Ethical Reflexivity and Epistemological Weakness

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ABSTRACT

It is customary to promiscuously interconnect the well-established methodological conception of sociological reflexivity to multi-level metatheoretical analyses, representational tactics and strategies, self-conscious knowledge-production processes and, in general, epistemological questions and answers. However, Western reflexive thinking about culture, rationality, and scientific knowledge often tends to (somehow) reproduce the self-assured "one epistemological size fits all" standpoint of Eurocentrism, to arrogantly exclude alternative post-colonial theorizations and to implicitly ignore the irreducibility of the "ethical dimension". The "reinvention" of this crucial dimension, within contemporary sociology and critical organizational research, entails the substantial incorporation of the "weak" performative circular reasoning as well as a new reflexive ethos and aesthetic of scientific modesty. The issue here is indeed the fruitful pluralist maximization of both ethical and cognitive possibilities. In this respect, the innovative "it could be otherwise" clause of radical intellectual inquiry remains central to our inter-disciplinary world- and self-accounts.

Key words: Reflexivity, Science, Epistemology, Ethics, Social Theory

Reflexivity and Ethics

Methodological reflexivity as a systematic means to better understand the complex "knowledge-making enterprise, including a consideration of the subjective, institutional, social, and political processes whereby research is conducted and knowledge is produced" (Alvesson, 2007), has been rendered one of the most attractive sociological buzzwords of our time. In particular, the reflexive awareness of the *mutual dependency* of sociological categories (e.g. risk, citizenship, space, time, modernity, morality) and social practice has been increasingly brought right at the forefront of various hot epistemological debates.

In the contemporary academic context, it is almost customary to describe sociological theories as both constitutive *of* and constitutive *for* practice, but also to tactically use "reflexivity" in order to criticize or polemize others: "As the charge was once made of being a positivist, to be called an unreflexive practitioner seems to signify someone who is inadequate, incomplete and worst of all, outdated" (May, 1999: par. 1.1). In consequence, reflexivity is paradoxically transformed into an unethical egoistic project of simply becoming the "certified deconstructors" (Jackson, 1992) of other people's discourse and a "dead end rather than a route to more thoughtful and interesting social studies" (Alvesson, 2007). This leads us to further elaborate on the agonistic notion of "reflexive sociology" or, more precisely, on the antagonistic relationship between reflexive sociology and the sociology of reflexivity (Kenway and McLeod, 2004), between truly "reflexive accounts" and mere "accounts of reflexivity" (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). In fact, reflexivity is a contingent chance rather than a "sacred cow", a fixed or "black-boxed" model providing strong and irrefutable

methodological guarantees (see Garratt, 2003).

Then, following a consistent "humble" line of *conceptual pragmatism* (Charles S. Pierce), a new set of self-critical (meta-reflexive) questions may possibly emerge. For instance, what does the acute reflexive critique of the (male, dispassionate) knowing subject exactly involve? What does it really mean for our daily scientific practice? And, what are its ultimate ethical implications for the overall discourse of sociology? In the same spirit, Wanda Pillow, fruitfully prioritizes reflexivity as a topic of sociological study in its own right, which is regularly used by most researchers "without defining how they are using it, as if it is something we all commonly understand and accept as standard methodological practice for critical qualitative research" (Pillow, 2003: 176).

Focusing on this sharp meta-theoretical strand of inquiry, it is practically demonstrable that the ethical dimension of reflexivity is rarely stressed (or even recognized and acknowledged) in an explicit manner: "Although reflexivity is a familiar concept in the qualitative tradition … it has not previously been seen as an *ethical* notion … Reflexivity is not usually seen as connected with ethics at all" (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 262, 274-275). In other words, the *irreducibility of ethics* renders epistemological reflexivity as largely inadequate or incomplete.

Hence, reflexivity should be no more regarded as a mere "conceptual" tool or weapon for a pragmatic, self-referential understanding of social theory and research – that is, social theory and research as a cluster of categories that are productive in an analysis of a given object under investigation, rather than as an overarching explanatory model of the social world. Following Marcel Mauss, it should be also regarded as an ambivalent and potentially helpful guide for *a new ethic of academic life*, as well as a highly contested "process and a way of thinking that will actually lead to ethical research practice" (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 273). Epistemological and ethical aspects of reflexivity are of equal importance. These aspects should energetically and demiurgically *complement and reinforce each other*, mutually contributing to "good science" and "good life" (*eu zein*).

In this respect, reflexivity as an "ethico-epistemological" project, or as individual *and* collective ethical reflection *and* action, is not easily compatible with a "strong" conception of social/organizational science, as expressed by the rationalist idea that "knowledge, in order to be interesting or creatively new, must be relatively context-*free*, must be able to rise above and transgress its primary situatedness" (Pels, 2000a: 163). However, the "traditional" or "received" conceptions of a "strong" social theory and an ascetic, interest-free pursuit of truth and epistemological perfectionism have not ceased to attract all the conflicting "paradigms" (Thomas Kuhn) within the highly ant-agonistic sociological "field" (*champ*).

The persistent formulation of (Western) "strong hand" metaphors and the obsessive drive for clear-cut, compulsory and inescapable definitions continue to copiously proliferate in (post)modern scientific vocabularies. In Dick Pels's words, "evidence still needs to be hard, theory 'grounded', facts solid, results robust, methods rigorous, proofs decisive, arguments compelling, conclusions inescapably powerful, propositions firmly anchored in nature or reality" (Pels, 2003: 218).

So, although the well-established theoretical and methodological concept of "reflexivity", largely associated with the "natural proximity of facts and values" (Pels, 2002), is now central in the contemporary analyses of knowledge, science and society, the performative, hermeneutic "circle of representation" (Pierre Bourdieu) always tends to somehow disappear in either a transcendental objectivity (*materialism*) or a transcendental subjectivity (*idealism*) (Pels, 2000b). Through a careful, critical review of theoretical exhibitionist shows of intellectual power, from Conversation Analysis and ethnomethodology to feminism and the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (SSK), as

Dick Pels intriguingly concludes, it is almost clear to see that the various forms of reflexivity are paradoxically attracted to the old Cartesian ideals of mentalism, authoritarian individualism, elitism and context-transcendent knowledge: "What these bitter adversaries continue to share is a fascination for the pursuit of hardness and strength" (Pels, 2003: 219). The implicit pursuit of these purist eurocentric ideals regularly tends to:

(1) the systematic reinforcement of the hegemonic "grand conception of sociology's role" (Hammersley, 1999) and

(2) the methodical concealment of the essential "epistemological circularity" of sociological accounts (see Potter, 1996). *Hardly anyone in everyday performative practice actually sees knowledge as inherently circular!* (see Pels, 2002b; Woolgar, 1988).

This seriously alienates or distantiates us from the epistemologically healthy ethics/aesthetics of "imperfection" and "scientific modesty" (Umberto Eco). For "weak social theory" to say that an argument carries ultimate force, or that it stands up in a definitely unproblematic way, is to "find it distasteful or even slightly obscene. To say: 'that is a very vulnerable argument', is to pay a compliment to it" (Pels, 2003: 220). In this peculiar sense, we must be proud of our (constitutive) weakness and reflexively embrace our own anti-universalistic politics of knowledge, or "politics of the mind" (Alvin Gouldner), primarily pointing our epistemic guns at *ourselves*, rather than at everyone else in order to forcibly achieve maximum diffusion and global consensus[1]. Thus, our knowledge's own (unavoidable) circularity is openly acknowledged and celebrated, toward a critical direction.

Reflexivity and Relationality

Yet, this kind of "politics" is not disastrous or self-refuting, since it non-opportunistically offers itself as a (weak) criterion of truth by displaying the dialectical "projective relationship between the spokesperson and that which is spoken for" (Pels, 2000b: 17), waiving all claims for "independent" realities, "transcendental" truths and "obligatory" epistemological foundations (Pels, 1995: 1036). As the radical skeptical ethics of circular reflexive reasoning is being brought right at the heart of current critical sociological debates, we do maximize our chances to "relationally" see ourselves "through the eyes of the other" (Heinz von Foerster) and discover a wholly new intellectual life conduct (or *Umgangswissen*): "Less egotism, both individual and collective, and more awareness of how we all constitute each other: this could be a path toward lowering intellectual acrimony in the future" (Collins, 2002: 70). In such terms, "caring for the other" (Maturana) signifies an essential prerequisite for both social and scientific living (Tsivacou, 2005: 520-522).

Furthermore, encouraging the enabling practice of a relational, radically reflexive (*anastochastic*) and self-consciously performative[2] "knowledge politics" (in a Foucauldian sense), we openly promote an Aristotelian negation (*apophasis*) of the will to intellectual power and, eventually, the development of more "apophatic", and less "promethean", modes of sociological thinking and inter-acting. This implies a kind of *apophatic methodological voluntarism*, where different levels of radical uncertainty are

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[1] So, our present contribution is just a "humble" starting point for an ethical reflexive project and an invitation to significant others to join and enrich that project, to share the burden of its further elaboration and expansion.

[2] By this, we arguably imply a "performativist" or "enactivist" conception of social order, according to which social structures, relations, patterns, connections and identities are imaginary quantities that exist only partially, because they are continuously "at stake" in attempts to render them a little bigger or a little smaller. We are all in the permanent business of re-negotiating, re-constructing and acting performatively upon them. Therefore, we all contribute to the "reality status" of what is described and explained (see Pels, 2002).

incorporated in the self-confrontation of science, as well as in the co-emerging relationship between science and society (including politics and religion). Following Nicos Mouzelis (1999), the "spiritualization" of socio-logical reflexivity does not entail exegetic anaemia, nihilism or political paralysis, and does not necessarily abstract from the venerable Enlightenment adage of knowing thyself/knowing better, posing itself as a potentially effective antidote against both scientific and everyday essentialism.

A less rational-cognitive, and "more contemplative, more easy-going" (Mouzelis, 1999: 85), alternative form of reflexivity inevitably turns our analytic attention not only to post-Western ways of conceiving ourselves, sociology and society (at both micro and macro levels), but also to a post-Western, yet critical, approach to culture and cultural studies, opening the "space of possibility" (Martin Heidegger) for a more enriched, multilogical and participative "cosmopolitan public sphere" (Koegler, 2005). In contrast to the strong ethnomethodological opposition to a version of reflexivity that "implies no antonym, confers no definite methodological advantage, and elevates no particular theory of knowledge, cultural location, or political standpoint above any other" (Lynch, 2000: 47), the qualitative betterment of social and organizational science might indeed "help promote a more democratic society in the future" (Brown, 2001: 171). Thus, there is the vital normative need for a post-colonial, knowledge-political discourse of a *europic* (wide-eyed) reflexivity, advancing *"intellectual humility and tolerance"* (Rosenau, 1992: 22) as parts of a new ethical project, facilitating scientific communication and focusing on wider contexts and interests, in direct contrast to the myopic (short-sighted), narrow and immunizing (eurocentric) reflexivities which still dominate the various sociological fields[3].

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[3] Europic reflexivity therefore calls for an escape from narrow analytic frameworks and the short-sighted academization of knowledge. In particular, a critical broadening of contemporary science and technology studies might be alternatively set forth

Strong theory is obviously reluctant to see ethics as an *irreducible* aspect of reflexivity. But, as stressed above, the self-conscious researcher should be alert not only to "issues related to knowledge creation but also ethical issues in research. This alertness might include conscious consideration of a range of formal ethical positions and adoption of a particular ethical stance" (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 275). In this context, we actively promote a genuine, anti-hegemonic stance of epistemological weakness connecting reflexivity, as a rather community level concern, with the "microethics" (Komesaroff) of social (and organizational) research and theory.

Hence, we arguably accomplish a provocative dialogical expansion of the very project of reflexive sociology, which is indeed integral to good (serious, accountable) cultural production. In this line, as Shiv Visvanathan comprehensively points out, a new, post-Western, "pluralist world of cognitive possibilities" is increasingly open to us (Visvanathan, 2006). Such a "relational" world presupposes a strong sense of ethical reflexivity, which insistently pushes "towards the uncomfortable" (Pillow, 2003: 192) and, of course, does not entail a "stronger objectivity" (Bourdieu, Harding, Longino), but rather a modest notion of "reflexive objectivity" (Alvin Gouldner), associated with the "importance of

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beyond the limiting question of "public participation and engagement". What is really needed here is to always keep a sharp reflexive eye to the wide financial and political context of science and technology, so that we can possibly apply new emancipative policies and move out from today's dominant debilitating discourses, in a largely uncaring world risk society. For example, the risks and potentialities of the rapid developments on artificial life, genetics, nanotechnology and biotechnology cannot be fully grasped without thinking more globally, in the crucial direction of new areas of study and forms of radical egalitarian action. Hence, more sociological emphasis should be carefully put on the *global implications* of science and technology, as well as on the new emerging alliances between technoscience, the public and the state, towards an alternative *Wissenpolitik* (Nico Stehr).

personal presence and sentimental commitment in all sociological accounts of the world" (Pels, 2000a: 220), against eurocentric Methodological Dualism.

Epilogue: Against epistemological arrogance and unlimited knowledge

No doubt, reflexivity as the committed self-inclusion of the observer in the object observed has been a persistent source of epistemological inspiration and sociological imagination (at least) during the last 40 years. But epistemological reflexivity is not enough; epistemological reflexivity, ethical reflexivity and post-colonial reflexivity/post-Western are simultaneously introduced here. We therefore tend to arguably favour an alternative, non-ascetic (weak) approach which self-confidently stands against all purist, macho aspirations to (Platonic) perfectionism, recognizes ensuing hybridities, celebrates "limited knowledge" (Cilliers, 2005)[4] and ultimately champions a creative, on-going interplay between the ontological, the epistemological and the ethical, according to Karl Mannheim's famous "magic triangle" (Pels, 2003).

The anti-objectivist/anti-realist epistem-ological principle of "performative" or "circular" reality-making inevitably includes a radical ethic/aesthetic of "fair play", according to which the sociological spokesperson continuously displays herself/himself as a *morally responsible performer* of her/his contingent, non-compulsory realities (see Pels, 2000b; Maturana and Varela, 1984). But this is not the end point which has to be discursively negotiated. Rather, ethico-epistemological reflexivity is a real point of departure, struggle and critique, in order to dialogically contest the constitution of any form of essentialism and

reification on the very ground of everyday life. Of course, this carefully comprises an incisive post-colonialist reconstruction of sociological worldviews, lifestyles and lifeworlds, towards an egalitarian, sincerely humanitarian, radically democratic and culturally pluralist science (Visvanathan, 1997).

Besides, science, as a historically relevant, relational human activity, can only exist in our social togetherness (Kenneth Gergen). From this viewpoint, it is actually freed from its overwhelming governmental power speech that severely impedes the fragile, contested process of generating mutual understanding and forecloses further critical investigation. In the last instance, as Steve Woolgar comprehensively concludes, a healthy dose of ethical reflexivity is indeed the best way to avoid the (Western) arrogance of certainty and self-sufficient/self-immunizing knowledge or, in general, the eurocentric "dangers of complacency" (Rachel, 1996).

We thus move beyond the Enlightenment need for grand intellectual heroes, or compassionate social engineers (designing unflawed systems), and the utopian/narcissistic modernist dreams (delusions) of unlimited wisdom[5] and epistemological perfection, without devaluing science or eschewing issues of value, justice, politics and accountability. By "turning the other cheek" (Dick Pels), we just allow for an ethical weakening of our theorizing, which is firmly anchored in the very "flesh of the world" (Maurice Merleau-Ponty). The social researcher, always keeping in mind "both how little the single scientist knows in relation to the total community of inquirers, and a respect for the complexity of reality" (Kalleberg, 2007: 141), does not need to be (or feel) strong any more!

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[4] For Paul Cilliers, however, self-reflexive modest claims "are not relativistic and, therefore, weak … We can make strong claims, but since these claims are limited, we have to be modest about them" (Cilliers, 2005: 260, 263).

[5] Of course, the antithetical (weak) Aristotelian conception of "phronesis" (practical, limited wisdom), as a sign of epistemic humility and honesty, is quite relevant here (see Flyvbjerg, 2001).

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