Soziologie, 53. Jg., Heft 3, 2024, S. 271–282

The End of Sociology?

The Analytics of Decline

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»Do not ask what a social phenomenon is.
Ask instead what it is not, and what it is like.«
Everett Cherrington Hughes

When one is trained in the sociology of knowledge, it becomes a habit to carry out research while looking at the same time over one's shoulder, placing the inquiry in a larger context. To use a nautical analogy, the pilot of a boat guides it while practicing situational awareness, above and beyond the most advanced aids to navigation. Over six decades I have practiced teaching and research in sociology and I have observed its relative decline in several nested fields: society at large, the full set of social sciences, and academia.

Sometime ago Volker Meja (a former fellow graduate student at Brandeis University) forwarded to me a journalistic report on a shabby episode in the state of Florida, in an e-mail which he provocatively titled »The End of Sociology?« The article reported a recent decision in Florida to remove »Principles of Sociology« from the state's general education core course options. Undoubtedly this was in consonance with the increasingly belligerent attack by the Governor and his political associates against what they define as a leftist »woke«[1] attempt to indoctrinate students.[2] On the surface this attack

1 Woke is an adjective that refers to a broad awareness of inequality, racial injustice, sexual discrimination, and minority rights. It is often used as a shorthand for some ideas and claims of the American left, like reparation for past black slavery. The catch word is derived from the African American vernacular.

2 For an update and review of the controversy see https://is.gd/UAiz6K. See also the article by Jukka Savolainen (2023). The reaction of the President of the American Sociological Association was not a powerful one, and it reveals that a sociology requirement for

may seem a grotesque repetition – in the American anti-intellectual style – of the ancient criminal allegations against Socrates for »corrupting the youth«. But the comparison would miss the fundamental difference between a »woke« culture that seeks to reinforce preconceived albeit rebellious attitudes and the Socratic method of intellectual discourse that requires the teacher to always assume the role of the devil's advocate in an argument.

In America, direct interference in the academic integrity of an institution is possible in the case of public schools whose budgets are voted by the state legislatures. In other cases, the attack takes place in more circuitous, but no less effective ways, in a sort of a McCarthyistic »un-American activities« accusation by a Republican-dominated lower House of the Congress. The recent forced resignation of two presidents of top elite private universities is an alarming case of political interference in the autonomy and academic integrity of those institutions. The pretext was the vociferous outrage of right-wing legislators at an alleged rampant antisemitism on campus, on the occasion of student protests against the actions of the state of Israel in Gaza, and the accusation that university presidents had »not done enough« to punish such protests.

Those episodes have prompted in me a retrospective look at both the discipline and my own trajectories over sixty years in the field. Whither sociology?

In 1965 I finished in record time my BA degree in sociology at Brandeis University, where I had been recruited while I was a law student in Buenos Aires. A generous scholarship from that institution allowed me to study in the United States. The episode changed my career and my life as well, as I pursued a new intellectual vocation in America during those turbulent years.

In those days Brandeis University was a unique and transformative institution.[3] It was a non-denominational Jewish university founded at the same time as the State of Israel. Among its faculty was a brilliant set of German refugees whose ideas of the social sciences were definitely not in line with the mainstream sociology of the time, whose dominant paradigm was structural functionalism.

undergraduates is perhaps also a strategy to mitigate the decline in market share of the discipline within a college (Misra, Carter, Wingfield 2024).

3 For a recollection of the history of Brandeis by one of its founders and long-time president, see Sachar (1976). For a description of Brandeis sociology in the sixties (from a feminist perspective) see Thorne (1997).

Brandeis sociology was heavily influenced by a European outlook, including the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, and also by the field work approach of the Chicago school of sociology. I wrote my undergraduate thesis on the sociological implications of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, in particular the philosopher's late work on the crisis of European science. My thesis advisors were Kurt H. Wolff, a student of Karl Mannheim and the introducer of Simmel's sociology in the United States, and Herbert Marcuse, who had been a doctoral student of Husserl and Heidegger before the advent of Naziism and of his exile in America.

In 1965 I was pondering whether to embark in further studies in sociology. At the time Herbert Marcuse was forced into retirement (because of age) at Brandeis and moved to California. I fondly remember helping Marcuse pack his books, especially his collection of German classics, including the complete works of Schiller in elegant brown leather binding. I used the opportunity to ask my professor for advice. He invited me to lunch in a French restaurant in Cambridge and then we took a long walk. I remember our conversation on the state of the social sciences in the United States. Regarding my prospects in the discipline, I recall vividly his advice in the form of a warning: »If you choose sociology, it will be either your wedding or your funeral.« He suggested I continued my studies at Brandeis under the guidance of Kurt Wolff but added I could do well in apprenticing to his good friend Barrington Moore, Jr., who was teaching at Harvard in the Russian Research Center and the Department of Government. Later he introduced me to Professor Moore.

I took Marcuse's advice, studied the sociology of knowledge under Wolff at Brandeis, and through an ingenious arrangement also took Moore's graduate seminar on class and politics in the industrial revolution at Harvard's Department of Government, and other courses taught by him in the program of social studies at Harvard College. I thus developed a double interest in the critique of ideology and comparative modern societies in those formative years. It led to a doctoral dissertation on class and politics in the development of Argentina, somewhat pompously titled »Pseudomorphic Modernization« – an adjective borrowed from none other than Oswald Spengler![4]

4 Pseudomorphism in geology is the existence of a mineral that has the appearance of another mineral. Spengler used the term to characterize inauthentic cultures shaped by other cultures. In Spengler's words in »Decline of the West«: »By the term ›historical pseudomorphosis‹ I propose to designate those cases in which an older alien Culture lies so

At the time I published my first paper in sociology, co-authored with John David Ober, who had written a dissertation in the history of ideas under Marcuse[5] on the notion of voluntary servitude by Etienne de la Boétie.[6] Our paper was a critique of the ideology implicit in mainstream sociology (Ober, Corradi 1966). It was a critical assessment of sociology in the geopolitical context of the time, marked by the trauma of the Vietnam war.

This early essay on the sociology of sociology delved on the ideological dimensions of what was an accepted paradigm in the field. In the language of Thomas Kuhn, finding the functions of social practices was »normal science« at the time. For Ober and I, what paraded as a paradigm was an idealized model of American society presented as *the* abstract social system (Parsons). For us the critique of ideology was a prelude to discussing methodological alternatives with different premises (e.g. a conflict approach vs. a consensus approach). In other words, we were engaged primarily in a *Methodenstreit*, not in a *Kulturkampf*. We were aware of Max Weber's statement that a socio-critical analysis of thought (as in Marxism) and the relativism of the sociology of knowledge was not a tramway that one could get on and off at will. One's own social position was as determinative or biased as that imputed to another actor. But we believed there were ways of escaping the dilemmas of relativism and of attaining an unattached (*freischwebend*) perspective on ideas in a field of competing perspectives.

In the following decade, the quiet disillusion with the utopian expectations of imminent global change typical of the sixties was accompanied in leading universities by the importation of intellectual currents from Europe and by the cross-fertilization of trends and fashions between the humanities and the social sciences. Structuralism in anthropology, post-structuralism and deconstruction in the literary field (mostly French), converged within sociology with the theme of post-modernity and the reorientation of theory

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massively over the land that a young Culture, born in this land, cannot get its breath and fails not only to achieve pure and specific expression-forms, but even to develop fully its own self-consciousness. All that wells up from the depths of the young soul is cast in the old moulds, young feelings stiffen in senile works, and instead of rearing itself up in its own creative power, it can only hate the distant power with a hate that grows to be monstrous.« (Spengler 1961: 263; see also Corradi 1974)

5 Marcuse taught in the Program on the History of Ideas at Brandeis.

6 »Discours de la servitude volontaire« is an essay by Étienne de La Boétie, Michel de Montaigne's closest friend, published clandestinely in 1577. This short text, composed when the author was only 18, has made the rounds through the centuries and is relevant even today (de La Boétie 2010).

in diverse directions – Marxism, psychoanalysis, linguistics, and phenomenology among them. Experimentation with new approaches to the study of knowledge, power, and justice, and inter-disciplinarity, were in some quarters the order of the day. Sociology lost a unitary theoretical framework and was rent asunder by competing paradigms, often deaf to each other's claims.[7]

After the continuation for some time of both growth and salience inside the discipline and of its position in the larger academic field,[8] some symptoms of decomposition and decline set in. These became manifest in the critique of the discipline uttered by Lewis Coser[9] from the »cockpit« of the profession. In his 1975 presidential address to the American Sociological Association he lamented the consequences of two then-prevailing trends: the fetishism of statistical methods on the one hand, and sectarian esoteric intellectual cults[10] on the other (Coser 1975).

In his view both impeded the creative growth of the discipline. In their own ways, each led to the abandonment of substantive areas of inquiry in favor of linguistic or mathematical virtuosity. Coser was no stranger to the sociology of knowledge (Coser 1966) but he came short of analyzing the totality of the academic field and the shifting situation of sociology within it. This kind of analysis was being developed at the time in France by Pierre Bourdieu. The latter combined the immanent and internal interpretation of the discipline with its position in a larger context of power relations.[11]

From a Bourdieuan perspective Coser's warnings were a good preliminary step in a serious diagnosis of the evolution of the discipline. He was right in suspecting that methodological prowess bereft of a solid theoretical base is like a Pirandellian character in search of an author – something like the skill of a good plumber that can be applied to a number of practical issues or problems outside as well as inside the discipline. And Coser's critique of self-regarding and sectarian paradigms was also right: They made the discipline appear less respectable in front of others within the academy. Moreover, some of its erstwhile substantive research areas in domains like

7 There were attempts to synthesize the various approaches, as in the work of Antony Giddens, but they generally did not go beyond a fashion parade.

8 The late sixties and early seventies were perhaps the apex of the golden age of sociology in the West.

9 One of my Brandeis teachers in the early sixties.

10 He singled out ethnomethology at the time.

11 Cf. Bourdieu's contributions to the journal *Actes de la Recherche*, and eventually his book, »Homo Academicus« (1984).

large power structures, comparative socio-economic development, and global conflict (concerns of classical sociology) began to migrate to other disciplines like economics, political science, anthropology, and history. In those areas of inquiry sociology had less to say than it had before.

In a Bourdieu-style mapping of the academic field sociology moved down from a central to a peripheral position within the academy and away from an interface with socially strategic partners in the wider field of power in society and towards occasional partnerships with unstable ideological and social movements. In short, it moved from being a big fish in a small pond to a smaller fish in a larger one.

Twenty years after Coser's warnings, Irving Louis Horowitz produced a more dire diagnosis. His vehemence in the critique of his own discipline, as it had evolved in those two decades may sound familiar to the student of religious movements: It has the shrill tone of an apostate (on the right) who was once an apostle (on the left). Nevertheless, Horowitz pointed to the deleterious effects of sectarian advocacy for the objectivity of the profession. He detected an encroachment of »progressive« dogmatism in sociological studies designed to confirm pre-established suppositions (derived from a skeletal Marxism) and above all, in the analysis of society at large, the focus on the trees at the expense of the forest – exactly the opposite tack of the grand tradition of the founders. In one area after another, Horowitz showed how this same formulaic thinking dominated the field, resulting in a crude reductionist view of contemporary social life, out of step with social change itself (Horowitz 1994).

In all fields of inquiry, evolution leads to specialization, to the point that practitioners in one subfield are likely to interact with other disciplines more often than with members of other subfields in their own discipline. In the case of sociology the single paradigm of early days (as in Parsonsian structural functionalism) that for all its scholasticism[12] kept it aloof from ideological conflicts in the wider field of societal power, gave way to a multiplication of perspectives, often esoteric and faddish, and sometimes sporting the name of »theory« without scientific rigor. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish genuine specialization from ad hoc fragmentation, for instance research on social inequality from grievance studies.

12 See Sztompka (1971) and especially the early critique by Barrington Moore, Jr. (1953). Among Marxists, an equivalent scholasticism was evident in the work of Louis Althusser and his disciples, notably Marta Harnecker in Latin America.

In my days at NYU, especially the 1990s, and harking back to my experience at Brandeis, I sought to broaden the intellectual horizons of sociology on campus by launching a series of mini-seminars on European Sociology with my friend and colleague Wolf Heydebrand. For the two of us and very few others[13] the series was a feast. But for local sociologists the mini-series went almost unnoticed, with rare exceptions tied to some recognizable names: Alain Touraine, Michel Crozier, Pierre Bourdieu, Cornelius Castoriadis, Antony Giddens, Niklas Luhman, Zygmunt Bauman, David Frisby, Jacques Leenhardt, among them.[14] I think however that they left no significant mark in the thought or research of the Department.

The marginalization of this and other efforts in my own department prompted me to »bail out« in the most elegant way I could. I strengthened intellectual alliances with colleagues in the departments of French Studies, History, and Anthropology, and made a few career moves that proved attractive. One was to become a Dean in the Graduate School of Arts and Science, first under a brilliant anthropologist – Annette Weiner – and then all by myself, dealing with the good and the bad not of one department any more but of forty six; the other was to join Richard Sennett – a real public intellectual with a foot in NYU – in the creation of a university-wide Committee on Theory and Culture; and finally to move to Europe directly as Executive Director of New York University in Florence.

In all of these venues I felt that I could breathe a broader air. When that was not enough, I ventured in ocean sailing on my own boat and crossed the Atlantic four times at the helm of a small sailing vessel, with my wife Christina Spellman, also a sociologist (art and urban studies). Sailing was my avocation and an antidote to the petty politics of the university. In some ways this venture into world sailing was a compensation for the failures and frustrations in the political micro-cosmos of academia.

I would have liked to stay in Florence – the city of Machiavelli – at the helm of a great institute of European-American Relations, a sort of Davos not in the Alps but in the Tuscan hills. It was not to be, as my bosses at NYU preferred to keep the Florence campus as one more of the many study

13 Some from other departments and some brilliant outsiders like Paul Piccone, editor of the critical journal *Telos*, and occasionally Wolfgang Schivelbusch – both friends of mine that were rare *freischwebende* intellectuals in New York.

14 Jürgen Habermas was more influential elsewhere, as a frequent visiting scholar at The New School for Social Research, physically close to NYU, but intellectually much closer to the legacy of the Frankfurt School.

abroad programs in that city, catering mostly to undergraduates. My ambitions were thwarted, even though the Florentine experience was rewarding in many other ways. Eventually I produced a novel on the life of Florence as I witnessed from my perch (Corradi 2021). I decided to leave at the end of the millennium, do more ocean sailing, and retool my intellectual kit, focusing on comparative studies and geopolitics.

One thing I kept from my Florentine experience, for which an anecdote will suffice. In 1998 I was graciously allowed by the Mayor of Florence to spend time alone in an area of the Palazzo Vecchio normally closed to the public: the study of Nicolò Machiavelli. There I reflected on the analysis that the great political thinker made when forced into exile – bad for him but good for posterity – on the basic questions that to this day inform political sociology and geo-politics, to wit: Who rules? How does a ruler manage power? Who is afraid of what?[15]

Of particular interest for me was the role of fear in political and social life. In the 1990s, and on the occasion of studying the military regimes of South America in a recent past, I led a collective study on the uses of fear (in its extreme form, terror) by such regimes. It resulted in a volume titled »Fear at the Edge«, sponsored by the Social Science Research Council of the United States (Corradi, Weiss Fagen, Garreton 1992). It has been my most cited study in the field, and made me a pioneer in the sociology of fear. Eventually this interest of mine morphed into an inquiry into the sociology of conflict and war – a novelty in my own department, which graciously allowed me to indulge in these topics, though not considering them important enough for the curriculum.

When I returned to the New York campus in 2002 the world had changed; the university had changed; and I had changed. Although I came back to the Department of Sociology, now renewed under the capable leadership of Craig Calhoun, I shifted my research and teaching interests to international politics. Starting with courses and seminars on comparative modern societies, I continued to pursue my interest in the sociology of conflict and war, and finally and directly, to delving in geo-politics proper, where I continue to these days.

15 For a seminal presentation of what is at stake, and in the vein of Machiavelli (although he does not mention the illustrious Florentine) it is useful to consider the text of Max Weber's lecture in Munich addressed to a young audience of distraught demobilized soldiers in 1919, »Politics as a Vocation« (Politik als Beruf; Weber 1988).

Classical theorists[16] are always mentioned with reverence, but their progeny is heterogeneous and lacking in equivalent stature. In the domain of theory, sociology resembles in some ways an orphan brought up by its grandparents. One famous dictum by a great mathematician (Alfred North Whitehead) comes immediately to mind: »A science which hesitates to forget its founders is lost.« And sociology hesitates a lot.

Claudio Benzecry and Monika Krause, two of the most accomplished academic sociologists produced by my own department at NYU in recent years have published an important text (a collective volume) that seeks to take stock with – as the title indicates – social theory now (Benzecry, Krause, Reed 2017). They note fragmentation in this domain, and an active exchange or »trading« with other intellectual domains. That is expressed in the difficult distinction, if not indistinction, between *social* and *sociological* theory. The organizers of this volume try heroically to find a focus, or at least foci, as substitutes for a productive paradigm in the discipline. The connection of the various theories (*theoretical perspectives* is a better term) with empirical research remains tenuous. The latter continues to develop as a theoretically unmoored technology. Moreover, the arena of loosely denominated »theories« has a fluid connection with non-scientific social movements, with their literature and slogans in the wider society. If I search for a reasonably precise definition of any of these »theories« I find a mumbo-jumbo of perspectives stemming from a variety of sources.[17]

On the hinge between the academic and the non-academic world stands the ambiguous figure of the public intellectual. Some sociologists attained this status in America, but most of them in Europe, especially in France, and some of them late in life like Norbert Elias and Zygmunt Bauman. Those in France were called *maîtres à penser* or more generally *philosophes*. While these individuals sometimes called attention to sociology in the mass and later social media, they often also simplified or distorted concepts and findings and straddle cavalierly different fields of knowledge. For some the job was not the advance of knowledge, but the *alegato pro domo suo* (calling media attention to self) and the cry of *J'accuse!* inaugurated by Emile Zola, and thereafter

16 The brightest stars in this constellation have been Marx, Weber, Durkheim, with lesser ones like Simmel and Mannheim among them.

17 An example: »Queer theory's origin is hard to clearly define, since it came from multiple critical and cultural contexts, including feminism, post-structuralist theory, radical movements of people of color, the gay and lesbian movements, AIDS activism, many sexual subcultural practices such as sadomasochism, and postcolonialism.« https://guides.library.illinois.edu/queertheory/background. Last retrieval on May 22, 2024

mostly a sort of shadow boxing parading as militancy. Sometimes it was hard to disentangle researcher from publicist, concept from slogan, sociological terms from terms in other fields, and all these from common conversation.[18]

Of the most brilliant public intellectuals I met or worked with some were bona fide sociologists: Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Alain Touraine[19] were a source of inspiration. Pierre Bourdieu, a sociologist whom I admired and frequented, attained stardom too. He was a sociological research machine all of his own and left his mark for quite some time in the field. But the heyday of *maîtres à penser* came to an end with the new millennium, followed by more technical, anonymous, and team-based research.

On the practical side, the job prospects of sociology graduates in America are not too bad in relation to other social sciences. Unemployment rates (relatively high but below 10 percent) are evenly spread across economics; political science and government, and sociology. A noticeable difference is that among graduate students in the discipline the preferred career is academic. Sociology has a larger share of new doctoral recipients employed in the academy than any of the other scientific fields and this situation has not changed much over the last two decades. Its survival hinges a lot on close circuit reproduction.

Considering other career paths, we see that the alternatives to academic life are not lacking. However, when one looks at these careers one finds that they are far from the cutting edge: They are by and large ancillary positions in the middle to lower ranks of government and social services. To put it grossly, the field operates less in the production of significant new knowledge than in the reproduction of the administrative state. I should not expect any great intellectual innovation in such areas of activity. The picture is one of a field with relatively stable but mediocre prospects. In my own experience at New York University the most brilliantly successful alumni are those who left the field altogether – though perhaps not all of its teachings – for careers in business and finance. A few do well in academia. But there is no breakthrough – no theoretical leap, and no discovery of note. And so the field continues on its path of conventional studies, with some developments

18 I can cite the following comment as an illustration: »In the weeks after Hamas's brutal Oct. 7 attack in Israel and Israel's brutal response, as the world tried to make sense of the violence and its origins, the language of postcolonialism suddenly seemed ubiquitous, even in mainstream conversation: The terms ›decolonization‹, ›settler-colonialism‹ and ›empire‹ appeared regularly not just on social media but also in newspapers and on podcasts.« Max Strasser (2024) on Adam Shatz.

19 Touraine was the sole sociologist in this trio.

in quantitative and qualitative studies – in that order – but without much bang for the buck.

At this point in my career, upon retirement and after joining the ranks of the »emeritocracy«, I have continued doing research and writing in the domain of geo-politics, producing several books. An incurable writer, I also produced a tome on something else, namely a book on sailing which made quite a splash in nautical circles, and I wrote a novel too.

Returning to the initial and provocative question that prompted these recollections, I have written numerous articles on the international situation in our troubled times. They are informed by sociology but not squarely in the field, because I find the latter quite somnambular in the understanding of international affairs. They are published in an internet journal that appears in three languages, *Opinión Sur*.[20] At some point, their collection might see the light of day in the form of a book. I wish to publish this in Spanish first, as a sort of homecoming, in a way, to my Ithaca in this odyssey – my native Argentina.

In closing I realize that I have come full circle in a sketchy outline of what is not an auto-biography but an auto-ethnography. In 1897, Mark Twain, upon reading his obituary, is said to have remarked, »The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.« In 2024, to the question posed in the title, the proper answer is, in my view, »sociology is alive but not too well«. It muddles through, while some practitioners still wait for a breakthrough.

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20 https://opinionsur.org.ar/wp/?lang=en.

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