SOCIOLOGY AND IRONY

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I recall with perfect clarity the micro-second during which, after more than twenty years in sociology, I decided to leave the discipline. It was at one of those endless, pointless faculty meetings in which "quantitative" and "qualitative" sociologists mutually, habitually abuse one another. As a historian of social theory, I was sympathetic with the latter camp, and was tempted to add perspective by appealing to the history of the issue under dispute. "Some of us", a demographer sneered in response, "think that sociology should look to its future rather than its past!" Intellectually parochial as it was, for me the remark epitomized years of frustration and, in retrospect, stands between my past and my present like an epiphany.

Remarks like these are heard often[1] among sociologists, and they are vulnerable to multiple, justifiable objections. As I've re-settled comfortably among my new colleagues in the humanities, however, these objections have paled by contrast to what I now take to be the more general state of mind responsible for such remarks – i.e., the almost complete lack, among the people uttering them, of any sense of *irony*, whether about themselves, their discipline, their activities, or their beliefs. This is not to say that sociologists generally are incapable of irony. On the evidence of earlier essays by Bernard Valade and Monique Hirschhorn, for example, Charles Camic is probably quite right to suggest that the problem is more American than French[2]; and even in the United States, there is a large and sometimes vocal contingent of "ironist-sociologists."[3] But the repeated suggestion that sociology should look to its future rather than its past, with its odd, implicit assertion that historical ignorance is intrinsic to scientific progress, suggests that ironist-sociologists have been (and will continue to be) pushed to the periphery, marginalized, and occasionally even forced into exile.

What is meant here by "irony"? Very briefly, Richard Rorty has suggested that each of us carries around something he calls a "final vocabulary" – i.e., a

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1   As a graduate student in intellectual history applying for my first job in 1968, I received a letter from Melvin DeFleur, the American sociologist, which included an identical observation explaining why his institution would not hire a historian of social science.

2   See Camic, 1997; see also Valade, 1997, and Hirschhorn, 1997.

3   I am grateful to my friend and colleague Leigh Star – now an ironist-sociologist in exile – for suggesting this qualification.

set of words (e.g., "true", "good", "right", "beautiful", "progressive", "professional", "rigorous", etc.) we use to justify our actions, our beliefs, and our selves. This is the vocabulary we use to praise our friends, condemn our enemies, express our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes – in short, to tell the story of our lives. Such a vocabulary is "final" in the sense that, if doubt is cast upon its words, we have no non-circular arguments with which to defend them. Beyond the arguments constructed from this vocabulary, therefore, there lies only passive resignation or the resort to force.

Within this context, the "ironist" is someone who has radical, continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she uses. This is because she's encountered other vocabularies with which she's been impressed, either by meeting other people or by reading lots of books. The ironist recognizes that arguments phrased within her present vocabulary cannot underwrite or dissolve these doubts, for such arguments would be circular; and she also recognizes that nothing beyond her vocabulary – no "foundation", natural or supernatural, physical or metaphysical – could possibly justify, verify, or certify her own way of thinking and speaking about the world. For the ironist, therefore, there are simply multiple, final vocabularies, there being no neutral, meta-vocabulary within which universal criteria for the choice between these vocabularies might be formulated. The ironist is thus "meta-stable" in the sense described by Sartre – i.e., never quite able to take herself seriously, because she is always aware that the terms in which she describes herself are subject to change. So the ironist is always aware of the contingency and fragility of her final vocabulary, and thus of herself.[4] The ironist also believes that, by taking the sciences of nature as their model, the social sciences have simply repeated and compounded their most fundamental misconception – i.e., that scientific "truth" is a matter of getting our sentences to line up with something in the "real world". Ironists thus resist speaking of some "essential reality" – natural or social – to which our utterances might be made to correspond. For nature doesn't speak, only people do. And for the same reason, people cannot step outside their language in order to compare their sentences with something more basic or "foundational".

Some sociologists, of course, will claim that this kind of irony is incompatible with the practice of social science itself – i.e., with its avowed goal of explaining social behavior "scientifically". To the ironist, however, this claim is little more than shorthand for a decided preference among some sociologists for one vocabulary rather than another. To the ironist, this preference is not, in itself, objectionable. Indeed, in so far as the interests and purposes of the sociologist are to explain, predict, and control human behavior, the ironist might defend

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4 This comment draws much of its inspiration from Rorty's essay, "Private Irony and Liberal Hope" (1989).

the sociologist's choice of a vocabulary in which human beings are described in abstract, "thin", and "scientific" terms, including generalizations embodied in statistical and mathematical terms. The difference is that the ironist will deny that this choice of vocabulary is dictated by anything – e.g., some putative "scientific method", human "reason", the "nature of human societies", etc. – other than the interests and purposes of the sociologist herself, and thus that it has any warrant or privilege other than itself. And if the interests and purposes of the sociologist lie in a different direction – e.g., in praising or condemning a certain behavior or an institution, establishing relations with another culture or subculture, understanding their language, grasping the nature of their suffering, etc. – an alternative, "thick" and "descriptive" vocabulary would seem more useful.[5]

Whatever the merits of this kind of irony, there can be no doubt that, if more sociologists were ironists, sociology would be a different discipline. The battles between different schools of sociological theory, for example, each of them claiming to speak Nature's Own Language, would be reduced to minor disagreements over the greater utility of one vocabulary over another to serve particular interests and purposes. Similarly, disputes between "quantitative" and "qualitative" sociology, which currently threaten to destroy whole departments if not the discipline itself, might be resolved in so far as each respected the claims of the other to answer specific – and quite different – kinds of questions. At the very least, there would be less dogmatic self-assertion, less self-righteous indignation, and less moralistic preening on all sides. The level of intellectual conversation would rise, and sociology might even re-discover a sense of humor.

But how, one might ask, is this relevant to the history of social theory? Briefly, ironists like myself are frequently tempted to describe the history of ideas as a series of "conversations" that we imagine, either between ourselves and the classic writers of the past, or between the classic writers themselves. When most sociological theorists write about Durkheim, for example, they have little interest in the details of his personal life, his social and political context, or even most of his intellectual relationships and commitments. Instead, they try to imagine and then converse with an "ideally reasonable and educable Durkheim" – e.g., the Durkheim who might be brought to describe himself as having overstated the "objectivity" of social facts, the "normality" of crime, or the "pathology" of the forced division of labor. Once brought in this way to accept such a new description of what he meant or did, this Durkheim becomes one of us, our contemporary, fellow-citizen, or fellow-member of the same

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5   See Rorty, 1982, esp. pp. 195–198.

discipline (Rorty, 1984, 51 f.). The goal of these "rational reconstructions", Rorty tells us, is *reassurance or self-justification* – i.e., our quite natural and reasonable desire to see the history of sociological theory as "a long conversational interchange", and thus to assure ourselves that "there has been rational progress in the course of recorded history – that we differ from our ancestors on grounds which our ancestors could be led to accept" (Rorty, 1984, 51). As a historian, I find such reconstructions hopelessly anachronistic, and – immersed in an earlier final vocabulary – I repeatedly attacked them; but as I've become an ironist, I've also come to agree with Rorty that anachronism – as long as it is recognized as such – has its place.

Still, it's difficult to see how such reconstructions could ever add significantly to the sense of irony so sorely lacking among sociologists today. On the contrary, in so far as the "ideally reasonable and educable Durkheim" might be led to endorse the views of the theorist reconstructing him, such "exercises in commensuration" might only serve to increase the dogmatic, assertive, and self-righteous tone of sociological debate. Inversely, where the rationally reconstructed Durkheim rather clearly could not be led to provide such an endorsement, his failure to do so might still be turned to similar effect (e.g., Durkheim "failed to recognize" a truth known to the theorist in question, "fell short" of some widely accepted doctrine, "over-shot the mark", etc.). In part for the reasons cited by Camic – i.e., the interwar alliance forged between sociological theory and the history of sociology – the sociological literature is filled with such reconstructions of the classic writers. Needless to say, there is no evidence that they encourage the slightest sense of irony.[6] Quite the contrary.

But there is also a second, more genuinely "historical" type of reconstruction.[7] Here we are less interested in the Durkheim who might be led to converse with us than with imagined conversations between Durkheim and his contemporaries, in their own language rather than ours. In the history of political theory, such reconstructions are found in writers like Quentin Skinner, John Dunn, and J.G.A. Pocock; and as Camic has noted, they have also multiplied in the history of sociological theory – even as they have been largely ignored by the mainstream of the discipline (Camic, 1997). The value of these reconstructions lies, not in reassurance or self-justification, but in *self-knowledge* or *self-awareness* – i.e., "in the fact that, instead of supplying us with our usual and carefully contrived pleasures of recognition, [the classic writers] enable us to stand back from our own beliefs and the concepts we use to express them, perhaps forcing us to reconsider, to recast or even ... to abandon some of our

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6   See, for example, my criticisms of such anachronistic reconstructions in Jones (1977).

7   This distinction between different ways of reconstructing sociology's past seems to roughly correspond to the one indicated by Valade, 1997, 12 f.

current beliefs in the light of these wider perspectives."[8] To read these more *historical* reconstructions, to imagine these conversations that take place in an entirely different idiom, is quite literally to encounter other vocabularies – many of them impressive enough to induce doubts about our own.

I take this to be the force of Busino's insistence, cited by Valade, that the history of sociology offers "the sole possibility of overcoming the self-centred focus on our own knowledge and society, the sole means of making our scientific beliefs less categorical."[9] The fact that the classic writers themselves seem so incapable of such irony (the humorless Durkheim is a perfect example), combined with the observation that their vocabularies are no longer our own, is doubly instructive – and deeply ironic. Indeed, what we learn from the nominalist and historicist reading of past sociological thought is that what were once regarded as undeniable truths – scientific propositions that were "true" because they corresponded to some putative social "reality" – were in fact the merest contingencies of a particular history, biography, language and/or social structure. Ironically, to learn this is surely to learn a more general truth, not just about the past, but about ourselves.

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8   Skinner, 1984, pp. 202, 197 f.; Jones and Kibbee, 1993, 156.

9   See Valade, 1997, 9.

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