

### Sociological Knowledge: Specific Features, Science Criteria, and Prospects of Development

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## **Sociological Knowledge: Specific Features, Science Criteria, and Prospects of Development\***

*Abstract*

*The author of this article discusses characteristic features of changes in sociological knowledge according to its development under conditions of the present-day social transformations.*

In my opinion, a rather short period of sociological knowledge development manifested the evolution of a strange kind. Sociology has come into being as the queen of sciences. Auguste Comte, its founder, thought so. However, a couple of decades full of fruitful work by sociologists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century led to the necessity when Emile Durkheim decided to prove that sociology had its right to independence as a discipline and was able to produce its own knowledge different from philosophy, psychology, etc. They did not talk anymore about reign but an opportunity for sociology

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\* Translated from the Ukrainian text "Sotsiologichne znannia: spetsyfika, kryterii naukovosti ta perspektyva rozvytku", Sotsiologhiia: teoriia, metody, marketynh, 2004, № 1, pp. 5–14.

This article is the first part of the report "On Prospects of Sociological Knowledge Development and State of Sociology in Ukraine" that was delivered for Academic Council of the Institute of Sociology of the NAS of Ukraine on the 27<sup>th</sup> of January 2004. The report consisted of three parts. The second part was about theoretical and methodological aspects of studies on social phenomena that appeared as a result of social transformations related to destruction of soviet social system and birth of post-communist countries. The final part was about institutionalization in sociology and development of professional sociological community in Ukraine.

to be “equal among others”, its right to an independent existence. Thinking of his work *Suicide*, Durkheim hoped of proving that sociology was a science that, in his opinion, had to tend to become something else but not only a kind of philosophic literature, because it has the same determined, as well as solid, reality to study the objects that have psychologists or biologists [1, p. 4, 8].

To the middle of the 20th century, after theoretical achievements by functionalists and essential results of numerous empirical studies, it seemed that nobody would doubt in ability of sociology to produce its own knowledge. However, bold and scorn words by Charles Wright Mills about studies in theoretical and empirical sociology by Talcott Parsons and Paul Lazarsfeld were only the first wave of interdisciplinary criticism that made people doubt not only in scientific independence of sociology, but also in its “mental health” — its ability to produce anything more constructive than scholastic schemes and chaotic empirical observations over voluntary chosen parts of social reality. In 1970–1980s, everybody, irrespectively of theoretical views, talked about crisis in sociology; among those who discussed whether sociology as an independent science has already died or is only in agony, there were many western sociologists — from patriarch Robert Merton to the young activists of new functionalism and postmodernism, who are now widely recognized scientists in the discipline still called sociology despite many obstacles on the way to find the common basis for professional consolidation of all those who formally belong to sociological community.

Meeting the lack of constructive approaches for studying new social problems related to globalization, informational society, transformation of bipolar world, etc., sociologists decided that the reason is in the fact that sociology is only partly opened for other sciences about human and society. When leaders of traditional sociological community called their colleagues from other humanitarian disciplines, they got a significant answer. After Alvin Toffler, the journalist studying theory of society and social cognition, who was the first, there appeared Jurgen Habermas and Roy Bhaskar, philosophers, Francis Fukuyama and Robert Putnam, French postmodernists and politologists, Immanuel Wallerstein, historian and economist, Noam Chomsky, linguist, and other scholars of authority whose conceptual approaches were wider than their professional interests and needed to be generalized in a wider social space.

While professional sociologists discussed ways to overcome the crisis, the leading positions in social studies happened to be taken by globally thinking theoreticians from interdisciplinary sciences, who consid-

ered society and social relations in their traditional sociological meaning that was less important than global drama of human civilization and the human being as a possible victim of global processes. Looking for ways to make humanity and a person survive in this new social world, they appeal to the world economy, geopolitics, environment, systems of education and communication, new discourses, etc. — everything that disturbs the mass and power elite, but has no right to distract sociologists from the main — social phenomena in their structural links and changes.

Maybe thinking of global problems, solutions of which determine the destiny of mankind as a whole, theoretical aspects of a social science can seem less important; but the essence of crisis in modern sociology is that, under the conditions of global problems deepening, sociology could not become a leader of new intellectual movement; it left this place to widely thinking economists, politologists, environmentalists, historians, publicists, who are far from understanding laws of society development, social relations, and the nature of social events.

Crisis in sociology relates, first of all, to its theoretical basis — possibility to substantiate sociological theories and accumulate sociological knowledge, maintain its specific features under growing inter-osculation and integration of the humanities. Why does this problem exist? Why does sociology still deal with the methodological problems discussion of which, in other sciences, has been already *mauvais ton* or ignorance? Mostly because the sociologists still cannot determine the subject matter of their studies, common initial postulates, without which it is impossible to agree positions as to evaluation of scientific character of knowledge, its difference from ordinary observations and everyday stereotypes.

How many debate was conducted whether sociology looks like other sciences, especially natural! But this polemics is senseless, because there is no sociological dependence to be strict enough to ensure that the opposite dependence is less probable. In sociology, any evident observation can be regarded as a fact, because there is always a possibility to notice the “opposite” observation based on social factors and circumstances that were not taken into account during the first observation. That is why; structural functionalists and theoreticians of conflict are right and wrong when they come to mutually exclusive conclusions on the nature, functions, and consequences of social conflicts. In my opinion, tragedy of sociology is in the fact that ambivalence of processes and results of so-

cial cognition has to be considered as a disciplinary norm but not anomaly.

In his last interview one of the best Russian sociologists Gennadiy Batygin, who devoted his life to the institutionalization of sociology, answering the question — would he choose the same life path? — Said: “No, our occupation is very ungrateful. I would even say that it is not an occupation so far. Our profession is a risky thing” [2, p. 163]. In other work, he writes: “Sociology is a vague and unsolved discipline...” [3, p. 116].

Why is it so vague and ungrateful? Why the person acknowledged as one of the best professionals decided to say that about all his life? I think that it is mostly because the probabilistic nature of any social dependencies enables to substantiate any hypothesis and so, scientists lose their main award for hard creative work — possession of truth. In natural sciences, competitive hypotheses could exist, but one of them will eventually exclude all others. But sociology assumes infinite number of competitive, sometime mutually exclusive but somehow rightful hypotheses. That is why, our empirical data and theories are such contradictory, leading to disturbance in the mass consciousness, elite minds, and even in sociologists' heads, without mentioning students, talking about whom in his presidential speech to an annual meeting of American Sociological Association, George Homans mentioned, that at the beginning of studies students of sociology understand the real nature of social events better than at the end, and our ambiguous discussions kill their natural wisdom [4, p. 61].

The natural wisdom mentioned by Homans makes it possible to get adequate observations of social reality. In other words, if people are far from professional sociology and live in this reality, they understand a lot simply due to their intuition. However, when these people get involved in contradictory sociological knowledge, they easily turn into ambivalent creatures that unavailingly try to understand in what reality they live and whether it is possible to get to know this reality.

I think that sociological knowledge was and always will be falsified in principle. Due to this, it is initially cannot be “absolutely scientific” according to rigorous criteria of neo-positivists. However, this does not mean that it cannot move towards more strict verification by development and improvement of methods with getting better understanding of the nature and epistemological function of sociological laws. Sociological law can take its perfectly “legal” place in the system of sociological knowledge without losing the specific character of the knowledge in its wording. Unfortunately, to deal with laws in sociology was not so easy as

it seemed to Comte, who wrote down the first sociological law and got no less critical arrows from specialists of the science created by him than St. Sebastian from violent pagans. Hundred years later, the same critics got William Ogburn who decided to formulate a law of cultural lag. Since then many sociologists have been avoiding words like social laws and calling scientific explanations of social reality by “explanatory mechanisms” taken from the fashionable concept of scientific realism. In period of postmodernism, the mere discussions of laws in sociology became *mauvais ton*. Defining the purpose of social theory, Anthony Giddens even decided to distance himself from this “bad” category, by using the universal rules and principles instead of the category “laws” [5].

This position of modern sociologists can be explained by weakening creative minds in comparison to the 19<sup>th</sup> century when new social laws were produced without a delay, but the destiny of these laws formulated by outstanding scientists in their fundamental and numerous works happened to be unenviable. Who of our contemporaries can be serious about the social laws discovered by Spencer, Tarde, or Giddings? Probably, they will be sociological historians that intended only to criticize the naive thinkers. The “spiral” law of changes in social formations was luckier. Having made the most part of intellectuals, sympathetic with the oppressed mass, convinced that return to primitive society at a new higher stage is inevitable, Marx, Engels, and their revolutionary followers almost succeeded in turning the mankind into the primary state. It turned out that Utopian projects realized in practice and introduced into the mass consciousness in the form of objective “social laws” can be more dangerous than nuclear weapon, environmental pollution, and other by-products of natural science laws. That is why, it is understandable when people are afraid of limited sociological possibilities, when some social thinkers, maybe even as “clever” as the founders of Marxism, would be unable to determine strict criteria making a difference between an objective social law and their own social fantasy.

However, the principle denial of “post-modern” sociologists from construction of knowledge on a solid basis of laws leaves a lot of room for ambiguous interpretations and discourse tricks, which allow imitating the process of social cognition that, as a result, discredits it. They refer to a specific character of the reality being studied, to its principle difference from the subject matter of natural sciences, but all this only covers their efforts to leave the door open to philosophic fantasy, to “natural sociology” like by ancient Greek thinkers who substantiated that all living things took their origin from solid, liquid, or gas elements. If we do not

want to follow their path, a law has to be formulated as a fixation of essential and necessary links between events that requires special cognitive discipline and self-limitation. We can understand doubts as to expediency of such victims from a researcher in the field of knowledge where the person who studies it becomes a creator of the reality under investigation; so, the research situation cannot be reproduced and the dependence that discovered empirically is of a probabilistic nature. Sociologists denying laws protect themselves from problems related to prognostic validity of knowledge obtained by them. They talk about self-fulfilling prophecies, all-penetrating subjectivity, etc., but when we deny substantiated social prognoses and try to avoid the problems of prognostic validity, we put ourselves into the absurd world of self-producing uncertainty. Even in our everyday life, nobody lives according to these rules, and this situation becomes more absurd if a science accepts such rules. I believe that only regarding laws as a basis of sociological cognition can make it possible to turn sociology into a science; of course, we must understand the clear difference between classic laws of natural sciences and probabilistic laws of social reality.

It may sound strange but in the “post-non-classic” picture of the world the same cognitive problems arise while studying the physical reality. But modern physics does not deny its laws only because a researcher can become involved in the reality under investigation; even the reality itself is less strictly determined now. It leaves room for both — specific laws that organize practical activity and the universal law of energy conservation that keeps cosmogonical thoughts from entering the space of knowledge that cannot be verified in principle. All the mentioned give the hope of making sociological knowledge scientific despite weak probabilistic sociological dependencies determining the specific character of social cognition.

The idea that the knowledge has to be scientific is common for all sociological schools even the most close to subjectivity. But how it could become scientific? This question still causes most discussions. For example, Piotr Sztompka, the founder of Research Committee on Theoretical Sociology of International Sociological Association, is convinced that for the past decades sociological theory has been developing very rapidly and productively. He presents convincing, in his opinion, substantiation of unprecedented growth and flourishing of explanatory, analytic, and heuristic sociological theories [6]. If it is true, why does sociological community still try to understand: “What is primary — an individual or a society? What is primary — a structure or an action?” Modern scientists

pay an unbelievable attention to these problems, although they cannot be solved constructively; the same can be referred to a chicken-and-egg question. However, in his rather popular works, Roy Bhaskar seriously discusses who was right — Weber or Durkheim? And there is found the answer, which is dialectically irreproachable — it seems that they were wrong both. The right idea belongs to Peter Berger, who told that society forms individuals who create society [7, p. 225–226].

Anthony Giddens who found a compromise solution of dualism of structure and action in their continuous self-production studied the same eternal problems. So, the result of the highest theoretical achievements of modern sociology brings us to good dialectics (in the best traditions of Herakleitos' times). We understand that it is hardly possible to expect somebody like George Lundberg who would demand to keep sociological studies in accordance with strict rules of natural sciences (because if you call something a science, it has to develop according to scientific rules). Even European sociological school that recovered, according to Sztompka, its leading position in development of sociological theory, takes the positivist approach skeptically at least in its "light version" (without taking into account the paradigm conception of scientific development and post-non-classic scientific picture of the world). Most likely, traditional theoretic discussions on the right understanding of structure-and-action duality will persist. I am afraid, sociologists' attention will be distracted from studies to please inexhaustible and inventive discussions on problems eternal for scholastics of all times and nations. I am not a proponent of militant positivism, because I believe that people are to be thinking creatures and something in the world should depend on their will and sense. Even religious doctrines, not pretending to scientific substantiation of their ideas, deal with serious problems related to duality of "the highest structures" and "individual actions". However, I do not see the reasons to consider that thinking creatures with free will are also free of all social laws; the laws can be understood, but not violated.

I give a simple example, it relates to interactive surveys on TV. The first data can widely vary. We can see essential jumps and changes for small numbers of respondents. And when the number exceeds a hundred, the dependence becomes clear and practically will not change with a growth in respondents' number. Probabilistic laws work and the drawback of sociology related to its probability dependencies becomes the good when we deal with mass processes. Probabilistic laws lead to leveling of unpredictable individual will and inaccessible individual sense that could be



introduced by individuals into a social situation. This ability of social system to level individual differences makes the essential difference between sociology and psychology or other related sciences.

When sociologists deal with the mass processes, they see that within the frames of a certain social phenomenon there could be noticed tendencies and laws, which “take social processes off” their uncertain and unpredictable subjective “basis”. The next step brings a serious problem of sociological cognition. Being happy to discover the first “objective” dependence, sociologists forget that their subject matter is far more complex than in natural sciences. There is an opinion (especially among representatives of natural sciences) that sociology is a “sub-science” because it cannot meet strict standards of hypothetical and deductive methods. We can, of course, forget about this criticism and explain it by probable humanitarian ignorance of naturalists. But in this case the truth is close, because sociology really looks like mythology when we, sociologists, cannot take off the ground of primitive aborigines that are happy with their first observation and worship it.

What do I mean? Let us suppose that a survey discovered some dependence between two variables. This dependence enraptured the discoverer. Look! There is a difference! There is a relation! However, we often forget that this effect discovered in the only survey (sociologists conduct most surveys as unique and get the unique image of social reality, which is as far from being representative as an interview of one respondent from representative poll of population) is the only observation and the discovered effect cannot be considered as a sociological fact. Of course, there are sociologists who understand that one observation cannot be enough for discovery of fact as an element of social cognition, but in sociological communities that are not sufficiently developed, like our national, such understanding is a rare event; anyhow, the triangulation method (necessary for reconstruction of fact from a set of observations) is not often applied by Ukrainian sociologists. However, even this method cannot ensure from delusions through identification of sociological facts with social reality. If a “primitive sociologist” makes this identification on the basis of the first “successful” observation, then his more experienced colleague will rather serve the “cult of fact”. As a result, we can see numerous cases of reification when scientists find in social reality the things, which exist mostly in their own social imagination. Despite the fact that they nearly reach the heights attained by Durkheim’s thought (he regarded a social fact as a “real thing”), their knowledge is still weak.

The point is that discovery of fact in a survey, even if the fact proves a theoretical hypothesis, is only the first stage of sociological cognition. Discovery of non-contradictory system of facts is the highest point of cognition in natural sciences, but in sociology it is only a basis because in social space, especially modern, the reality changes more rapidly than sociological knowledge. Neither a fact itself nor a system of facts supporting a hypothetical social construction means anything without rising to higher (than simple discovery of facts) stages of social cognition, and this makes a difference between sociology and natural sciences. Naturalists need a hypothesis, appropriate methods, and correctly developed series of experiments, while to understand a social phenomenon we need much more complicated research procedure. Before I describe this procedure, I would like to tell about a social phenomenon as a subject matter of sociological cognition. I believe that the common for sociologists is study but not of a social action as insisted Weber (because the social reality has more than actions) or social relations as Marx thought regarding a person as a set of all social relations (because relations are not enough to study those who are involved in them). In fact, sociologists study social phenomena. In professional empirical surveys, sociologists forget, as a rule, that some of them make a start from relations, others — from social actions, somebody — from social communications, etc.; because they study social phenomena and constantly use this category when talking about the subject matter of their survey, but somehow modestly hide that a social phenomenon is the common name for all variety of objects studied in the social world.

What is a social phenomenon? It is a directly observed aspect of social reality. Choice of a phenomenon to be a subject matter of survey relates to the possibility to discover in social reality something that necessitates a systematic observation. The first hypothesis of sociologist is a supposition that systematic observation is possible. As a matter of fact, it is a hypothesis that makes it possible to separate the real phenomenon from imagination or illusion, to determine it, and then to formulate a hypothesis of the next cognitive level dealing not with plain observation but facts that open a way to the theoretical interpretation.

In my opinion, after the hypothesis about a fact had been proved, there would go a hypothesis about existence of tendency as a permanent reproduction of social phenomenon, its relative temporal invariability. Why do I adhere to monitoring surveys? Because any sociological study, even the most honest and qualified, cannot be saved from systematic errors. Monitoring surveys reproduce systematic errors and there reveals a

tendency that enables to draw conclusions at a higher level than it would be in the case of separate facts. However, even the above-mentioned is not enough. The next hypothesis has to move the social phenomenon from its temporal context into the spatial one. We must regard hypotheses about essential links forming the inner space of phenomenon (structure) and its surroundings (system of essential links with other social phenomena). Multistage hierarchical hypothetical and deductive procedure makes the difference between sociological cognition and cognition of natural sciences.

I believe that ascent to sociological law needs a special procedure to be applied. That is why; I will describe it more strictly than all mentioned above in this work.

Sociological cognition of social phenomenon starts not from discovery of a social fact, because in order to state that we deal with a fact it is necessary to have a result of application of sociological methods to revelation and specification of phenomenon; it means determination of its specific features among other social phenomena. Cognitive process starts from everyday observation leading to “suspicion” about existence of the social phenomenon, and this suspicion becomes an initial scientific hypothesis to prove which we have to apply some methods of sociological research. So, we can assert that any sociological survey, at its initial stage, is based on everyday observation and analysis of everyday social experience (even if it is presented in theoretical generalizations of other social and humanitarian sciences). The initial stage of study on social phenomena leads to a successful realization of phenomenological approach in sociology. This approach places emphasis on the structures of everyday consciousness and phenomena of everyday life as a “true” social reality. At the further stages of social phenomenon cognition, it is important to keep off actions inherent to phenomenologists when the generalized everyday experience is presented in a refined theoretical manner with the help of methods, like philosophic reduction or folklore and dialogue exercises by ethnomethodologists. The result of application of such procedures to social cognition would lead study of social phenomena to initial social experience and, at best, it would be systematic observation making it possible to develop a hypothesis about existence of a certain social fact as a specific social phenomenon.

However, observation data and fixation of social phenomenon could not be ignored, because the namely initial stage of sociological cognition reveals a phenomenon in all its completeness and empirical complexity. The next stages of cognition — **specification of phenomenon as a fact**

of social reality, **temporal reconstruction of phenomenon** as a determination of a certain social tendency related to its appearance and further manifestation, **social and space reconstruction** as a study of natural links between the phenomenon and other social ones, their interrelations, and, lastly, **substantiation of sociological law** as a result of discovery of invariant spatio-temporal dependencies related to appearance and manifestation of this phenomenon — need consequent “peeling” of initially observed “phenomenal field” (registered in everyday social experience). Only this process determines the specific character of sociological survey. The difference between sociological and natural scientific cognition is not that the former ignores the principles of knowledge truth accepted by the latter, but the significantly more complex procedure of obtaining the truthful social knowledge with the necessary substantiation and showing proofs of a number of hypotheses related to the consequent stages of studies on social phenomenon — observation, fact, tendencies, natural rules, and law. Not always, the complete way of cognition — from initial social observation to proof of a law — can be realized. That is why, in social cognition, there was developed a “temporarily scientific” method of social typology theoretically substantiated in concepts of ideal and constructive types.

This is my idea of prospects for sociological knowledge. I understand that this approach requires great efforts of researchers. But there are no other way out for sociologists that do not tend to sink in discussions, who is wrong and who is right in endless “natural-sociological” debates on fundamental principles.

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