically, an implicit acceptance of the autonomy of the same perspective.

There have been, however, attempts to provide a sociological explanation. Fredric Jameson (1991) proposed a Marxist analysis of postmodern thought, which seems appropriate given the role that the Marxist conception of ideology had in the theoretical development of sociology of knowledge⁷. According to Jameson, postmodern thought is a superstructural construction that disguises and justifies a new stage in the process of economic and military domination of the world by the United States, the great capitalist power. Hence, it would be the ideology for consumption society, an ad hoc philosophy that naturalizes the latter developments of capitalism and the primacy of consumption in the economic process.

It is also possible **to examine postmodern thought from a sociology of intellectuals standpoint**. Gellner (1992), in an explicitly partisan spirit, shows how the style and contents of intellectual work follow an strategy for maximizing results within a framework defined by a set of rules. Science requires constant criticism and review;

⁷ See, for example, Gonzalez Garcia (1979), who tried to refound sociology of knowledge returning to its Marxist roots.

replies and counter-replies are an essential part of academic work. The search for an absolutely invulnerable position leads, paradoxically, to relativistic assumptions that necessarily imply one only universally valid truth: that of the radical relativism assumed. Aphoristic writing, intuitive logic or stylistic dogmatism are pragmatically effective weapons⁸ when the writer desires to secure his position against criticism. It works as an auto-reflective update of the old ruse, ideological imputation: if earlier the adversary was expelled from the debate invalidating his position because of hypothetical social and historical biases (normally related to social class or a defence of status quo), now ideological distortion is acknowledged in our own position as in any other conceivable point of view (regardless of its rivalry with our position), but we preserve one certainty: the relativity of all knowledge. Hence, in an uncertain world where no one is totally right, the postmodern relativist manages to be right.

According to Gellner, postmodernism would be a sort of intellectual defence mechanism, a pendular overreaction that, in truth, seeks to reestablish the safety of the lost ideology embracing a new one riding the wave that destroyed its predecessor⁹.

Lastly, we may consider the specific contributions by postmodern authors to the analysis of ideologies, knowledge and systems of thought. Prominent amongst these is **Foucault's archeology of knowledge**, conceived as an explicit reversal of a classic discipline, history of ideas (and also, anecdotically, opposing a current, structuralism, that it intends to overcome). History of ideas is, in the same way, the reference for sociology of knowledge¹⁰, and Foucault's proposal is placed in a position secant to both. A first step in the construction of the new theoretical building, which will be enthusiastically echoed in later postmodern texts, is the disappearance of the author, an element of no interest to the archeological analysis. Speaking to himself, Foucault replies to his own rethorical reproaches: his discourse, he states, avoids the ground on which it should stand, being a discourse about other discourses which does not attempt to find a hidden law in them (Foucault, 1969).

His writing is a practical example of the discentering that denies every privilege to any center: he seeks dispersion, a scattering of everything. Since his discourse avoids the ground on which it should stand, there are no grounds for the self-refuting criticism,

⁸ Of course, "pragmatically effective" does not necessarily mean "scientifically valid".

⁹ According to Gellner, this is a reverse fashion of ethnocentrism.

¹⁰ Again, Stark (1958) would provide a classic example.

because Foucault deliberately seeks unlocated ambiguity. In a sense, it is similar to the divine attribute of ubiquity, lacking a location that can be attacked.

Among the many points of discordance that distinguish archeology of knowledge from classic (which is to say, modern) history of ideas, Foucault emphasizes four:

1) *Archeology doesn't intend to define thoughts hiding within discourses*, but discourses themselves, as practices following a set of rules. It is not a tool for interpretation, it does not look for another, deeper discourse. It does not try to unveil what the discourses “really mean”; that implies that it cannot be used to force convenient meanings to the discourse, in order to implement a project of historical reconstruction designed by the researcher. Archeology of knowledge cannot be used to read our present in the past, nor to shape it according to our interests.

2) *Archeology does not attempt to find the transition that joins the discourses to that which precedes, surrounds or follows them*. It intends to define discourses in what they are specific, to show in what aspects the set of rules that shapes them is different to any other. The point, then, is not to force coherence and continuity where we only find fragmentary, contradictory realities. Archeology is not a tool to impose order and uniformity but, much to the contrary, to draw more sharply the cutting edges of heterogeneous discourses. Comparative analysis requires both similarities and differences, and only when the latter are shown is it possible to faithfully describe what is specific to each discourse. Shapes are perceived when outlined over a background, shapes are differences that stand out of the inconcrete ambiguity, out of diffused noise, out of indistinct void. Archeology of knowledge demarcates the point of contact of the buried monument (never a document) and the ground that entombs it, without looking for any use in that document beyond itself (for, in that case, the monument would become a document and archeology would work exactly like the history of ideas).

3) *Archeology does not accept categories such as “work” or “author”*. It defines types and practical rules of discourse that cross different individual works, sometimes completely governing them, dominating them without any release, sometimes ruling only over a portion. *Archeology openly rejects the essential categories of history of ideas*, in a sense a branch of the history of literature, suffering from a similar cult of the hero pathology. Foucault the political activist will be, like Sartre, a cult hero himself (Eribon, 1989), but that is not the Foucault who devises the archeology of knowledge and, anyway, he has already prevented ad hominem criticisms: the author is not relevant and discursive contradictions are to be treasured. It does not matter if, later, we dissect

Foucault's discourse using the history of ideas toolbox, if we construct, for devoted uncritical worship, a coherent Foucault, or if we invent a spurious unifying interest behind his contradictions so we can attack his work better. Such undertaking would only prove him right¹¹.

4) *Archeology does not try to restore whatever might have been thought or desired by those uttering the discourse while they did it.* There is no return to the origin and its secret. The archeologist of knowledge is not an interpreter nor an unveiler of ideological falsehoods. The archeologist simply rewrites and describes the monuments found.

What are the epistemological consequences of Foucault's method? First, it denies the possibility of the chimeric objective point of view, free of ideological distortions, that science tries to achieve (and Mannheim's sociology of knowledge tries to preserve, always conscious of its own relativistic implications). Not even the strictest methodological rigour, writes Foucault, could avoid ideology: ideology's role does not diminish when falsehood is dispelled.

Thus conceived, ideology has no necessary relation to error and falsehood: according to Foucault, religious belief and any scientifically impeccable discourse are equally ideological. This implies two consequences: in one hand, all kind of discourse is marked as ideological, and in the other, if truth and falsehood have no relation to ideology, ideology itself becomes irrelevant to scientific enquiry. Carrying Foucault's premise to its last consequences, Foucault's own work would appear as unnecessary¹².

The essential analytical unit for archeology of knowledge is the statement, characterized as a trans-structural reality that goes beyond its own dominion and defines it.

Archeology of knowledge is presented as a theoretical leap overcoming earlier categories, a project not without dangers. In fact, that innovative, "cutting edge" quality is the basis for what we could call Foucault's "academic marketing". Regardless of any consideration about his intellectual honesty, we can read his book as a promotional leaflet for the new method (and its author with it), which tries to convince the reader to "purchase" the product using both rational arguments and aesthetic and stylistic values. He explicitly states that he takes for granted that the reader has accepted the risk. Thus,

¹¹ This is only so, of course, if we accept the dialectical trap in which an acceptance of Foucault's premises would get us into.

¹² This implies the acceptance of a problematic premise, related to the development of ideology as a concept and the notion of the sociology of knowledge as a sociology of error. If it first intended to explain the social origin of error, preserving for truth a condition of universality and the absence of any social or historical influence, when we accept that all knowledge, true or false, is socially conditioned the fallacious conclusion seems to be that all knowledge is equally valid and the true-false distinction ceases to be meaningful.

he appeals to fundamental values of the scientific ethos: the risk implies the courage of those willing to take it. Archeology of knowledge, as defined by Foucault, goes beyond sociological empirism and philosophical idealism. It is not psychology, sociology nor anything similar to them, but something new and risky that engages with discourse itself and the set of rules which have shaped it, without bringing in elements that are alien to them. In short, archeology of knowledge is a method for innovative and daring intellectuals, willing to leave behind the old academic disciplines when these prove to be too narrow to properly cover their object. This would be the bottom line of Foucault's marketing strategy.

Since sociology uses all kinds of heuristic tools in order to approach reality and force coherence and unity where there only is contradiction, theoretical collage allows us to take anything from Foucault's toolbox without having to accept his whole method¹³.

Archeology and deconstruction (Derrida, 1967) appear as theoretical revolutions that over time are assimilated by the academic community: nowadays they are a part of the social sciences repertoire and are at the disposal of sociology of knowledge. Later, Foucault would put power in the equation (see for example Foucault, 1980) and would move from archeology to an explicitly Nietzschean genealogy. Nietzsche's genealogy of morals is an enquiry, in almost mythical terms, on the origins of the judeo-christian moral discourse, conceived as a form of ideological domination by the weak over the strong. MacIntyre (1990) examines such school of thought in the context of his typology of versions of moral enquiry (traditional, encyclopedic and genealogic), characterizing the latter as a degeneration of the encyclopedic school, unable to fulfill its own methodological standards: the impossibility of providing a rational foundation to traditional morals lead Enlightened encyclopedists to minute ethnography and from that to relativism and the conclusion of the incommensurability of opposing moral principles. When Foucault relates discourses to power, statements get related to social structure; to put it in Marxist terms, ideologic superstructure gets related to structure and, eventually, economic infrastructure. That ends with the "purity" of archeology, which refused to read in any given discourse anything beyond itself.

Despite Foucault's wishes, who tried to pose a poetic solution to the problem of the perspective analyst's particular perspective, writing does not erase our faces. On the contrary, it would seem that it is precisely the face, or perhaps the name and prestige of

¹³ As Ritzer (1997) does.

the postmodern philosopher, the only thing that remains constant through the contradictions of relativism.

1. 2. Postmodern theory from a sociology of knowledge standpoint

Is it possible to analyze postmodern thought as a “perspective” in the sense given to the notion by Mannheim? In a sense I am already doing that when summarising a sort of abstraction of forced coherence from the variety of texts that could be ascribed to it.

The Mannheimian analysis would begin with a **conceptual examination** of the perspective, detailing the following points: 1) more frequent concepts and their meaning; 2) “counterconcept” (that is, the elaboration of concepts by opposition to those put forward by another conflicting perspective); 3) the absence of particular concepts. Postmodern thought emerges and is characterized by opposition, a circumstance that decisively conditions its conceptual structure. Hence, the definition of concepts such as “grand narrative”, which is used to put the modern, scientific perspective on level with all the perspectives that preceded it, and also to proclaim its ending. Concepts like “objectivity”, “science”, “reality”, “reason”, etc, are redefined in a process of “transvaluation” (if I am allowed to use a Nietzschean term).

“Objectivity”, for example, ceases to be a positive value which ensures the faithfulness of knowledge to reality (‘what reality?’, the postmodern would ask) and therefore its universal validity, becoming an ideological tool of domination that silences other equally valid visions.

The **structure of the system of categories** appears to be elusive: the system is changeable, lax, extremely malleable, and connections are made mostly by aesthetic criteria rather than analytic ones. Concepts can be indefinitely reformulated, and the relative position of each regarding the others can be changed at will in any new reformulation; incoherence and discontinuity are built as positive, praiseworthy values. The structure of the system is, therefore, a nebula which allows for multiple combinations.

Regarding the **model of thought** that stands as a reference for the postmodern perspective, we could basically point to literature, experimental essayism, aphorisms, prophetic dogmatism. Again, it seems fitting to go back to Nietzsche and his Zarathustra, a compendium of all these features and an acknowledged source of inspiration for some of the most outstanding postmodern thinkers. As is the case with Nietzsche since *The Birth of Tragedy*, aesthetics are an essential element of their philosophical offering.

In its **level of abstraction** the postmodern perspective jumps back and forth between two extremes without taking much account of intermediate regions: in one hand it articulates great wide ranging concepts (“grand narrative” would be a characteristic example) with a high level of abstraction, which can be applied to very different objects regardless of their individual distinctive features, and in the other it insists on the vital importance of whatever is specific and impossible to abstract from each particular “local” reality, socially and historically defined. It can be argued that such emphasis on details implies an abstraction that puts all that exists in the same level, which would be adequate for a theory that constructs ambiguous concepts to cover its own social context as much as the rival theories against which it has been built. It reveals itself as a relativistic abstraction carrying implications about any possible action in a world defined in such terms. This is the starting point for analyses such as Jameson’s (1991), who understands postmodern theory in neo-Marxist terms characterizing it as the ideological apparatus (and, therefore, a conservative one) of late capitalist order¹⁴. The **ontology implicit** to the postmodern perspective implies a fragmentation of reality in an infinite number of realities. There is no unifying center, there is no privileged perspective that can establish a hierarchy for the rest of points of view or issue universal, absolute judgements on being. Any metaphysic doctrine is as valid as any other. Radical relativism may lead to another philosophical dead end, solipsism. Is communication between different realities possible? Are we all fatally trapped within the limits of our cultures, our realities that cannot be translated? Ironically, again, when writing in order to lose our faces, as Foucault intended, we find that we have lost everything but our faces.

Finally, **who is behind this perspective?** Are postmodern thinkers acting as spokespersons for any particular social group?

J. Robert Oppenheimer (1966) once wrote about the cyclic influx of the solipsistic temptation: whatever the field of study, any scientist can notice that the basis for his research on reality is the communication with others, an agreement on the results of observation and experience, the use of a common language. Thus, any scientist can notice that most of his knowledge has its source in books, actions and words of others, which might lead him to think that only his conscience is real and the rest is only an

¹⁴ It must be noticed that Jameson uses the two basic approaches to sociology of knowledge: the one that explores the way in which structure and social circumstances condition knowledge, and the one that enquires about the social effects of such knowledge. The premise is originated in Marxism, since it argues that ideology is produced as a means to an end (there we can find its social circumstances, its “causes”) and it allegedly achieves it (there we can find its “effects”).

illusion. This opinion, Oppenheimer stated, cannot be refuted by logic alone, and this means that it can dominate the scientist's mind from time to time.

Oppenheimer asks himself about the relation between the findings of science and common understanding, about the way in which scientific knowledge is transmitted to the rest of society. The atomic bomb, together with nazism and concentration camps, is usually pointed as one of the great catastrophes in the 20th century: these are the critical points where Western reason unveiled its most dangerous face, where the Enlightenment project unveiled its suicidal reverse. It seems fitting that Oppenheimer, given the tragic impact of the research projects he took part in, addressed such concerns and admitted the perfectly logical attraction of solipsism which, carried to its last consequences, science can neither confirm nor refute.

In what sense is all of this related to the postmodern perspective? Eagleton (1996) and most notoriously Sokal and Bricmont (1998) showed how postmodern theorists make a very confusing use of the scientific jargon (Sokal and Bricmont suspect that their goal is achieving a disorienting unintelligibility). Besides any hypothetic fraudulent intention, it implies that postmodern theory emerges from (and is diffused within) a relatively enlightened social circle, that may not be well versed in all the disciplines and fields of knowledge that it alludes to, but has at least a few notions from each of them¹⁵.

However, the more we learn about reality, the more complex we find it to be. Different branches of physics, which contradict one another in some key aspects, are required to cover all physical phenomena. Regarding social sciences, and particularly ethics, they are still seeking for ways to cover the ever changing diversity of human reality.

Postmodern theory is a tempting solution for those problems. In an academic environment, where any result is open to criticism, postmodern notions allow any author to protect his own discourse in a favourable strategic position: perhaps his perspective is biased and uncomplete, but all perspectives are biased and uncomplete. Perhaps his theory is self-contradictory, but so is reality, incoherent and fragmented. Like other intellectual currents, postmodern theory provides social scientists with a vocabulary, a set of topics, models and rules of game that can be used to produce an acceptably successful academic discourse.

Ironically, as pointed earlier, Mannheim identified the intellectuals, a social group relatively alien to class struggles, economic processes and their interests, as one of the

¹⁵ It would be hard to beat Mario Bunge's (1996) causticity when he writes that understanding a scientific text requires a wide range of knowledge, contrary to the fashionable opinion that literary critics and semioticians are able to understand scientific literature.

guarantees for objective knowledge. Even when he formulated the notion it contradicted the reality of his time, since, as Remmling (1975) remarks, such suggestion appeared in a moment when German universities were dominated by intellectuals who openly showed their class allegiances and loyalty to partisan interests. Even so, Mannheim contended that an intellectual class that recruited its members from all the strata of social structure had to naturally incorporate the different perspectives and produce a global synthesis. The development of postmodern thought shows, on the contrary, an intellectual group that maximizes the relativism inherent to sociology of knowledge in an environment of social circumstances that do not seem fundamentally dependent on class loyalties. Postmodern theory seems to be the ideology for an intellectual class engaged in self-observation. Hence its solipsism, as found in authors like Baudrillard.

2. Reflexivity of postmodern theory

The notion of reflexivity in social science is usually applied when certain predictions of generally short range are fulfilled or refuted to a certain extent as an effect of having made such predictions public (Lamo de Espinosa, 1990). If we apply it to postmodern theory, there seem to be few specific predictions on recognizable facts. The world painted by postmodern authors is not accepted or rejected by the population in a sort of referendum. And in fact, such portrait of the world is not at all clear.

In the field of prophecies we can find a perfect example in the catastrophic soothsayer par excellence, Nostradamus, whose poetic ambiguity stands as a good demonstration of how an ambiguous formulation of predictions helps to always guess correctly, as long as there are interpreters willing to reread the vague prophetic statements so they fit the facts once these have happened¹⁶.

Postmodern theory, as a prediction, would be a not particularly specific definition of a future (but also present) situation. In fact, the less specific it is, the more successful it appears to be. The future will show a gradual unveiling of such present situation, the final point in Western culture. Hence, the kind of reflexivity that it could produce is not as direct and experimentally isolable as that of other, more specific propositions.

Applying Thomas' law, if postmodern thought succeeds as a prophecy, it would mean that the hypothetical collapse of modern reason would be real in its social consequences. In terms of sociological analysis, it is not important if reason has collapsed or not, but if people believe it. Particularly, those professionals specialized in

¹⁶ In case of need, the interpreter can be the prophet himself, as did Baudrillard (1995) when the Gulf War, which was not to take place, did take place. There could hardly be a better example of solipsistic stubbornness: since reality does not exist, the thinker can reshape it at will.

the rational production of knowledge. We do not believe in something if we believe that we do not believe (even if there is always room for underground faith; one of the great advantages of modernity is its ability to produce practical, empirical and verifiable results that we use regardless of our faith in this or that basic assumption of modernity). Can we produce the collapse of modern reason, the same way that it is possible to produce the commercial success (or failure) of any product? In the twisted circuit of postmodern reflexivity it would be necessary to ponder the following factors:

1) *Degree of dissemination of the theory.* It can be divulged by different media outside academia, working as underlying “ideology” in all kind of popular culture products. If Gellner (1992) is right and postmodern thought is just the umpteenth incarnation of one side in an everlasting controversy, its dissemination would be based upon relativistic notions already rooted in culture.

2) *Degree of acceptance for such theory.* To what extent do we believe, if not in the canonic formulations of the theory, in their contents? To what extent postmodern theory is a synthesis of an already existing *weltanschauung*? To what extent does it feed back and strengthen such *weltanschauung*?

3) *Effect of the theory and the beliefs that it might have represented or produced* (or, probably, both, in a dynamic and complex process). Does believing that reason is not enough anymore to solve our problems necessarily lead to reason becoming useless? Doubting reason makes reason doubtful?

Bourdieu, Chamboredon and Passeron (1991) recalled the case, registered by Freud, of a patient that, in the process of wiping his glasses again and again never got to put them on. It is an example of irony based on methodological concerns, self-reflective by definition, regarding the observation and assessment of one’s own actions. The frontier between justified self-reference and self-centered Narcissism is not completely sharp and, as the above example shows, self-observation may lead to paralysis. Social scientists find themselves forced to justify, in apologetic and self-ironic caveats, what did not need justification before: the writing of academic works, the formulation of a scientific theory, or existence itself when the references that made it meaningful are lost.

Postmodern thought reflects the popularization of sociological knowledge and sociological notions in common culture: the “metaphysical burden of social reality”, as Searle (1995) calls it, becomes visible and we become gradually aware of the consensual, artificial nature of our world and the social and historical contingency of

our allegedly universal ideas. Postmodern theory, in the most modest of suppositions, is an ideological corpus with which it seems necessary to engage in a dialogue in order to understand the self-reflective, self-doubting elements in Western culture, as the postmodern authors engaged in a dialogue with modernity, even if in the end we conclude with Alexander (1995: 5) that we cannot be postmodern because now we understand that we never were modern, and we cannot be relativists because now we understand that there never were suprahistorical absolutes.

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