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Sociology of Knowledge

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practices based on the enlargement and diffusion of knowledge enable a much larger segment of society effectively to oppose power configurations that turned out or are apprehended to be tenuous and brittle.

Among the major but widely invisible social innovations in modern society is the immense growth of the “civil society” sector. This sector provides an organized basis through which citizens can exercise individual initiative in the private pursuit of public purposes. One is therefore able to interpret the considerable enlargement of the informal economy, but also corruption and the growth of wealth in modern society, as well as increasing but typically unsuccessful efforts to police these spheres, as evidence of the diverse as well as expanded capacity of individuals, households, and small groups to take advantage of and benefit from contexts in which the degree of social control exercised by larger (legitimate) social institutions has diminished considerably.

The future of modern society no longer mimics the past to the extent to which this has been the case. History will increasingly be full of unanticipated uncertainties, peculiar reversals, and proliferating surprises, and we will have to cope with the ever-greater speed of significantly compressed events. The changing agendas of social, political, and economic life as the result of our growing capacity to make history will also place inordinate demands on our mental capacities and social resources.

SEE ALSO: Economy, Networks and; Information Society; Knowledge; Knowledge Management; Knowledge, Sociology of; Network Society; Scientific Knowledge, Sociology of

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knowledge, sociology of

E. Doyle McCarthy

The sociology of knowledge examines the social and group origin of ideas, arguing that the entire “ideational realm” (“knowledges,” ideas, ideologies, mentalities) develops within the context of a society’s groups and institutions. Its ideas address broad sociological questions about the extent and limits of social and group influence through an examination of the social and cultural foundations of cognition and perception. Despite significant changes over time, classical and contemporary studies in the sociology of knowledge share a common theme: the social foundations of thought. Ideas, concepts, and belief systems share an intrinsic sociality explained by the contexts in which they emerge.

From its origins in German sociology in the 1920s, sociology of knowledge has assumed that ideas (knowledge) emerge out of and are determined by the social contexts and positions (structural locations) of their proponents. Its major premise is that the entire ideational realm is functionally related to sociohistorical reality. According to its framers, *Wissenssoziologie* was developed as an empirical and historical method for resolving the conflicts of ideologies in Weimar Germany that followed the political and social revolutions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, conflicts grounded in competing worldviews and directed by intellectual and political elites. Outlined in early statements by Max Scheler and Karl Mannheim, the new discipline reflected the intellectual needs of an era, to bring both rationality and objectivity to bear on the problems of intellectual and ideological confusion. It was in this sense that the sociology of knowledge has been described as a discipline that reflected a new way of understanding “knowledge” within a modern and ideologically pluralistic setting. The approach defines a new “situation” (Mannheim 1936), summarily described as “modernity,” a world where “knowledge” and “truth” have many faces. What we believe that we *know* varies with the cognitive operations of human minds and these vary by community, class, culture, nation, generation, and so forth.

Contemporary sociology of knowledge addresses a related but different set of concerns than those posed by its founders, and its subject matter extends beyond the problem of relativism and the social location of ideas and ideologies. Prominent among its current themes are the "local" features of knowledges and the study of their functions in everyday life. This redirection of the field from the study of conflicting ideologies to the study of the tacit and taken-for-granted understandings of everyday life can be characterized as a shift from concerns with the truth-status of ideas and ideologies to the concerns of a cultural "sociology of meaning." These changes also represent a movement away from a study of the ideological functions of elites and intellectuals to conceptions of knowledges as discursive (cultural) forms and as part of the entire range of symbolic and signifying systems operating in a society.

The term sociology of knowledge (*Wissenssoziologie*) was first used in 1924 and 1925 by Scheler (1980) and Mannheim (1952). From its inception, it described a field of inquiry closely linked to problems of European philosophy and historicism, particularly the nineteenth-century German philosophical interest in problems surrounding relativism that were linked to the legacies of Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and the historicists, whose cultural philosophy of worldviews (*Weltanschauungsphilosophie*) was influential in German social science from the 1890s to the 1930s.

For Scheler (1980), who offered the first systematic outline of the discipline, the *forms* of mental acts, through which knowledge is gained, are always conditioned by the structure of society. For this reason, sociology of knowledge is foundational to all specialized studies of culture and to metaphysics. While Scheler's original essays provoked commentary and debate, it was Mannheim's formulation of the discipline in *Ideology and Utopia* that defined the subject matter of the field for years to come. Those who offered their own sociologies of knowledge, including Talcott Parsons (1961) and Robert K. Merton (1957), defined their positions relative to Mannheim's arguments concerning ideology, utopia, and relationism.

Mannheim's treatise begins with a review and critique of Marxism and proceeds toward a

theory of ideology in the broader sense: the mental structure in its totality as it appears in different currents of thought and across different social groups. This "total conception of ideology" examines thought on the structural level, allowing the same object to take on different (group) aspects. This understanding of ideology refers to a person's, group's, or society's way of conceiving things situated within particular historical and social settings. Like ideologies, "utopias" arise out of particular social and political conditions, but are distinguished by their opposition to the prevailing order. Utopias are the embodiment of "wish images" in collective actions that shatter and transform social worlds. Both concepts form part of Mannheim's broad design for a critical but nonevaluative treatment of "ideology," one that supersedes the sociohistorical determinism and relativism of Marxism while moving toward a "relationist" notion of truth. From an analysis of the various and competing social positions of ideologists and utopians, a kind of "truth" emerges that is grounded in the conditions of intellectual objectivity and detachment from the social conditions that more directly determine ideas. *Ideology and Utopia* established the criteria for a valid knowledge, albeit a *relational* knowledge, of sociohistorical processes. More important, it raised the problems surrounding the historicity of thought and did this within the newly emerging academic discourse of sociology. In the process, it gave legitimacy to a new set of methodological issues involving the problems of objectivity and truth for the sciences and the humanities.

Despite the many criticisms of *Ideology and Utopia*, the work received wide attention and appreciation inside and outside the social sciences where the problems posed by relativism continued to attract the attention of those working in the sciences and the humanities. While reviews of the work focused on its failure to overcome relativism and Mannheim's excessive reliance on the Marxist conception of ideology, Mannheim's book provoked discussion and commentary in the decades after its publication.

Werner Stark's *The Sociology of Knowledge* (1991) prompted a major advancement and redirection of the field. It argued for the

embedding of sociology of knowledge within the larger field of cultural sociology. Stark's book clarified the principal themes of earlier writers, especially sociologists, who had addressed the problem of the social element in thinking. He also intended it to serve as an introduction to the field that would prepare the way for a detailed and comprehensive history of the sociology of knowledge and its most significant ideas: theories of ideology of Marx and Mannheim; philosophical speculations of the neo-Kantians Heinrich Rickert and Max Weber; views of the German phenomenological school of the 1920s, especially Scheler. Stark's strongest affinity was with Scheler's struggle to reconcile the antithetical claims of idealism and materialism, and his view of the sociology of knowledge as the foundation for a knowledge of "eternal values." The sociology of knowledge is concerned with the "social determination of knowledge," not with the problem of ideology. This distinction is an indispensable precondition of the sociology of knowledge. It directs attention to the study of mental life as grounded in social and historical conditions, granting to "social determination" a depth that the theory of ideology does not accomplish. While the theory of ideology will always play a vital role in sociology and the history of ideas, it remains outside the principal concerns of the sociology of knowledge.

Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) advanced a sociology of knowledge that was compatible with the view of sociology as a humanistic discipline and the notion that "human reality" is a "socially constructed reality." The work moved the field further away from theoretical knowledge or ideas and toward the (pre-theoretical) knowledge that social actors draw from in everyday life. Their treatise also redirected the traditional theory of social determination of ideas by social realities: social reality itself is a *construct*. It integrated the perspectives of classical European social thought (Marx, Durkheim, Weber) with the social psychology of the American pragmatist philosopher George Herbert Mead, thereby advancing Meadian social psychology as a theoretical complement to European sociology of knowledge (see Curtis & Petras 1970; Remmling 1973). What the authors proposed was that knowledge and social reality exist in a

reciprocal or dialectical relationship of mutual constitution. This work placed the sociology of knowledge on a new footing whose focus was the broad range of signifying systems that form and communicate the realm of social realities. Since its introduction, the idea of a "constructed reality" has summarized a number of concerns of writers in the sciences and humanities that may be described as the *problem of meaning* and the use of philosophical, literary, and historical approaches to study its social construction. Berger and Luckmann's treatise subsumed knowledges within a framework of interpretation, a *hermeneutics* that was decidedly cultural and semiotic, concerned with the symbolic and signifying operations of knowledges.

More recently, the "new sociology of knowledge" (Swidler & Ardit 1994; McCarthy 1996) can be seen as part of this larger movement in the social sciences, distinguished by a turn away from materialism and social structure toward semiotic theories that focus on the ways in which a society's meanings are communicated and reproduced. Swidler and Ardit (1994) focus on how social organizations (e.g., the media) order knowledges, rather than examining social locations and group interests. In light of new theories of social power and practice (Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu), they also examine how knowledges maintain social hierarchies and how techniques of power are simultaneously and historically linked to knowledges. They join others in pointing out that newer theories of power, gender, and knowledge depart from the economic, class, and institutional focus of the classical sociology of knowledge.

Proponents of the new sociology of knowledge do not claim that the subfield has been entirely superseded by newer work in sociology and cultural studies. However, they note that the new sociology of knowledge is not a unified field, an argument also advanced by earlier writers who treated the sociology of knowledge as a "frame of reference" rather than a body of theory in its own right (Curtis & Petras 1970: 1; cf. Remmling 1973).

Two overriding factors can account for the persistence of a broad approach to knowledges. First, the propositions of Scheler, Mannheim, and other early writers in this field (e.g., in the US, works by Florian Znaniecki, C. Wright Mills, and Edward Shils) today serve as working

propositions for a range of social scientists as well as for specialists in other disciplines, including the subfields of the history of ideas, social psychology, social studies of science, feminist theories, and cultural studies. For this reason, a sociology-of-knowledge perspective – concerning group life and mind – has been incorporated into the many subfields of sociology as well as sister disciplines from anthropology to history. Furthermore, as long as knowledges are understood as preeminently cultural phenomena, the more likely it is that the sociology of knowledge will be seen as a broadly inclusive set of theories and studies rather than a subfield with a distinct subject matter. Knowledges are no longer confined to the domain of “superstructure.” They operate across the full extent of society, from the realm of everyday affairs to the institutions of law, politics, art, and religion, to the various sites and fields where knowledges are produced. The new sociology of knowledge examines the observable properties of knowledges in texts, modes of communication, and forms of speech within specific institutional settings.

SEE ALSO: Collective Memory; Constructionism; Ideology; Knowledge; Knowledge Management; Knowledge Societies; Mannheim, Karl; Scientific Knowledge; Sociology of

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Komarovsky, Mirra (1905–99)

Vicky M. MacLean

Mirra Komarovsky's research, teaching, and advocacy on behalf of women mark her as a pioneer in the sociology of gender and feminist scholarship. She was the second woman to serve as president of the American Sociological Association, thus furthering opportunities for women in the profession of sociology. Major contributions to sociology include her critique of the Parsonian functionalist perspective on gender roles, research on women's education and changing feminine identities, and the study of men and masculinity. Komarovsky's research focused on the nature of conflict and strains in gender roles during periods of uneven social change. Her 1953 book *Women in the Modern World: Their Education and Their Dilemma* anticipated Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique* by more than a decade. Methodological contributions include refining the use of the qualitative case study method using in-depth interviewing and synthesizing sociological schedules and surveys with psychological tests of personality and gender.

Born to a Jewish family in Russia in 1905, Komarovsky migrated with her family from Baku to the United States in 1921, fleeing anti-Semitism and Bolshevik attempts to eradicate the middle class. Her childhood education in Russia was primarily from private tutors. In the United States Mirra's family initially