

## **HORIZONS OF POSSIBILITY: SOCIOLOGIES FOR THE 21st CENTURY**

## **HORIZONTES DE POSIBILIDAD: SOCIOLOGÍAS PARA EL SIGLO XXI**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The discipline of sociology has much to contribute to critical public awareness of changing global landscapes. Exactly what we are able to contribute —and how useful those contributions might be— will depend on how we (re)conceptualize the discipline in relation to narratives of science. While many sociologists argue for anchoring our analytical frameworks more strongly and more consistently to the physical sciences, this article counters that, at the start of the 21st century, the discipline needs to move forward with the development of social epistemologies, not turn back toward older models of science. This article begins with examples of the limitations of current research paradigms and argues for the development and use of social epistemologies that break from the Cartesian paradigm. It then highlights the value of sociological studies of language for apprehending 21<sup>st</sup> century social complexities.

### **KEYWORDS**

Epistemology, methodology, language, sociology.

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1. Introduction. 2. Science as a cultural activity. 3. Social epistemologies. References.

### **RESUMEN**

La sociología, como disciplina, tiene mucho que aportar a la conciencia pública crítica sobre los cambiantes panoramas globales. Exactamente, qué somos capaces de aportar -y lo útiles que pueden ser esas contribuciones- dependerá de cómo (re)conceptualicemos la disciplina en relación con el discurso de la ciencia. Mientras que muchos sociólogos argumentan para anclar más fuerte y consistentemente nuestros marcos de referencia respecto a las ciencias físicas, este artículo responde que, al comienzo del siglo veintiuno, la disciplina necesita dar un paso hacia delante a la par de la evolución de las epistemologías sociales, no dar un paso atrás hacia viejos modelos científicos. Este artículo comienza con ejemplos sobre las limitaciones que tienen los paradigmas de investigación actuales y aboga por el desarrollo y uso de las epistemologías sociales que rompen con el paradigma cartesiano. De este modo se resalta el valor de los estudios sociológicos del lenguaje para comprender las complejidades sociales del siglo veintiuno.

### **PALABRAS CLAVE**

Epistemología, epistemología social, metodología e investigación social.

### **SUMARIO**

1. Introducción. 2. Ciencia como actividad cultural. 3. Epistemologías sociales. Bibliografía.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Significantly, at a time when the complexities of social relations and new media seem to demand a broad range of complex and contemporary methods, social researchers are experiencing a global push toward narrowing our analytic range. Around the globe, governments are attempting to regulate scientific inquiry by defining what good science is. In the process, conservative regimes are enforcing biomedical models of research on the social sciences. In the United States a very strong governmental push to accept quantitative methods as the only valid method of social research is compounded by the recent move toward public sociologies. Both government and mainstream media prepare publics for a largely uncritical acceptance of statistical information—and seem to assume that more nuanced analyses are too complex for the general public. Research paradigms offer more than simple orientations for data collection and analysis. They provide frameworks for recognizing what we see, as well as for understanding the relevance and importance of what we see. Science itself is a cultural activity—a kind of performance that enacts itself.

In the face of movements to narrow the analytical focus of social research, this article's core argument is that social research methods—both quantitative and qualitative—are not able to fully comprehend 21<sup>st</sup>-century complexities because they are rooted to a 19<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy of science. If scholars accept that all knowledge is socially constructed and historically situated, we must also understand social research methodologies as historically produced social formations. This article begins with examples of the limitations of current research paradigms and argues for the development and use of social epistemologies that break from the Cartesian paradigm. It then highlights the value of sociological studies of language for apprehending 21<sup>st</sup> century social complexities.

## 2. SCIENCE AS A CULTURAL ACTIVITY

Historically, Western traditions of social science research have been based on a physical science model; the goal was to produce knowledge that was believed to be an objective and accurate representation, or reflection, of an external reality. Early Western science was based on Cartesian dualism, which distinguished between subjects (as agent persons) and objects (things to be studied). If objects in the natural sciences might be rocks, minerals, or cells, for social scientists 'objects' are other people. In the social sciences, the philosophy of Cartesian dualism has had (and continues to have) particularly negative consequences in social research for marginalized groups of people who have been (and remain) the focus of social research.

One does not have to look hard to find scientific research that advanced various forms of knowledge that were clearly extensions of bigotry. For example, early sociologists were committed to an understanding of social progress in which "primitive" societies gradually developed to achieve the "sophistication" of Western cultures. Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, is one obvious example of what might (at best) be called an ethnocentric commitment in sociology. Modernization and science have served as colonial tools that systematically devalued cultures and erased important knowledge. Social research is itself a relation of power that produces (and is produced by) "rituals of truth"

(Foucault, 1977: 194). With the benefit of hindsight, social scientists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century frequently recognize that science has been more than a search for objective knowledge.

Yet, it has been easy for contemporary scholars to imagine that the results of earlier research supported bigoted social hierarchies because the researchers themselves held such views. Consequently, contemporary researchers have challenged specific research findings, even as we have advanced 19<sup>th</sup> century paradigms of social research—*as if prevailing social and political agendas produced good research methodologies that had been put to bad ends*. For example, sociologists have broadened research to include grounded theory, interpretivist frameworks, feminist standpoints, as well as postcolonial and critical race theories. In addition, many social researchers seek to develop a better grasp of social inequalities by analyzing the reflexive and interpretive repertoires used both by researchers and the people we study.

Despite these innovations, the cornerstones of data collection are still anchored to a 19<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy of science. The production of scientifically valid research continues to seem possible only if evidence is understood as a thing to which one can physically point, rather than as a heuristic for investigation. Scholars might speak of multiple realities, but the techniques of research redirect us to a Cartesian construct. Operationally, sociological research depends upon realism. Indeed the few areas of sociological research that do not conform to a 19<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy of science (e.g., autoethnography and performance ethnography) remain on the margins of the discipline because they are not generally recognized as valid social science research. All research methods depend on prevailing narratives of science for meaning and credibility. Arguably, the intellectual empires of the 19<sup>th</sup> century have outlasted the geographic ones.

Despite progressive work on methodology, in the United States, there is a general disconnection between methodology (the logical frameworks of research design) and methods (techniques for acquiring data). Important methodological critiques of epistemology and ontology are rarely incorporated into discussion (in classrooms and in articles) regarding the pragmatics of data collection and analysis. Historical arguments about the nature and importance of ontology and epistemology are embedded in commonsense assumptions about the research process. This is important because, to the extent that social researchers assume, rather than account for, the ontological and epistemological commitments of social research, social scientific knowledge is bound to an unacknowledged, ideologically determined, and culturally biased production of knowledge. The most fundamental assumptions that continue to be pervasive in sociological research regard the nature of evidence. In a Cartesian paradigm, evidence exists as tangible, objective phenomena, which must be discovered.

For the most part, sociologists continue to use processes for recognizing and collecting data remain tethered to a Cartesian framework that specifies evidence in terms of phenomena to which one can point in localized contexts. Indeed it seems to be a matter of commonsense that one should be able to point to one's data. However, this notion of evidence prevents scholars from examining 21<sup>st</sup> century complexities from within the boundaries of sociology. Consider, for example, that social science research methods are useful for examining oppression and domination, but are poor tools for understanding the forms of privilege and power that routinely pass without remark in daily life. The routine production of privilege (e.g., whiteness or heterosexuality) is always an unmarked category that leaves little or no empirical evidence in daily interaction or in media—it is routine precisely because it passes without remark. All routine relations of power and privilege

pass without remark—this is the measure of how ordinary such relations are in a culture. For instance, in the United States, social researchers know that whiteness, as an unmarked category, has profound importance in social interaction and in media representation, yet it consistently escapes empirical analysis. Researchers can prompt interviewees to talk about white racial identities or the meanings of whiteness (Bonilla-Silva, 2003) but we must also acknowledge that talking about whiteness falls outside of cultural convention. It is not a typical social practice in face-to-face interaction or in media. As a consequence, analyzing representations of whiteness in media and in unprompted conversation poses an arguably insurmountable challenge within the existing paradigms of science.

A social scientist needs evidence to which one can point and yet production of routine privilege always passes without remark. Social science is not prepared to enable scholars to examine the effects of what isn't overtly expressed. How then can social researchers analyze forms of privilege that pass without comment? On the one hand, a reader must ask, should social science be expected to provide such analyses? On the other hand, this problem directs us back to an analysis of the politics of knowledge production. If social research is not yet capable of fully accounting for human experience, there must be something in research assumptions that alienates research processes from aspects of human experience.

The scholars who developed social research methods were not concerned with apprehending routine privilege so it should be no surprise that both our methods and standards of evidence fall short of enabling researchers today to do so. Similarly, research methods and standards of evidence were developed without a concern for media or intertextuality. Without recourse to the methods of other disciplines, sociologists are left to approach film, television, and newspapers with the same analytical frameworks used for interviews or ethnography. Consequently, researchers pursue cinematic realism—or at the very least to treat film, television, and newspapers just as they would interview transcripts. Neither approach is an adequate approach to 21<sup>st</sup> century media.

In many nations around the globe, social justice movements have come to be characterized by the media they produce. As early as 1994, the Zapatistas sent email from Chiapas to allies within and outside of Mexico. Today Subcomandante Marcos appears to maintain a substantial web presence through photologs, blogs, videos and e-journals. Similarly, in Iran, text messaging and twitter have become central to political protests in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Yet the centrality of media to social movements extends well beyond these examples. I suspect that many readers regularly receive email about the crisis in Darfur, human rights abuses, and threats to polar ice caps. In a global landscape, with new forms of media constantly emerging, former distinctions between culture, politics, and economics come to seem less relevant than they once were.

Not only is there a massive proliferation of media in the 21st century, there is also a “media convergence” as media content crosses multiple platforms, genres, industries, and audiences (Jenkins, 2008). Changes in media are simultaneously technological, industrial, cultural, and social; media convergence “alters the logic by which media industries operate and by which media consumers process news and entertainment” (Jenkins, 2008, pp. 15-16). However, social research paradigms have not adjusted to be able to effectively address the complex issues of representation in the proliferation of media and its porous relationships with arguably all aspects of social life.

The meanings of social interaction and social context are shifting through the rise of wikis, blogs, vlogs (video blogs), texting and so forth. In many forms of emerging new media (vlogs and blogs for example) we see not only a transformation of media, but arguably a complete collapse of what social researchers have understood as an interactional context. If people can be said to assert some level of control over what they say in interaction, in new media personal expressions have an unlimited life span that is out of any one person's control. From the privacy of our homes, we enter an endlessly public space. People post messages and videos with no idea of who, when or why someone might download their content. And replays (in which new viewers recreate a new version of an original vlog) reconstruct the meaning of authorship. Truth, authenticity, context and reality are no longer easily assumed or clearly apparent.

Media have a broad range of possibilities for constructing meaning that exceed the tools of our current research frameworks. At a minimum, media representations are always intertextual, that is to say the meanings of any one image or text depend "not only on that one text or image, but also on the meanings carried by other images and texts" (Rose, 2007, p. 142). However, social science research methods those remain constrained by 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy of science that cannot begin to address these social complexities. Social science currently demands an epistemological focus on local contexts, which precludes most intertextual cultural analyses.

What is the value of a social science that cannot examine routine privilege or meaningfully apprehend and account for technological mediation? Is the loss of this knowledge, the ineffectiveness of our research methods, a reasonable price to pay to maintain the traditional boundary of "science"? Should social sciences continue to concede media studies to the humanities? Clearly the answer to these last two questions is "no," if we believe that *all* experience is characterized by various forms of unacknowledged privilege and that all experience is both intensely personal and culturally mediated. Contemporary social research needs research frameworks that are capable of examining both routine relationships of privilege and the intertextuality of media—both of which require eroding the false distinction between theory and method to develop social epistemologies.

### **3. SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGIES**

Unlike the physical sciences, which might more or less comfortably rely on Cartesian dualism, social sciences need *social* epistemologies. Any adequate epistemology in the social sciences must account for the inseparability of knowledge and social organization. In the social sciences, epistemic communities are not groups of individuals they are interdependent—in this sense, epistemologies for social science need to be relational. Where the individualistic epistemologies rooted to a Cartesian paradigm are concerned with truth and error, social epistemologies are concerned with social practices in relation to knowledge production. There are myriad ways of conceptualizing social epistemologies that have a broad range of political effects. Of particular relevance here, are those that best support the production of knowledge in ways that are consistent with efforts to apprehend the intertextuality of socialities: specifically, the historicity of localized

contexts, the technological mediation of culture, and the subjective processes of social research.

With *relationality* as an ontological premise, social epistemologies demand that we pursue knowledge about the social world by examining social routes to knowledge. This requires that all narratives be understood both in relationship to each other and to broader discursive systems—that is to say as intertextual. In addition, identities and subject locations would need to be analyzed in the relational contexts that make them possible and which give them meaning. Social epistemologies refuse the possibility of conceptualizing identity as entirely fixed or as entirely individual. Analyses of social phenomena, such as whiteness, would necessarily account for both localized expressions and cultural contexts of emergence.

Systems of representation, particularly narratives and discourse, are the basic concepts of a social ontology and a social epistemology. Through narratives we come to know and make sense of the social world and through narratives we constitute social research. Yet narratives can never be entirely of our own making, they are the products of broader cultural discourses. In a social ontology, events and phenomena exist as constellations of relationships—not singular or isolated moments—that are discerned in temporal and spatial relationship to other events and phenomena. Ontological narratives dialogically define who we are and what course of action to pursue—these are socially constituted, not individual, narratives. In this sense, ontological narratives are fundamental to conceptions of agency and constraint. Indeed, agency and constraint are possible only through the narratives in which they are embedded.

To expand the limited notion of localized contexts necessarily erodes robust theory/method binaries by cultivating analyses that, in the social sciences, have not traditionally been considered empirical, or even relevant to the empirical. Many important issues in the social sciences, such as the nature of agency, subjectivity, and experience, can only be solved by conceptual analysis, not empirical research (cf., Winch, 1958). It will be necessary to draw together theory and method in less dualistic ways in order to cultivate a social science that possesses techniques of data collection, analysis and interpretation that can apprehend the tensions between personal agency and social constraints while accounting for relative consistency or stability in the contexts of multiplicity, contingency and difference.

While multiple ways of developing social epistemologies might exist, I want to assert the value of sociological analyses of language because of their ability to bring to life an organic connection between local and cultural contexts. By language, I do not refer to the study of grammar or syntax, but to a range of disciplinary approaches that get at the discursive production of meaning and knowledge in local and cultural contexts.

Linguistic turns have occurred in social, political, and economic contexts because they share basic commonalities such as: an emphasis on the interdependent character of phenomena; the idea that the source of knowledge does not reside in individuals or objects but in relationships among individuals and objects; and, an appreciation of language as actively contributing to our lives and our choices (Ives, 2004, p. 16). Perhaps because language is the premiere signifying system of cultures, studies of language have been regarded as something other than the basis of *scientific* investigation. Indeed sociology's first movements toward studies of language are characterized by highly technical studies of

talk, such as conversation analysis, which attempt to reconcile the demands of traditional science with studies of situated talk. Glyn Williams (1999, p. 294) argues that:

“Sociology’s emergence as a feature of modernism was responsible for the separation of language, mind and reality. This meant that it was possible to study reality without reference to language. It also meant that reality was reflected in language and that a consideration of evidence, as language, implied an introduction to truth. In the same manner, language and nature were separated, involving the separation of representation and fact. This meant that society could become something to study as something separate from language. In a sense, language was excluded from proto-sociology”.

In acknowledging the dramatic social changes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, scholars must also reconsider our tools of research. Our most private experiences are narratively constructed through the cultural framework of language. The ability to distinguish among truth, illusion, and falsity is dependent upon language—upon culture. All classificatory systems are narratively produced; even the individual, as such, does not exist as such prior to language. Without language there is no social interaction; without social interaction there is no social structure, no culture. Language, broadly construed as systems of representation, is arguably the foundation of shared culture. Consequently, sociological studies of language offer an effective means for developing social epistemologies that can apprehend intertextualities as they link together structure and agency, history and local interaction. While these circumstances have always been true, the discipline of sociology, as a whole, has been constrained by a dominant discourse of science and slows to recognize their importance.

Given the changing and contested notions of what constitutes a social science, and deeper appreciation for the inseparability of symbolic practices and material realities, more sociologists are turning to a broad range of methods and theories for apprehending the sociological importance of language. For example Steinberg (1999) demonstrated how material and discursive forces conjoin in shaping inequalities. Similarly, Bourdieu (2003) argued that the potency of symbolic power is the capacity of systems of meaning and signification to strengthen relations of oppression and exploitation.

Scholars have come to argue that “narrative is an ontological condition of social life” (Somers & Gibson, 1996, p. 38). Stories, in this sense, are not objects of knowledge they are practices which constitute what they intend to mean. All representations of empirical realities, even statistical representations are narratively constructed; and, similarly, the construction of factuality is at the heart of all dominant forms of mass media communication technologies (Clough, 1992: 2). Language itself is epistemic: language makes ‘reality’ real.

In the Research Committee on Language and Society of the International Sociology Association, scholars whose research ranges from sociolinguistics to poststructural discourse analysis, are united by the desire to look *at* rather than through systems of communication. Moving away from the technical focus commonly associated with conversation analysis and sociolinguistics, sociologists are increasingly concerned with broader issues such as the ability of studies of language to effectively apprehend both media and routine relations of power and privilege—to get at the reproduction of power and the intertextuality of ordinary life.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, sociology requires more sophisticated analytical tools for examining media—both as a form of hegemony and as a form of cultural resistance. This might mean broadening conceptions of “mixed methods” to also refer to efforts to combine interpretive and critical qualitative strategies of empirical analysis with more theoretical strategies such as deconstruction, genealogy, poststructural discourse analysis. Or it might require a more radical re-envisioning of the analytical process.

Sociological studies of language will help to prevent scholars from examining social phenomena such as race, class, gender, sexuality and ability as predetermined categories. Using a social epistemology, researchers would attend to the production, maintenance, and transformation of meaning with respect to social categories. Meaning is only possible through language (broadly writ); our communication is always constructed through systems of representation that preceded us and will go on well past us. For example, a slur is recognizable as a slur only because it has been used as such in the past—it connects us to a cultural history of bigotry (Butler, 1997). Without the broader social context, it is not possible to fully understand its use in a local interaction.

As de Certeau (1984) reminds us, words are tools marked by their use. However, in much of sociology the current paradigm of social science demands that we treat language as a transparent bearer of information, devoid of history, which can be understood through examination of a very narrow context of use. This practice speaks to one of the most profound and lasting binaries in social research, that of theory and method. The distinction has been maintained, in part, through the construction of positivist conceptions of evidence.

Western science is produced through narratives of achievement that actively disassociate social science from disasters such as entrenched racism, and other forms of systemic social and economic inequalities. Yet a strong commitment to challenging hegemonic science and to advancing social justice is clear in much of sociology. However, there are real limits to the amount and kind of change that can be produced within the current social science paradigms. We need new techniques for analyzing data and new standards for empirical analysis that will enable us to legitimately ask (and answer) different kinds of questions. If the mark of a mature science is its ability to generate new paradigms for research, social sciences are coming of age. This is not an argument to destroy existing paradigms but rather to stop privileging them as the only reliable forms of social science. It is time to reconsider 19<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy of science that underscores all of sociology and move social research toward a coherent, 21<sup>st</sup> century ontological and epistemological foundation that can fully apprehend contemporary processes of social life.

Around the globe there are multiple traditions and practices for social research that may be of core relevance to the process of rethinking how to reformulate social research in ways that would enable researchers to examine the complexities of 21<sup>st</sup>-century life. At a minimum, reconceptualizing social research in ways that would enable both systemization and intertextuality, would require a more integrated and flexible relationship between theory and method that would situate local practices in broader cultural contexts by drawing from both empirical evidence and logical warrants. New paradigms are needed to pursue the circulation of knowledge and power beyond the traditional concept of a local context. Changing the way we conduct research is both possible and necessary. As researchers, we know that ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’ are polemical, strategic relations of power—our efforts to create just social research paradigms will always be imperfect, but we can do better.



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