

# 1

## One Sociology or Many?

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The question of whether there is Spanish physics, or Polish chemistry, or Danish astronomy does not make sense (except in the trivial institutional sense, namely that science, like all other human activities, is practised somewhere). The arguments for specificity of Soviet mathematics put forward in the days of Stalinism sounds today like a bad joke. This is because in the natural sciences there is only one universal subject matter, the natural world, functioning in the same manner in Spain, Poland, Denmark and Stalinist Russia; and there is one universal method, common standards of research that are acceptable at least as long as a certain paradigm is accepted (Kuhn, 1970). On the other hand, we do not hesitate to speak about German music, French art, Italian architecture, Latin American literature. Art is not like science; it is rooted in particular histories, local traditions, intellectual climates; one is even tempted to say it reflects a 'national character' (if this notion is not treated in any genetic, but rather in the purely historical sense). Where do the social sciences or humanities fit, in between the natural sciences on the one hand or art on the other?

Precisely in the middle, is the answer. Some disciplines lean more toward art, and

therefore it is quite normal to speak of British, or German, or French philosophy. Others lean more toward science, and therefore it is not usual to refer to Swedish experimental psychology or Greek micro-economics. More generally, humanities are closer to art than the behavioral sciences, which are closer to sciences proper. Some sociologists have recognized this intermediate position of sociology as part science and part art. Neil Smelser treats it as an asset when he says, 'the benefit is living in a field that refuses to seal itself into a closed paradigm and threatens to exhaust itself, but, rather, retains the qualities of intellectual openness and imagination' (Smelser, 1994: 8). And precisely this intermediate status is the reason why the question, 'One sociology or many sociologies?' is raised yet again.

### **THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL PLURALISM**

Sociology is a pluralistic discipline in two senses. First, there is a theoretical and methodological pluralism. Sociology has always

been a multi-paradigmatic discipline. Of course there were periods when certain paradigms became dominant. Sometimes it was due to spontaneous, widespread acceptance of certain influential models or methods, as was the case of structural functionalism in the middle of the twentieth century. Sometimes it was due to intellectual fashion, as in the case of post-modernism at the close of the century. Sometimes it was imposed from above by political and ideological pressures, as was the case with Marxism–Leninism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. But even in the latter case, there survived different perspectives and the ruling doctrine never attained complete domination.

Thus in sociology we have always witnessed a number of different theoretical and methodological orientations, various approaches to the study of society – as described in the textbooks of history of sociology or contemporary sociological theory. The recognition and evaluation of this fact leads to two extreme views. At one extreme there is dogmatism, which treats plurality as a liability and argues for the valuation of one orientation only, or attempts to synthesize various orientations leading to a single unifying and the only valid theory. At the other extreme there is theoretical anarchism, which considers all theories equal, and does not allow any distinction to be made between different theories or to establish hierarchies. Anything goes, one may argue, for the middle of the road position between these two extremes. This is the advice given by Robert Merton when he spoke about ‘disciplined eclecticism’ (Sztompka, 1986: 115–18). In Merton’s view pluralism should be considered an asset rather than a liability and sociologists should draw from all available theories the concepts and models relevant to understanding a concrete sociological problem. The research problem is the ultimate criterion of selection. Sociological inquiry is not theoretically closed but rather problem driven. So if the alternative ‘many sociologies or one sociology’ is read ‘many theories or one theory’, the solution is, ‘all

available theories bearing on a concrete research problem’. The same is true of sociological methods and research techniques, which should be treated as an open toolkit to be used according to the research question.

### LOCAL PLURALISM – NATIONAL, REGIONAL, CIVILIZATIONAL

But this is not the sense of pluralism with which we are mainly concerned nowadays. There is another type of pluralism: localized pluralism of national sociologies, regional sociologies, or sociologies linked with particular civilizations. This is what is meant when we speak of Polish sociology, British sociology, African sociology, Western sociology. Let us try to unpack what we may possibly have in mind? There are ten grounds on which such specificity of distinct sociologies may rest.

1. For a long time, the idea of society was considered as *parallel with a nation-state*. Ulrich Beck calls it the assumption of ‘methodological nationalism’, based on the ‘national prison theory of human existence’ (Beck, 2006: 12). Beck claims that:

Until now it has been dominant in sociology and other social sciences on the assumption that they are nationally structured. The result was a system of nation-states and corresponding national sociologies that define their specific societies in terms of concepts associated with the nation state. For the national outlook, the nation-state creates and control the “container” of society, and thereby at the same time prescribes the limits of sociology.

(Beck, 2006: 2)

Sociologists conceived their subject matter as populations, groups of people, institutions, organizations and cultures, circumscribed by the borders of a state. And obviously they were most often concerned with their own society. In this sense, French sociology meant simply: research about French society; Italian sociology: the study of Italy; American sociology: the study of the United

States. This meaning is akin to the concept of 'area studies', which signifies problem focus on specific geographical or political areas.

2. It often happens that varieties of historical trajectories, geopolitical location, natural environment and other contingencies cause the *differences in central social problems* for a given country, as defined by its citizens, which is reflected by unique problematic profiles of sociology as established by sociologists; the country-specific articulation of *sociological problems*. For example the post-communist transformation, rebirth of civil society, democratization, marketization and modernization are dominant research themes in East Central Europe; poverty, famine, tribal conflicts, AIDS – for post-colonial African societies; racial tensions, problems of minorities, assimilation, crime – for American sociology; nationalism and identity in the period of integration – for West European sociology; and oppression and cultural assimilation of aborigines for Australian sociology.
3. Sometimes sociology in a given country or region is dominated by a *particular theoretical and methodological orientation*, or school, e.g. for a long time Marxist sociology in communist societies, structural functionalism in the US, post-modernism in France.
4. A variety of this is the *dominant influence of a certain commanding personality*, founding father or particularly influential representative of national sociology: Durkheim in France, Weber in Germany, Pareto in Italy, Znaniecki in Poland, Parsons in the US, Elias in the Netherlands.
5. Another specificity of national sociology may have to do with the traditional *link with other disciplines*, particularly at the moment of birth: the alliance with history and historiography in nineteenth century Europe, with philosophy and linguistics in France, with psychology in the US, with social anthropology in Britain and with ethnography in Poland.
6. There are various *emphases on preferred types of research*:s empirical (famous 'concrete sociological investigations' meaning mere social statistics in Soviet Russia), abstract theoretical (Germany), philosophical (France), policy oriented (Scandinavia). They result in various national 'styles' of sociological work. Those may change historically. For example theory seems to travel back and forth across the Atlantic: dominating in Europe during the classical period, then 'emigrating' to America, and then returning to Europe at the end of the twentieth century.
7. The *language in which sociological ideas are articulated and communicated* may have independent influence on the style of research: English – facilitating a more analytic, cold, detached style of Anglo-Saxon sociology; German – suggesting more involved, dense philosophical discourse; French – more narrative, expressive, quasi-literary, essayistic narration, allowing for nuances and innuendos.
8. If we assume with many authors that there is no sociology without values, sociologies may *differ in the type of values, stereotypes, prejudices or biases that they incorporate or imply*. Sociologies of former imperial centres differ in perspective from sociologies of post-colonial countries, sociology of hegemonic and dominating nations from sociologies of dominated and dependent nations (see the case of Indian sociology and Latin American sociology, as contrasted with British sociology or American sociology). A kind of perverse case is liberalism stretched to the extreme, when in defence against stereotypes, prejudices and biases, a taboo of 'political correctness' is raised to prevent any criticism of minorities, groups defined as oppressed or excluded – clearly a bias à rebours, so typical of contemporary American sociology.
9. Sociologies *differ in their institutional development* i.e. in the type of institutions in which sociological research is conducted: universities or research institutes, think tanks, etc. and also the overall strength of sociology compared to other disciplines: its status as recognized or marginal in the structure of academic institutions.
10. If we assume that sociology, its conceptual and theoretical structure is a reflection of characteristic social experiences, life conditions of people, then national or regional sociologies may also *differ in their typical concepts*. Benjamin Lee Whorf demonstrated that the Eskimos have numerous concepts allowing subtle distinctions between varieties of snow, and the African nomads, for varieties of sand in the desert (Whorf, 1957). In the same sense we may observe a proliferation of concepts referring to dependency, exclusion and oppression in Latin America; nationhood, sovereignty, civil society in the former satellite countries of Eastern Europe; conflicts, wars and famine in Africa, etc. Depending on their contingent life conditions and indigenous traditions people give different meaning to the same concepts.

Poverty means different things in Africa and in France, money has different meanings for Mongolians and for Norwegians, McDonald's is a different institution in Russia and in Italy.

As a result of these multiple differences, a *pluralistic mosaic of sociologies* has emerged in the world. Again, this fact may be evaluated in two opposing ways. On the one hand we find an *ethnocentric position* that claims that there is only one valid sociology, usually identified with Western sociology, which developed in the wake of the Enlightenment in the countries of Western Europe and then in the US. Even worse, sociologists are tempted to generalize about human society from the experience of just one country.

One's own society serves as the model for society in general, from which it follows that the basic characteristics of universal society can be derived from an analysis of *this* society. Thus Marx discovered British capitalism in British society, which he then generalized to the capitalism of modern society. Weber universalized the experience of the Prussian bureaucracy into the ideal type of modern rationality. And in criticizing the 'power elites' C. Wright Mills was criticizing not just American society but modern society as such.

(Beck, 2006: 28)

On the other hand there is an extreme *relativistic position* which claims that there are as many equally valid sociologies as there are societies, whose unique experiences they reflect. Societies are self-contained cultural wholes, monads endowed by their members with unique meanings, mutually impermeable worlds. No general, universally applicable social theory is possible. Nationally, regionally, civilizationally rooted perspectives defy comparison; they are mutually untranslatable and incommensurable.

Culture is understood in terms of self-enclosed territorially demarcated units; and at the extreme the (uneasy) silence of incommensurable perspectives reigns between cultures. Such a belief frees us from the rigours of dialogue, leading almost inevitably to imperialism, cultural conflict and the clash of civilizations (Beck, 2006: 30).

## IS LOCAL PLURALISM INEVITABLE?

I will argue for the middle-of-the-road position: pluralism of national or regional sociologies is an asset and not a liability, a source of richness, but it cannot be put in mutually exclusive terms with unified sociology, as there are also common core standards, the pool of concepts, theories and methods which because of their uniformity make sociology one scientific discipline across the world.

The debate between ethnocentrism and relativism was most often conducted on a philosophical and logical plane. The *epistemological arguments* were the most common. For example the middle-of-the-road position could be defended by distinguishing various levels of generality on which sociological theories operate. There is a most general level at which all humans are alike, and hence their collective, social arrangements are also similar. But at more concrete levels people differ significantly. They develop distinct civilizations, cultures, regional specificity and ethnic differences. Hence, at such lower levels, sociology, which is nothing but a systematic and grounded reflection of social life, must allow for such differences. Sociology of a universal human society (in the singular) and sociologies of historically and culturally particular societies (in the plural) are therefore not mutually exclusive but complementary. This is the gist of the epistemological argument.

But in this article I propose to switch the analysis to the *ontological level*, the subject matter of sociology, and look at the societies that sociology studies, and what happens to them in our time.

In 1987, at the meeting of the American Sociological Association in Chicago I put forward the following claim:

The actual *historical tendencies*, both in the social world and in the sociological world, work toward growing convergence and commensurability of societal as well as sociological concepts. The trans-societal and trans-theoretical concepts are more and more available, the riddle of incommensurability is getting resolved, and new

emphases and opportunities for comparative inquiry present themselves.

(Sztompka, 1990: 50–1)

I then compared two historical cases: one of the social world made up of numerous, heterogeneous, differentiated, isolated, self-contained units: tribes, clans, ethnic groups, nations, states and the like; and the other of a globalized society where much more comprehensive wholes emerge as crucial: political and military blocs, regions, economic areas, global networks, etc. And the implications of this historical shift can be felt at the conceptual level.

What happens to societal meaning and concepts (...) in such a globalized world? Obviously, they undergo far-reaching uniformization due to double mechanism. First, the actual experiences, ways of life and social conditions become more alike. And second, even if they remain different, the knowledge of foreign experiences, ways of life and social conditions becomes more accessible – through travel, tourism, mass media, personal contacts. Provincial ignorance turns into more *cosmopolitan imagination*.

(Sztompka, 1990: 52)

Ten years later Neil Smelser adopts a similar strategy of deriving changes in sociological theorizing from actual changes in the social world. As he put it:

The national society as a natural unit of analysis is growing progressively less relevant. Most of the social sciences in the nineteenth century assumed national economies, nation-states, national societies, and the culture of nations to be the primary organizational bases of social life, as they indeed have been. But with irreversible march of globalization, along with the aggressive reassertion of sub-national groups, the theory based on national units must be superseded by theories that capture the interpenetration of supra-national, national, and sub-national forces.

(Smelser, 1999: 22–3)

Twenty years later a very similar position is formulated by Ulrich Beck under the label of ‘cosmopolitan realism’. He claims that ‘Reality is becoming cosmopolitan – this is a historical fact’ (Beck, 2006: 68). And he draws similar conclusions concerning the inevitable ‘cosmopolitanization’ of

sociology. Contemporary society, he argues, has evolved behind the phase of modernity and already acquired a new shape which may be labelled ‘second modernity’. Its dominant, new features include: interrelatedness and interdependence of people across the globe; growing inequalities in a global space; emergence of new supranational organizations in the area of economy (multinational corporations); politics (non-state actors like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, World Trade Organization (WTO), International Court of Justice); civil society (advocacy social movements of global scope like Amnesty International, Greenpeace, feminist organizations); new normative precepts like human rights; new types and profiles of global risks; new forms of warfare; global organized crime and terrorism. Their common denominator is cosmopolitanization, i.e. the erosion of clear borders separating markets, states, civilizations, cultures – and life-worlds of common people. What I find particularly insightful is the emphasis that cosmopolitanization does not operate somewhere in the abstract, in the external macro-sphere, somewhere above human heads; it is internal to the everyday life of people (‘banal cosmopolitanism’), and to the internal operation of politics, which at all levels, even the domestic level, has to become global, taking into account the global scale of dependencies, flows, links, threats, risks, etc. (‘global domestic politics’).

According to Beck, the real objective transformation of human society at the beginning of the twenty-first century is inadequately reflected both at the level of social consciousness and sociological methodology. National outlook must be replaced by a cosmopolitan outlook and methodological nationalism by methodological cosmopolitanism. And in the more concrete domain of politics, national politics with its obsession on sovereignty and autonomy must turn into ‘politics of politics’, which on the meta-level commits itself deeply to solving the issues of global and wide national scope.

I emphasize the similarities between Smelser, Beck and my own views, not to claim any priority, but to demonstrate the universalization clearly occurring at the meta-level: the commonality of views among American, German and Polish sociologists about the growing universalization of sociology ascribed to the real, actual changes in human society. This may be treated as the self-exemplifying argument for the tendency noticed by all three of us.

### ONE SOCIOLOGY SENSITIVE TO VARIETY AND DIVERSITY OF SOCIETIES

Returning now to the ten foundations of variety of local sociologies, I will try to show that the current tendencies in the social world make several of these less relevant than before, or even obsolete. In brief, sociology must come to terms with the fact that the domain of what is universal in a human society rapidly expands, and the domain of what is particular shrinks.

There are two current processes central to our problem: globalization of society and internationalization of sociology. As Peter Worsley says 'it is only at our time that human society really exists' (Worsley, 1984). We may extend and paraphrase it by saying: 'It is only at our time that global sociological community really exists'. Let us list the crucial consequences of these two processes.

1. The concept of society escapes the limits of the nation-state, it becomes global. Humanity is no longer a romantic, poetical or philosophical notion but sociological reality. The importance of the nation-state diminishes; the concept of society is emancipated from state borders. Sociology may now be no longer of Polish society, French society or Russian society, but of human society.
2. Global interconnectedness makes local social problems more similar for at least large groups of countries. Sociological problems also become more similar. Both are no longer determined by the specific national agendas
3. The meaning systems, conceptual frameworks and relevant structures of the people undergo mutual accommodation. Trans-societal, universal meanings emerge as a result of a real historical process opening massive contacts – both direct and virtual, through the media – making their life-worlds more alike.
4. The importance of national languages diminishes (at least in academic discourse), and hence their impact on national styles of sociology becomes negligible.
5. The institutional differences concerning the location of sociology in the academic community are weakened by the dominant, Humboldtian tradition of the research universities.
6. The traditional links with other disciplines become less important in the era of interdisciplinary and mutual openings.
7. The great masters are appropriated by the world sociological tradition; they are no longer national but have become international heroes and gurus of sociology.
8. Theoretical and methodological orientations flow freely in the world sociological community, enter into a global pool of ideas, losing any attachment to national roots. Their national genealogy is forgotten, due to the process which Merton described as 'obliteration by incorporation' (Merton, 1996: 30).
9. Global communication systems are established among sociologists and institutionalized by means of international associations, journals, conferences, etc. The flow, of persons, ideas, books, journals, emails, etc. produces similarities among national sociologies in terms of sociological vocabulary, models, theories and methods.
10. Similarity of sociological curricula across the world produces similar competences for all new adepts of sociology. International journals and international publishers promote common, unified standards of good sociological work.
11. The Mertonian mechanism of 'organized scepticism' (Merton, 1996: 276) – peer control, open debate, criticism, assigning reputations, rewarding achievement – operates now on a global scale. It is no longer possible to be highly recognized in the discipline by writing only in one's national language and publishing in one's own country.

The dialectics of social life does not omit the area discussed in this article. There are

immediate countertendencies evoked by globalization of society and internationalization of sociology. The expansion of the domain of universality does not eliminate the domain of particularities. Ulrich Beck admits that cosmopolitanization does not mean uniformization and homogenization. People, their groups, communities, political organizations, cultures, civilizations will (and should) remain different, sometimes even unique. But to put it metaphorically, the walls between them must be replaced by bridges. Those bridges must be primarily erected in human heads, mentalities, imagination ('cosmopolitan vision'), but also in normative systems (human rights), institutions (e.g. the European Union), and 'domestic global politics' informed by transnational concerns (e.g. energy policy, sustainable development, fighting global warming, war with terrorism) (Beck, 2006).

Thus at the background of growing uniformization and homogenization – of both society and sociology – there are defensive countertendencies. We witness the defence of local customs, values, identities, traditions – a more clear-cut definition and emphasis of what is our own, peculiar, distinctive. And there is a sharpened awareness of specificity of local sociological traditions and more articulated definition of our own unique sociological problems and emphases.

Doing sociology in accordance with universalistic global standards, using uniform conceptual frameworks, models, orientations, theories and methods – detached from any local genealogy, and accountable before worldwide sociological community – does not stand in the way of emphasizing particular local problems, studying and solving them and in this way contributing original results to the global pool of sociological wisdom.

The tendency described above is also reflected at the level of methods and techniques of research. There is a change of sociological optics, angle of vision, due to major changes in society which are grasped by notions of globalization and

internationalization. Formerly, faced with a variety of relatively independent and relatively isolated societies (nation-states), the typical goal of sociology aiming to raise the above concern with local issues was to search for some commonalities, and uniformities in the sea of difference (for example the search for cultural universals, for laws of elementary social behaviour, etc.) Now, faced with growing interconnectedness and homogenization of the world, the typical challenge for sociology which refuses to focus exclusively on globalization, changes; it is the search for remaining uniqueness, enclaves of differences among uniformity (to put it in another way: in the universalized world, the search for peculiarities). The most challenging question now is why, in spite of globalization, there is still so much variety, and sometimes more salient variety than before (Sztompka, 1990: 53–6).

Thus, to conclude, the prospect for the sociology of the future is neither 'one sociology for many worlds', nor 'many sociologies for one world', but in a sense both: one global, international sociology recognizing and exploiting local varieties for its own cognitive benefit. Uniformity of world sociology and uniqueness of local sociologies are two mutually enriching sides of the same sociological enterprise. Beck calls it the 'melange principle': 'the principle that local, national, ethnic, religious *and* cosmopolitan cultures and traditions interpenetrate, interconnect and intermingle – cosmopolitanism without provincialism is empty, provincialism without cosmopolitanism is blind' (Beck, 2006: 7). In other words, there is only one sociology, but if it is any good it recognizes the diversity and variation of human societies, and not only states the fact but attempts to interpret and explain it.

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