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V. Knowledge and Culture: Two Review Essays

Knowledge or Knowledges?*

Charles Lemert

Knowledge is a ghost to social scientists. It spooks their work. For them, it is a subject unlike any other. Knowledge, to be sure, is what they, the social ones, like all other scientists, produce. Some people in the humanities may still search for truth, or truths, but scientists produce knowledge. Yet, unlike the more normatively respectable scientists, social scientists understand that their knowledge is forever haunted by the mysterious circumstances of its origins and passings away.

Knowledge of the social produced by social beings is never, nor can it ever be, what it seems. It arises necessarily out of the experiences its producers have as members of the social orders they study. For this very reason, its factual certitude withers to a relative wisp nearly as soon as it is born. Knowledge of the social by social beings is a subject that, by its very nature, frightens the knower because it cannot, or will not, be contained by the more comfortable methods and categories of science. This is why so many sociologists, a good number of political scientists, and even some academic psychologists and economists will cash their pay checks in the name of an official department of social science, while, in their work-a-day lives, they disavow the rules and ideals of science itself, seeking instead the gentler comfort of methods borrowed from history, ethnography, philosophy, even literary criticism.

Among the social sciences, no discipline has been more troubled than sociology by the question of knowledge, which is why, no doubt, it has sponsored (though improperly named) a subspecialty, the sociology of knowledge. One supposes that Karl Mannheim, the first modern codifier of the sociology of knowledge—no less than Karl Marx, who first defined the sociological troubles of knowledge—would be annoyed to learn that the subject of their concerns has become a formal subject of professional expertise

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within one, and only one, of the bureaucratically organized disciplines. Just the same, if it must have one, sociology is a proper academic home for this tradition of thought, if only because everyone knows that sociologists are ready to organize a "sociology of ... [almost anything]." If a sociology of the emotions, or of the military, why not a sociology of knowledge? Why not, indeed? Because knowledge is not a social thing like the military, not even like the emotions. Though, among their many other importances to social life, the emotions do affect how knowledge is produced, not even they are the thing produced when it is knowledge that is affected.

When it comes to a sociology of knowledge, the knowledge in question is both, and simultaneously, the effect and the cause. It would not be far wrong to complain that the two grand traditions in the sociology of knowledge are comparably unwilling to hold effect and cause in the same breathe. The one that Marx began, and Mannheim continued, considers the sociology of knowledge the investigation of the social causes of whatever passes for knowledge in sociology. The other, that of the now notorious social constructionist tradition, of which Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann are important early sources, holds that knowledge in the form of social consciousness is the cause, not just of knowledge itself, but of the whole of social reality.

Neither of these considered attitudes within the sociology of knowledge is entirely welcome in the polite company of the majority of social scientists who, as a rule, would prefer to think of their knowledge as no less fine and clear than any other produced by good science. Yet, neither tradition can be as easily forsworn as they might like, though each, its popularity in the reputationally less well established circles notwithstanding, leads to real trouble.

The knowledge-as-effect line, for example, is ever at risk of reducing knowledge to that which is so utterly not-knowledge that, at an extreme point of skepticism, it is difficult to justify the claim that knowledge is anything in particular. This is the trouble Marx got himself into by insisting that things are not only not what they appear to be but they are the very opposite of appearances—that knowledge, thus, is not knowledge at all but the mere, false, and inverted reflection of the mode of production. But, as Alvin Gouldner once put it, in reference to Marx's famous *camera obscura* metaphor, How then does Marx account for the cameraman? Marx had no answer for this question which ultimately opened his politics to the activist emendations that led, in due course, to the Soviet imperium and Mao's cultural revolution.

Mannheim seemed to have better understood the risks of reducing knowledge to the irrelevancy of a mere effect of prior political and economic causes. After his earliest essays in *Ideology and Utopia,* which veered

in this direction, Mannheim corrected course away from the study of ideology as the inevitable distortion of knowledge to a more positive, and scientific, study of "the varying ways in which objects present themselves to the subject according to the differences in social settings." Mannheim thereby tamed the more unruly impulse of the knowledge-as-(mere)-effect line, by inventing a sociology of knowledge that in the 1940s Robert K. Merton would study carefully as he was inventing the sociology of science, which is surely one of the more satisfyingly scientific of the various sociological subspecialties.

Contrary to the gradual, though irregular, devolutions of the Marx-Mannheim-Merton line, the knowledge-as-cause line leapt to the fore with surprising suddenness in the late 1960s. It was of course the combustible energy of the times that set fire to sawn timbers left about by Scheler, Husserl, and Schutz in particular. Known today as "social constructionism" (a term nearly as inappropriately over-used as its occasional misapplied cognates: "deconstructionism" and "postmodernism"), the knowledge-as-cause tradition inclines along a precipitous angle at which, it would seem, all of social reality, being the result of human consciousness (that is, of the synthetic, if collective, apperceptive *a priori* of knowing), is real only in a figurative sense. At its extreme, social constructionism leads to the intriguing, but impractical, conclusion that things-in-themselves (including social things) are not necessarily there in themselves. If human knowledge is the cause of human social things, then the best that can be hoped for is that such things might be real, though very likely absent—that is, that they possess phenomenal qualities while lacking ontological gravity. You can hear the real scientists down the hall roaring with derision at the very idea. They are so amused that it is impossible to talk to them about the "reality" of their data which in many cases (economists and attitude surveyors) are, at best, third order simulations of primary effects. Only the demographers and ethnographers come as close as second order empirical simulations of whatever is out there in, to use the word, "reality."

The idea that empirical social things may be *real* without being certifiably *there* is far from loony. The danger is not in the epistemological desiderata, but in the politics. Hunger and starvation are both *real* and *there* for all intents and purposes. Hence the derision of the scientists is joined by the scorn of many in the knowledge-as-effect line, particularly latter-day sons and daughters of Marx, who consider such debates a cynical trifle against the pain of real human suffering. This may be why, soon after *The Social Construction of Reality*. Peter Berger made a mad dash toward a more comfortably conservative position and Thomas Luckmann returned to the safer confines of editorial work on Schutz and his prior, excellent studies in the sociology of language. This is surely why, whatever one's political

orientations, it is necessary to check the brakes before starting down the constructionist slope.

E. Doyle McCarthy's *Knowledge As Culture* is an assiduously crafted analysis of these two lines in the sociology of knowledge tradition. Her enthusiasm for her subject is palpable, her conviction that it is of enduring and general value is firm, and her method of dealing with the sociology of knowledge is frankly revisionist. She aims at nothing less than recuperating these two grand traditions in the study of social knowledge in order to demonstrate their continuing vitality, as she puts it in the phrase of the day, as resources "to enable us to scrutinize the current 'turn to culture' " (p. 107).

As the title proclaims, all too obviously, knowledge is also culture, whatever its origins. Since, for better or worse, everyone and her sister seems to suppose that culture is now what sociologists (at least) and a good many others (anthropologists and literary people especially) ought to be studying, McCarthy is right to seek to revise the sociology of knowledge as she does. To this end, after giving unmistakably clear renderings of the two grand lines in the sociology of knowledge, she provides reliable and parsimonious accounts of four of the major traditions in which the two lines (she labels them, somewhat optimistically, propositions) are carried forth. These are: 1) the Marxisms that have sought to clear up Marx's own one-sided theory of ideology; 2) the French structuralisms that sought to project the contents of mind (hence of knowledge) onto the shared structures of collective life; 3) the American pragmatisms that clarified the possible origins of human knowledge (hence of culture) in the consciousness of the acting self; 4) the feminisms that extended the constructionist idea of knowledge by arguing that sciences (hence knowledges) are situated in real, therefore historically arbitrary, social conditions (hence, they are cultural). To oversimplify, these four discussions pertain, *inter alia*, to: 1) Althusser, 2) Levi-Strauss, 3) Mead, 4) Harding and Haraway.

Unlike some other writers who come to their subjects with an avowed attitude, Doyle McCarthy presents her expositions of these four traditions with acute attention to their nuances and difficulties. Althusser is brought up against Gouldner and even a few of today's postmodernist critics; Levi-Strauss is situated backward to Durkheim and forward to Foucault; Mead's pragmatism is framed, not only by the most recent studies in the pragmatist tradition, but also by pragmatism's possible, if improbable, implications for the grand debate today about identity politics and imagined communities; and the feminist questions of science are presented in their many, admirable variants and against a thoroughly sensible understanding of the larger complications in the social study of science. Though those expert to any or several of the four traditions will surely quibble here and there, or be

disappointed by the brevity with which some points in this short (111 page) book are covered, only the hard-to-appease could fail to appreciate the ambitious reach and thoughtful attentions of this fine book.

Yet, quibbling is one of the ways we earn our professional keep and I would be false to my duties were I not to announce my own reservations.

For one, in her treatment of the structuralist tradition McCarthy allows her case to rest too much on the merits of Levi-Strauss's radically culturalist revision of the later Durkheim. She is right to explain that, among other things, structural anthropology sharpened our understanding of human culture and knowledge as primary and autonomous "symbolic systems" (p. 63), which emphasis, in turn, entails an entirely necessary criticism of traditional methods of enthnography and (by extension) all social scientific methods in the study of culture. What McCarthy does not do is venture into structuralism's own no-less necessary entailment, poststructuralism. Though, today, these two movements are confused in the minds of those innocent of ever having read the original texts, structuralism and poststructuralism were, in fact, two independent movements that evolved in such a way and at such a time that the one, structuralism, could not help but incite the other, poststructuralism. Just as Levi-Strauss's structuralism drew upon, among other sources, Durkheim's sociology of knowledge in *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life,* so Foucault drew on the same French tradition in the social history of knowledge that influenced his teacher, Louis Althusser—that of Georges Canguilhem and Gaston Bachelard, not to forget Georges Bataille.

One well understands why Professor McCarthy left out these fine points of historical connection. She aims to revise the sociology of knowledge (not to elaborate all of its possible connections) and, clearly, she had it in mind that her book should be brief and to the point. But still, you can see the difficulties her own purposes impose. It is strange to set Althusser in the Marxist tradition as though he were not also a structuralist through and through and, stranger still, to offer the reader Althusser and Levi-Strauss without, at the least, Foucault. Foucault's *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* are both, and obviously, important latter-day contributions to the far-reaching and disciplinarily ecumenical sociology of knowledge McCarthy aims to encourage. Though Derrida is, perhaps, a little less obvious a resource for those whose primary taste is for social science, as opposed to philosophy, still he too has much to offer a revised sociology of knowledge—in particular in his early essays on Levi-Strauss and structuralism in *Writing and Difference* and his recent book on Marx, *The Scepters of Marx.*

While I would not hold any author accountable to purposes that exceed her own perfectly reasonable ones, it is fair to hold an author to her own standards. The sociology of knowledge is nothing if it is not the study of the social basis, or implications, of knowledge. The structuralist and post-structuralist movements arose at quite specific socio-historical moments in the immediate postwar period of the 1940s in the Europe of the 1960s and in the turmoil of that period worldwide. Levi-Strauss (in *Tristes Tropiques*) and both Derrida and Foucault (in various places, including interviews) clearly announced that their ideas were anything but indifferent to the waves of modernizing reconstructions, then decolonizing rebellions, that shaped the world order in the 1940s, then the 1960s. Similarly, Althusser's own ill-fated journey through structuralism to personal tragedy was more or less evidently linked to his attempts to come to terms with the Stalinist residues on the French political left in the terrible Sixties.

It is not that McCarthy is ignorant of these wider political events (she alludes to several of them). But one would expect that their importance as causes (or effects, if one prefers) of the intellectual traditions she chooses to discuss might enter more saliently into the argument itself. Instead, all four traditions are too often treated as though they were knowledges pure and simple, shorn of social source and consequence. If nothing else, one telling implication of this emphasis is the classification scheme that treats Althusser as Marxist but not a structuralist; and structuralism as culturalist without being also profoundly, if preconsciously, Marxist. When ideas, and their traditions, are treated as ideas pure and simple they can be made to move effortlessly into the analyst's scheme. When they are rooted in their proper social places, ideas resist the easy classification.

My second quibble derives from the first. McCarthy may well be justified for reasons of parsimony and convenience for allowing her classificatory scheme to interrupt the actual historical foundations of the knowledges she examines. Cutting things up is also part of what we do, and nothing would ever get done if we searched out to explain every nuance. This is to be forgiven. But it is harder yet to overlook the harsher effects of analytic categories when they restrain the discussion from nuances without which they are presented in a false light. Thus, I am more belligerently disappointed that McCarthy's discussion of feminism ignores so completely the several, and contentious, expressions of feminism that have today made it nearly impossible, and rightly so, to speak of feminism as though it were one, continuous, and seamless. True, McCarthy aims to demonstrate the importance of feminist studies of science to her revision of the sociology of knowledge. And, it is no less true, that most of these are studies done by feminists who are generally white, not avowedly queer, and only exceptionally influenced by social origins outside the first and northern most world. Yet, as in the

absence of, say, Foucault's theory of power/knowledge from the earlier chapters, so also some readers will wonder what became of the women of color, queers, and postcolonial feminists who have done so much to challenge *and* extend generic feminism's foundational principle that knowledges are situated; therefore, plural.

Knowledge As Culture, of course, mentions Donna Haraway's contributions to the canonization of the concept *situated knowledges,* as well as the ways her work draws upon and is congruent with many prominent sociologies of knowledge. But, so far as I could find, there is not a mention in this book of Haraway's famous 1984 essay, "Cyborg Manifesto," in which, more than anyone at the time (with the obvious exception of Audre Lorde), she (Haraway) developed the idea of fractured identities. Like the essays in Lorde's earlier (1979) *Sister Outsider,* and the poetry in Gloria Anzaldúa's later (1987) *Borderlands/La Frontera,* Haraway began systematically to demonstrate that knowledge is never homogeneously situated; thus, by consequence, it is never singular. Even, and especially, knowledge of self is always bound to one's various knowledges of the world, which, in turn, necessarily fractures the situation of the knower according to the differences of race, sexuality, world-position, as well as gender.

One might overlook Anzaldúa or Lorde in a discussion of feminist contributions to a cultural theory of knowledge, but not this crucial aspect of Haraway's work. In her *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (1981), Haraway herself situates her "Situated Knowledges" (and note the plural!) immediately after the earlier "Cyborg Manifesto" and describes the later as central to the former. Indeed, Haraway's sociology of knowledges, if that is what it is, depends on *both* key concepts. Situated knowledges make no sense without fractured identities—not for Haraway, nor, in my opinion, for any attempt to refer knowledge to the varieties of social circumstances in which knowers know whatever they know. This is the premise that demarcates an older standpoint feminism from its subsequent rivals. It is, for many, the central controversy in post-essentialist feminism, and there are many, many instances of references McCarthy might have made—to Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought,* to Steven Seidman's *Contested Knowledge,* to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. Each of these three, among numerous others (Gayarti Spivak's expositions of the subaltern, for one added example), is an implicit sociology of knowledge in McCarthy's sense (if not in the intentions of their authors).

I have greater confidence in the seriousness of my second quibble than of the first, but more still in the third, which feeds off the previous two. The problem with a revisionist, as opposed to critical, approach to any subject is that revision, when wedded to conviction, can dull the appetite for skepticism. *Knowledge As Culture* is so bent on its purpose of revising the

sociology of knowledge that it seldom pauses to consider the troubles within the actually existing traditions of the sociology of knowledge itself. The knowledge-as-effect tradition *and* the knowledge-as-cause line, both, aggravate the ghosts that ever lurk behind the facade of social science. The two traditions that form the propositional beginning point of *Knowledge As Culture* are indeed traditions, but like many traditions they are also variant themes within the proper subject they together constitute. One of the reasons there is a sociology of knowledge. original or revised, is that knowledge most decidedly is a problem for endeavors that claim to be a social, or human, *science*. If so, and McCarthy would likely agree with me on this score, then it must follow that the trouble the traditions cause, separately and together, *must* be taken seriously.

Doyle McCarthy is far from alone in hesitating to put her subject into its own analytic trouble. Reflexivity is a powerful ideal, mercilessly painful in the practice. Ironically, it is the very clarity and assurance with which she defines her subject and explores its possibilities that left me longing for answers to the prior question that a radically revised, but reflexively critical, sociology of knowledge would be forced to ask: Is the sociology of knowledge, as it has been traditionally defined, still a viable vantage point for the analysis of knowledge's relation to culture, hence to social life?

Perhaps it is. But if it is then I would want to hear more about a still longer list of questions: Why then did both the Mannheimian and pragmatist lines ignore the centrality of error which was foundational to the overlooked French tradition that so influenced Foucault and Althusser (certainly) and Derrida (obliquely, through another Hegelian passage)? What if, furthermore, the shifts and ruptures in world society that broke out in the 1960s have, as many claim they have, changed once and for all how global cultural *and* global politics (and perhaps too global economics) work? If so, or even if only possibly so, then what is knowledge, or what are knowledges, under such conditions? And, still further, what if, even in the absence of a postmodern global situation. the rebellions of women of color, queers, and postcolonials constitute at the very least a challenge to any prospect of universalities in the nature of actually existing cultures sufficient to permit anyone to speak, as McCarthy does in her subtitle, of *the* new sociology of knowledge?

It is surely not that Doyle McCarthy is insensitive to these questions and their importance. She ends her book with the statement, "Situated knowledges are, by their nature, unfinished" (p. 111). And, as I say, there is nothing wrong with writing a revisionist sociology of knowledge. But there are too many places where the revisionism takes the traditions revised for granted on their terms. Too often McCarthy assumes, or so it seems, that to slide knowledge under the cover of culture will somehow protect

it from the potentially deadly melting into the same thin air to which Marx hoped all of modernism would disappear; or, that the notorious cultural turn will somehow also hold knowledge back from its breathless slide into a constructionist world of thrills and frills in which, at the extreme, everything is a real, yet false, copy of an original that cannot be said to exist.

I believe that both the original Marxist and the current constructionist extremes, ridiculous as they may seem to some, are worth consideration. Like it or not, they are, both and each, wedged forever in the foundational propositions of the sociology of knowledge this book studies and seeks to advance. If they are, and McCarthy would have to think they are, then they require *a* new sociology of knowledge to question the very possibility of *the* sociology of knowledge, no less than of the possibility of social science. I am less convinced than McCarthy that the sociology of knowledge, in either of its variant traditions, is likely to harbor the confusions and possibilities attendant upon the study of knowledges—any of them.

The sociology of knowledge, if there can be one, or several, must be a ghost buster without being foolish. This is very hard work, and dangerous, too, for those who must look over their shoulders to the vagrant fiscal measures of deans and other guardians of the economic base of academic knowledge. Doyle McCarthy's book is anything but foolish; and it looks the ghost straight in the eye. But, if I am not mistaken, *Knowledge As Culture* does blink on the question of just how, or if, the ghost of social knowledge might be exorcised.

Still, this is a book that will cause readers to think about a subject many, myself included, had not thought about for a good long time. It is a sane, trustworthy, and helpful book—one that deserves a wide reading and, in many courses, an honest teaching. In her Epilogue, Doyle McCarthy writes:

> Surely one of the singular insights of the sociology of knowledge for social scientific inquiry is to be found in its claim that social life does not stop at the doors of our being, but passes into the chambers of our minds and our psyches, and insinuates itself even into the domain of spoken and unspoken thoughts and desires (p. 107).

If I have said anything that might poison a reader against *Knowledge As Culture,* this beautifully composed thought should be sufficient antidote. The book is very worthwhile. If it disappoints in some respects, it does because it succeeds so wonderfully well in others.