

Reflections on Interdisciplinary Collaboration between Sociology and the Exact sciences

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Abstract

If the original ambition of sociology to constitute itself into an encyclopaedia of the social sciences has largely failed (because of the obligation to restrict its scope through disciplinary specialization), the discipline has been more successful as a key actor in interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary encounters that cover a wide range of domains that link the exact and social sciences or the nature-culture divide that is at the foundation of modern epistemology. Besides providing the much needed human and social dimension in performance in the applied sciences relating to man (medicine, engineering, agriculture) or the intervention dimension that the pure sciences can usher in, sociology has a long history in interrogating the social (organizational, relational) and cultural (symbolic) context of the production of scientific knowledge. A discipline with a vocation towards fulfilling the aspirations of the pure and applied dimensions of science, sociology hopes to both gain from the advances of the other sciences exact sciences while contributing reciprocally to their development. This presentation hopes to throw light on these preoccupations by exploring the bases (philosophical, social) of this imperative as well as the problems faced in or the obstacles that still hinder the emergence of interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary/trans-disciplinary practice.

Key words: sociology, exact sciences, collaboration, intersections, reciprocity, reflexivity

Resumé

À l'origine la sociologie avait pour ambition de constituer une science encyclopédique du sociale. Cette prétention ne s'est pas réalisée étant donné l'obligation de spécialisation qui incombe aux savoirs à l'ère moderne. Toutefois, la discipline a réussi à nouer des relations interdisciplinaires dans des domaines qui lient les sciences exactes et sciences naturelles, et des domaines à cheval entre nature et culture. Une collaboration est très visible dans la dimension sociale des sciences appliquées à l'homme (médecine, ingénierie, l'agriculture), des sphères des d'intervention des sciences pures d'autant que la sociologie s'interroge sur les conditions sociales (organisation, relations) et culturelles (symboliques) de production des savoirs scientifiques. Une discipline scientifique à vocation tant fondamentale qu'appliquée, la sociologie compte bénéficier des avancées des autres sciences tout en contribuant aux autres dans leur développement. Cette article entend jeter la lumière sur les bases tant philosophique que sociale de cette exigence et des problèmes ou obstacles rencontrés dans la pratique de collaboration interdisciplinaire, multidisciplinaire et transdisciplinaire.

Mot Clés: sociologie, sciences exactes, collaboration, intersection, réciprocité, réflexivité

Introduction

There is a need to revisit the question of the relation between sociology and the exact sciences. Interdisciplinary work is not a new thing but it may need to be stressed in a world where divergences consequent on disciplinary specialization, itself a product of the Scientific Revolution, are giving way and intellectuals are finding common grounds again. The risk remains that of maintaining and cultivating borders to the extent that there is no communication between disciplines that can only understand themselves as strangers. Human progress has undoubtedly been propelled by disciplinary specialization but taken to extremes it has become one of the major problems of the modern world. According to Edgar Morin, the modern western European civilization (that has become the model of development) is oblivious of the fact that economic growth based on advanced technologies generates moral and psychological development characterized by extreme disciplinary specialization and all forms of divisions within disciplines (Morin 2002a :1)¹. This major pitfall of this model of development is that it leads to specialized knowledge that is incapable of understanding multidimensional problems and establishing relations between phenomena.

The dominance of discipline based organization of knowledge that segregates results in our inability to re-establish links and to contextualize, that is, to situate a piece of information or knowledge in its natural context. (Morin 1998: 1).

That is why sociology will be very familiar to some scientists but may be a total stranger to other academics whose subject matter is rather remote from it because of the attachment of academics to the nature-culture divide.

The objective of this paper is to examine the common grounds, intersections and affinities between sociology and the exact/natural

sciences. To do so will entail that the audience be acquainted with the substance and approach of discipline itself. In that way, one can understand the common grounds between the domains of sociology and some sciences. A second step will be to tackle issues related to the scientific approach or questions of method which impinge on the scientific status of sociology and its utility as a science. If we say that there are common grounds, what then becomes of our disciplinary divisions? This brings us to the question of how to collaborate and the problems that arise out of that collaboration. It may suffice to note that the divisions in the academic disciplines have a philosophical foundation that goes back to the dawn of the modern period and more precisely the Renaissance (the division between the Arts and Sciences), the Enlightenment (the Nature-Culture divide at the basis of the division between the sciences of nature and the sciences of culture) and the Scientific Revolution (with the continuing specialization of disciplines), each of these periods constituting land marks in the progress of human knowledge. However, these divisions have served conveniently and paradigmatically within academia for a long period but reality is dictating that there is a need for convergence in a situation where each discipline will continue to conserve its hard earned and enriching autonomy while gaining from and fertilizing others. This will entail that older boundaries that tended to keep disciplines apart be revised to make way for more fruitful collaboration. In the same view, there are already calls for (and even actual) revisions of the philosophies that founded the disciplinary specializations that we have today to make way for convergence.

This article is a reflection drawing from my personal experiences as a researcher and teacher in sociology collaborating with colleagues in the exact sciences (medicine, biology, geology, livestock development) that started in the second

¹ All translations in this article are those of the author.

half of the 1980s (close to thirty years at the writing of this paper). Recent invitations to contribute in projects and forums with scientists working on natural phenomena (climate change, natural hazards and disasters) have contributed immensely to nurturing the ideas initiated within the scope of the *Habilitation à Diriger des Recherches* (HDR) undertaken between 2005 and 2009 at the universities of Poitiers and Franche-Comté (Besançon). The self-analysis approach that was at the heart of the Habilitation (Yenshu Vubo 2009: 70-74) consisted of a critical analysis of my work up till when the dissertation was written but have since been expanded. Although the results cannot be generalised because of the subjective and singular nature of the facts, the experiences provide insights that could provide the grounds for research of a broader scope and trigger further debate. Bourdieu (1987: 116) justifies the sociological self-analysis approach on the grounds that it enables scholars to understand themselves and better understand the conditions of their work by examining the positions they occupy in the social world. Bourdieu (2001) has termed this reflexivity or the process of controlling the quality of knowledge by situating it within the context of the social position of the scholar.

Meeting Points because of a Scope that Transcends Disciplinary Frontiers

As a social science, sociology deals with human society or its elements (institutions, occurrences) and the relations between beings as members of organized entities. In short, it is the study of human existence and action with the society or social (i.e. group) contexts. According to Guy Rocher (1968: 11), sociology sets out to tackle three principal problems, namely: explaining how human communities come into existence, how they subsist and how individuals adhere to them; the organization or structure of the social framework of human existence; the initiation of change and the evolution of human

societies. We go ahead to posit that interactions between human beings create a structure or form of organization, a certain moral framework for action and social change. This leads to one of the fundamental postulates of sociology, namely that human beings are responsible for the creation of the social world and that products of human creativity and interactions, in turn, shape their actions. Human beings therefore are largely conscious producers of their social worlds which, in several ways largely not very perceptible to them, influence and shape their actions and the context in which they live. Sociology is therefore not only concerned with the world of conscious interactions but also the social environment created through the interaction of individuals whether they are conscious of it or not. This context may be a general context which is a product of long term historical processes such as nations, civilizations, cultures, political structures such as the state situated at the macro sociological level. It could be partial and involving a section of the society situated at an intermediary (meso-) level (e.g. institutions, kinship structures, voluntary associations, social classes. This can also be at the level of relations between individual members of a community and the ways they are linked to the global whole or general social context. This is the micro-sociological level. All these levels are important in the understanding of society and should not be treated as neat distinctions because the society observed is composed of a multiplicity of interactions and situations that can be styled social. To use the words of Marcel Mauss, sociology is looking at total social phenomena in all their ramifications. This leads us to the question of the scope and utility of sociology.

Sociology in this regard seeks to situate every human action in its social context. It could be day-to-day attempts at satisfying needs, some of which may be material needs as in the case of economic sociology. It could also be the study

of organizations and relations of power and the exercise of authority, which is the substance of political sociology. It could be the study of how people organize themselves within specific milieu as with rural sociology, urban sociology, environmental sociology, etc. It could simply be concerned with the study of institutions (e. g. the school, the military, the hospital) and facets of social life (industry, communication, knowledge, language, law, art, management and professions/occupations, to name only these). In fact, the scope of intervention extends to all aspects of life and whatever it is situated within the human society, making the discipline extensive in scope, subject matter and applications. In the ambitions of the founding fathers it was conceived as an encyclopedic science of society absorbing other social sciences (Comte), a super science unifying the generalizations of the other social sciences (Spencer) or the science concerned with modern characteristics and interrelations of the other social sciences. This explained the hegemonic ambitions of sociology to constitute the very essence of the social sciences, displacing and even disqualifying, as it were, the other social sciences but also defining the very close links with these various social science disciplines. What we can say is that there is no way we can understand population dynamics (demography), economic phenomena (economics), human occupation of space (human and social geography), legal systems (Law), systems of power and authority (political science) without reference to the social context with its culture, structures and dynamics which are the substance of the discipline. Likewise an interpretation of history and the arts is incomplete without a reference to a sociological analysis indicating the structural determinants of historical action, the social context that generates art forms and how the art forms and the creative imagination motivate social and historical actions.

However, the scope of sociology goes beyond this limited sphere of what can be termed the socio-cultural dimension of the nature-culture divide to embrace dimensions that would otherwise be termed natural. By seeking to understand how humans cope with the wider cosmos by way of knowledge or technologies (understood as practical knowledge systems), sociology inevitably gets linked with the preoccupations of other scientists of the natural order. This has given rise to specializations that link the natural and cultural spheres in their preoccupations (environment science, medicine, biology, etc.) in what may now constitute interface disciplines or specializations (medical sociology, human ecology, socio-biology, environmental sociology, etc.) that establish the link between the natural and cultural sciences and humanities as man stands astride the two worlds, the natural and the social/cultural. This is why one can talk of a sociology and biology without frontiers by integrating the advances in each discipline into the other (Morin 1994: 117-120).

The Necessary Intersections

The relations between sociology and the exact sciences can be classified under four main headings. These are methodological/paradigmatic, substantive, associational and reflexive.

Methodological Approaches: the Scientific Outlook

The methodological/paradigmatic dimension derives from sociology's claim to science as a distinctive branch of knowledge. From its very inception sociology has sought to simulate the canons of science as enunciated by the older scientific disciplines. It has not only taken as a given the values of sciences (e.g. objectivity) but has tried to adopt some of the specific values (e.g. value neutrality), models and paradigms (e.g. functionalism, structuralism, "physical model of science", positivism, systems analysis) of these

disciplines (cf. Von Bertalanffy [1968] 1979). The debate has therefore been whether sociology should be modelled along the same lines with them (in the positivistic argument) or it should adopt the scientific outlook without transposing the tools because of the specificity of the objects of sociological inquiry (the idiographic pole). This is the substance of what has been termed the nomothetic-idiographic debate. The success and acceptability of sociology has partly been dependent on the outcome of this debate but also how well this is achieved.

Substance

The substantive dimension is related to the common grounds shared between the discipline and some of the older scientific disciplines such as biology because of the delicate situation of humans both as part of Nature and the transformational role they play in Nature as they place themselves somehow out of that Nature (Morin 2002b).

We are in nature but we are also out of that nature in some sort of dialogue (Morin 1998 : 6).

We have to recognize our dual roots in the physical cosmos and the biosphere at the same time as our specifically human roots. We are both in and out of nature (Morin 1999: 17).

That is precisely the interface between sociology and the sciences of nature and the physical world. As such, an understanding of human society will be incomplete without an understanding of human biology especially the nervous system and genetics that constitutes the substratum of human behavior and creativity or man's transformational capacity. This interface has even given rise to the specific branch of sociology known as sociobiology. Man's activity is also as much an adaptation to surrounding nature (in its evolutionary and contemporary aspects) as it is

a substantial transformation (anthropogenic dimension) of that very environment (cf. Ruffie 1976). Biology and environmental science are therefore intimately associated to sociology and anthropology which have developed specific sub-disciplines such as paleontology (in conjunction with archaeology), physical and biological anthropology, human ecology, environmental anthropology, ethno-botany, ethno-medicine ethno-zoology, etc. to take care of the interfaces between the social and cultural, on the one hand, and the natural, on the other².

It is also possible to link sociology, human biology, medical science (for its understanding of human pathology), psychology and anthropology (in its physical and biological aspects) within one unified trans-disciplinary space as a science of human behavior, a subdivision in sociology.

Association due to Utility

The associational dimension is basically instrumental. The fortunes of Sociology as applied knowledge have fluctuated depending on the socio-political climate that has characterized its development in its short history. At the very onset the moods fluctuated between grand reformist and revolutionary projects. The debates that raged between revolutionary trends inherited from pre-Marxist socialism and given a supposed scientific basis with the writings of Marx and Engels, on the one hand, and a reformist tradition, itself a direct descendant of the European Enlightenment, are symptomatic of the divide although all fall under Bernard Lahire's socially oriented sociology (Bernard Lahire [2004a: xvii]). Even Max Weber's attempt to chart out an independent/neutral path for sociology does not escape the question of its practical utility. The progressive emancipation of Sociology from the grip of philosophical questions and its emergence as a science constituted an important point in its

¹ See in this regard, see Pilnick (2013), Smelser (2003) and Burawoy (2013).

development as an academic discipline with a practical component.

Several practical intervention disciplines have developed concomitantly with sociology, either as its derivatives or as parallel enterprises that occasionally benefited from its advances. This is notably the case of Social Work, Social Policy, Community Development, Social Administration and Development Studies that have continued to be nurtured by developments in Sociology. Sociology has also extended its influence to government/administration, medical practice/health systems, the legal system, the economy and industry, and environmental protection, to name a few. This explains not only why sociology has become a key discipline to be taught to specialists of these disciplines but why sociologists are solicited as key actors in various social interventions in order to understand specific issues, predict outcomes of interventions in the planning and execution of people-sensitive programmes.

The role of sociology has not ended at the level of acting as a handmaid to the project of consciously and positively transforming the society. It has been instrumental in developing concepts and analytic tools in handling questions related to human behavior and all interventions that are related to such behavior and social contexts. Sociology has developed specific tools, approaches and models of understanding that enlighten other disciplines and has, thus, come to play a leading role when an understanding of society becomes a necessity. This has been crucial in environmental studies, botany, zoology, pharmacy and some aspects of human biology and chemistry that need indigenous knowledge. The field methods and techniques of sociology (e.g. rapid assessment procedures, field surveys, in-depth interviews, ethnographic surveys, community entry skills, focus group discussion techniques, participatory appraisal approaches)

have led not only to an understanding of the human dimension in nature but also to the awareness of the knowledge systems (a derivative of the sociology of knowledge itself) that provide vital clues to the development of the fundamental sciences in general.

Several disciplines as far part as development intervention, social work, medicine, agriculture and urban planning with practical intervention contents have benefited from the development of these techniques. Some concepts such as *involvement, participation and mobilization*, which owe their existence to sociology, have become standard unquestioned terminology in all sorts of interventions that implicate human societies. It is therefore not only the critical input of sociology that has turned the attention of the political community and the other intellectual communities to these concepts; the intellectual pertinence of the concepts has been instrumental in providing credibility to sociology itself.

Reflexivity and the Sociology of Science

The reflexive dimension is provided by sociology's contribution to what has been termed science studies that revolve around the philosophy, history and sociology of Science (in the singular and with capital S). In this regard, science and scientific activity (organization, dynamics, and logic) are part of sociological enquiry because scientific activity is a social and cultural activity (Kuhn 1962; Pickering 1992). It is social because it is undertaken as a collective endeavour and within social relations geared towards collective interests. According to Bourdieu (2001: 13), scientific activity has developed into a field that is a microcosm of the larger society with its operation through relatively autonomous rules, communication between actors (science only develops through communication), the development of social bonds/cooperation or, conversely, relations of

competition/conflict (cf. also Latour and Woolgar 1979).

The person in scientific inquiry is not a solitary scholar but the scientific field taken as a universe of objective relations of communication and regulated competition in terms of argumentation and refutation. Scholars are never solitary geniuses...they are collective persons. As internalized collective history, they put all the historical landmarks of their disciplines - I am thinking here of Newton and Einstein – and work within collectivities with instruments, which are the products of objectified collective history. In summary, science is an immense device collectively used for building collectively (Bourdieu 2001: 139).

It is also cultural because it is situated within a symbolic world albeit one which seeks to detach itself from the other value-laden symbolic realities. In fact, the symbolic dimensions of scientific communities are the most sophisticated in the human world. The sociology of science is reflexive because it provides the sciences with a retrospective opportunity of understanding the historical and social conditions of their emergence, evolution and practice. In this regard, the sociology of science is not alone but constitutes only one of the vast domains of the sociology of knowledge distinct from the philosophy of knowledge or epistemology (concerned with conditions for the validity of knowledge) and history of science. The major contribution of this type of activity is the ability to inform the sciences (in the plural and with a small letter) of their relative nature or their situation in a historical/contextual dimension. It is only in this way that the sciences in general can hope to transcend the social limits of their production and thus work towards achieving an optimum scope.

PROBLEMS

If there is very reason to get the collaboration going, serious problems exist which hinder any progress in that direction. Suffice it to highlight some of the problems that one can be identified in cooperation across disciplinary boundaries.

Problems related to the hierarchy of disciplines within academia

These are fundamental problems which give rise to many others. There has always been a hierarchy among disciplines, this depending on the intellectual, social and political climate, in short, the historical context. Although this is a debatable issue because it cannot be philosophically validated, it has been the key factor in structuring academia (the organization of faculties, the tendency to collaborate or not). The history of the development of the modern knowledge system informs us that after the Renaissance, the humanities had distinguished themselves from science (as a developing practice) and occupied a dominant position as “the oldest and generally most prestigious of the intellectual disciplines” (Parsons op. cit.: 41) until the new social sciences challenged their hegemony. Although knowledge production and dissemination were essentially promoted and patronized in the pre-capitalist phase of history by the public sphere and results were placed at the service of the common good - hence the tendency for the humanities to have their prestige then-, they later became closely linked to the market economy (at the heart of capitalism) and thus private imperatives and interests.

This was a major qualitative transformation of relations of power within the scholarly preoccupations that came shortly after Science (in the singular and with capital S) emerged from the overbearing influences of religion and philosophy to constitute itself into an autonomous field (Bourdieu 1991). The evolution and structural organization of academic knowledge in terms of hierarchy of accreditation in modern times by both the dominant milieu of learning and research, on the one hand, and the arenas of decision-making, on the other, has been increasingly dictated by the economic vision by the way of its utilitarian philosophy (Yenshu Vubo 2009: 46-47). In this

scheme, the pure or natural sciences occupy a first position dictated by the claim to authenticity as “the sciences”, followed by the economic and managerial disciplines with which the former are twinned within the logic of the market economy. The other social sciences within which we have sociology occupy an ambiguous position³ within the structure of academia as the problem of their utility is often raised and as the dictates of the system relegates them in favour of what Karl Popper referred to as “piecemeal social engineering” (e.g. social work, social administration, social policy studies, community development), themselves built on a very limited social science base⁴. On their own part, Legal Studies and Public Administration owe their continued prestige to their place in the management of public affairs.

In the current dispensation, the humanities are barely visible in the spectrum of academic disciplines as their utility is not so evident to the system. For a long time in Cameroon, after the 1993 reforms one can observe a lack of interest in these disciplines among potential university students. Faced with such a situation, the search for accreditation has led to a gradual transformation of the agenda and role of the core social sciences (sociology, anthropology, political science) by leading practitioners to conform to the demands of the moment. This perspective, which Bernard Lahire (2004a: xviii) qualifies as “sociologie sociale” (sociological research whose dominant preoccupation is with answering purely social preoccupations) as opposed to experimental sociology (comparable to « art for art sake »), consists in collaborating with other academics within the narrow frame of providing useful recipes to problems as some sort of social

engineers (Bourdieu [1998]2002: 27). It is in this regard that some practitioners of these disciplines have increasingly accepted their marginal position within academia. The reverse side of the coin is the tendency for others to either not understand them or only accept them when they are imposed by institutions that have come to recognize their utility in the broadest sense. This has been observed with externally funded research or development projects which “impose” sociologists as pre-conditions but whose principal investigators only reluctantly accept.

Problems related to Supposed Utility and Tools

Even when sociology has come to be accepted, it is taken as a tool for understanding and cushioning the underside of current realities. Sociologists are sometimes understood as specialists of the social side defined narrowly as the negative underside of the world capitalist system (poverty, exclusion, racism, social conflict, and marginalization) or of cultural issues “popularly mistaken for folklore (music, dance, and dress), manners, custom [its]... popular definition as identity” (Yenshu Vubo 2013: 30).. At other times, they are hired to provide clarifications on social and cultural realities conceptualized as obstacles to “development”. It is laudable that they are also called upon in our context to be facilitators in community entry for disciplines that need field work but that seems always to be imposed by donors. In such a situation, when donors are out of the way “scientists” can continue with the real work without the interference of the “outsider”. Such an attitude simply transforms the sociologist into a simple foil who is used to give the sociological credibility to a project but may not be useful in the project itself. At times, when some scientists

¹ For a critique of the marginalization of the academic disciplines of sociology and anthropology see the interview of Immanuel Wallerstein with Annard Kumar and Franz Welz (2001:222), Claude Levi-Strauss (1963:346-381) and Parsons (1965:39-65).

² The paradox is that reference is made to sociology while there is a continuing questioning of its utility (cf. Bourdieu [1998]2002: 47; 1997; Lahire 2004b). Bourdieu has argued that this is peculiar for sociology because some university disciplines (e. g. archaeology, philology, history of the Middle Ages, China or classical philosophy) do not have to pass this test of utility to continue to exist as academic disciplines.

of the natural and physical order have become acquainted with some of the basic tools (e.g. the questionnaire or interview schedule) or basic field methods (without of course understanding techniques or underlying logic), they become confident that they can do without the sociologist because what is his/her contribution has nothing so special.

This is really a critical issue at the centre of collaboration. From personal observations, the argument seems to be: “We are dealing here with the core issues whereas you the sociologist is dealing with accessories or what is only useful to a very limited extent. We are the scientists; you may not be or are just a kind of scientist”. This is true of research as of teaching. The idea is often forgotten or overlooked that collaboration with others outside one’s discipline is where there are essential missing gaps that need to be filled by others with competences (methods and techniques) that one does not possess. This attitude has its origins in the dominant vision of Science as experimental as represented by the “physical” or mechanistic model⁵. In this case, the problem is in understanding Science in the narrow perspective while glossing over quasi-experimental, observational and purely analytical traditions. If the experimental has been the source of advancement of the world, it has had difficulties getting to the core of human behavior and social organization and the efforts of human beings in coping with the world outside them. It is this dimension that sociology hopes to carry along with it to the older scientific disciplines of the natural and physical world.

The questions of utility also relate largely to the critical dimension of sociology as opposed to expectations of contributions to society, these two being the source of some sort of ambivalence.

According to Boudon and Bourricaud ([1984] 2004: xix), sociology has to be critical, comparative and methodical. They hold that:

...critical sociology l[is] ... an attempt to detach oneself significantly from facts and problems such that the sociologist and his/her reader can treat them as important facts (ibid).

This critical dimension may even become even the essential hallmark of the discipline such that it either contradicts the instrumental role that may be expected of sociology or transforms it into an object of suspicion from the politically correct. This is when the sociologist’s critical stance, equated here with detachment (cf. also Elias 1987), makes of the him/her an essential outsider whose role is to unveil dysfunctions in structures as well as dismantle ideologies and illusions in really existing systems or systems in the making (Bourdieu 1994: 210-230). Bourdieu ([1998]2002: 77) thinks that this is consistent with the role of science to destroy pretensions and, and that the role of all science is to reveal hidden facts. This, according to Touraine (1974: 60), is through the critique of ideologies as well as the integrative role and repression undertaken by states. This critical dimension makes of sociology a discipline not to be trusted by persons in power who will feel threatened by the debunking of their strategies, especially domination. In the end a “social science whose role is to understand has been used at some time to condemn” (Bourdieu [1998]2002 : 68).

This position runs in opposition to or is parallel to the instrumental role that is expected of the sociologist, that of sociologist adviser or sociologist consultant invited /hired to give expert skill or opinion to the powerful (politicians or big

¹ It is significant to note that sociology itself –as many scientific disciplines at the early stages – took Physics or its mechanistic model as the standard to emulate given the success of Newtonian physics at the dawn of the modern age. It is no wonder that the first name which Auguste Comte gave to the new discipline at its inception was social physics (“physique sociale”). Mechanistic models of sociological inquiry have progressively gone out of intellectual fashion with time first in the fundamental sciences themselves and later in the social sciences. For more on the place of mechanistic explanations in sociology cf. Rios (2004).

business). This is the person whom Pierre Bourdieu ([1998]2002:27) has called the social engineer whose role is to provide recipes to leaders of private enterprises or governments and who rationalize the practical or half-academic positions that the powerful (the political class or business magnates) project about the social world. Sociologists, in this case, are accepted as experts of the social narrowly defined in one of its restricted senses as the unwanted underside of the modern world system where the dominant realities are either political or economic. This underside sees the object of sociology as the study of social problems (e. g. poverty/pauperization, rural exodus, urban crime, social disorder, etc.). At the service of the hire master, the sociologist risks becoming an uncritical voice of the master, a situation that is not peculiar to that category of social scientist alone. Economists and political scientists also find themselves very often into that position. Whatever the case, the sociologist is torn between these two contrasting pulls and poles and where the question at stake is the place of sociology in society and the role it has to play. Beyond that there is the question of the autonomy of the discipline vis-à-vis other disciplines and social forces (politics, market forces).

The ambivalence does not end there. The acceptance is variously experienced as timid and misconstrued by other disciplines in the academia. It is now a reality that sociology is taught as support to various academic units (e. g. medicine) way beyond its traditional place in the social sciences. This is consistent with the interdisciplinary demands that are incumbent on the discipline as we saw above. However, scholars or experts of the other disciplines often misconstrue the discipline as a result of the mistaken assumption that the object of the discipline is easily accessible. As a result, sociology is often equated with social knowledge or, at best, its claim to a scientific status is taken

with caution. The distinction between sociology and social knowledge is even overlooked. As such, many a person will think that either common place facts or the prescribed body of knowledge readily available in customs, folklore, myths, and traditions constitute sociology or its sister discipline, anthropology. If it were so, then every village sage would be a sociologist or by extension an anthropologist. Such misunderstandings are at the basis of colleagues from other disciplines believing that, after some limited contacts with sociologists, they can teach the sociology of their disciplines or manipulate research techniques that are specific to sociologists.

For example, it is not enough to be a medical doctor to be a medical sociologist. One needs to be first and foremost a grounded sociologist who takes the complex theoretical, methodological and thematic skills from sociology to other disciplines. That would also imply transforming the object of medicine into an object of sociological inquiry that requires a lot of effort at understanding from the sociologist. This epistemic transformation constitutes the strong point of the sociologist that goes with years of training. Medical doctors wishing to be medical sociologists will be conversely, required to go back to sociology to get the grounding that it takes to be a sociologist. The only problem will be that of the time to be wasted: why not allow a specialist to take such an interface domain while the doctor stays in his/her corner? Will it not also be enough to get part of the rudiments of sociology necessary for community practice?

Other problems arise when misconstruing the role of sociology goes as far as even requiring sociologists to talk as specialists for that to be enough as against providing sociological analyses. In this regard, it is the label of sociologist that is important and not what the sociologist is going

to bring as skill or competence. This devalues the role sociologists are expected to play and is likely to mislead those who are expecting contributions from sociologists. This is very often the case of the type of sociologists, whom we have called adviser (to government and industry) who may even be speaking or have adopted the language and substance of some technical/intervention discipline (medicine, environmental protection) when called upon to provide expertise as a sociologist consultant⁶. One will come across such a category of people speaking in the name of sociology and not definitely sociology. The assurance for the other specialists is that nothing new will be said as sociology (and thus not overturn what is taken for granted or *doxa*) while the so-called sociologist will have to do nothing to be paid except for affixing his/her title as expert. In this case, both those hiring services of sociologists and the latter end up as losers. This is definitely a misrepresentation of sociology and a stagnation or even regression in its development.

One easy way out has been to quote sociologists (the big names) without taking time to train in sociology (even if only in some rudiments). This takes place when the prestige of sociology itself is undisputed as in the case of political scientists who, in Cameroon, wish to pass for political sociologists (what they call in local French “*socio-politistes*”) or historians who may justify their analysis with quotations from sociologists without ever doing sociological analyses. We will label this piecemeal borrowing as against proper training, proper to those who have a sociological culture by acquaintance through reading or association. It is this attitude that Bourdieu criticized of some philosophers who made incursions into the world of sociology without the required training. This

may be the result of the success of sociology itself but that runs the risk of lifting/adopting positions from sociologists that may not be fully gaped. The other risk is that of some sort of imperialism on the part of sociology, the latter itself being conscious of its limits.

Conclusions

Sociology can play an enhanced and direct role as opposed to the view that can one only think of it as existing outside the margins of the dominant streams of economy and politics (the critical dimension) in a sort of intellectually subversive position. Sociology may not only be advisers but should become an integral part of the decision making and management process in its own light. This implies that sociologists will not be limited to either support or criticism as has been the case before one in two poles that Wieviorka (2001:15) has aptly described as the temptation of the expert becoming either the adviser of the Prince or his opponents on the one hand or reclusion into an ivory tower where sociology will have its small place on the other hand. A direct and enhanced role we are advocating here is based on Bourdieu’s argument that everyone can benefit from the extension of intellectual life (characterized by the logic of argumentation and refutation) into public affairs (Bourdieu 1978:17). In other words, there is the need for the acceptance of the discipline as an autonomous reality with a role of its own to play vis-à-vis other scientific disciplines. This call implies going to the fundamentals, namely the objectives and tasks sociology has assigned for itself. Sociology can only contribute in its own way and its own right to the continuing discussion, interconnectedness and collaboration between disciplines by bringing specificities (logic, attitudes, tools, models) to a scientific world which

¹ The written media also finds itself often in this category as journalists in the name of treating information or editing interviews from sociologists add to or deform what sociologists say so that it conforms to so-called editorial policy. Very often the sociologist may not recognize himself in what he/she purported said in a previous interview on publication. By then the interview would have already been published and the paper would have exploited the authority or expert image of the sociologist to put across a point of view (often in polemical contexts). Bad faith you call it but the journalist will tell you he is selling your image. You have been published and you are more visible, they will say.

is unending in its effort at building new knowledge. The objective should be to take sociology to the other disciplines and for the latter to welcome the former in a spirit of cross fertilization. In such a context, the task before sociologists and the members of the academic community with whom they are called upon to collaborate, the public expecting inputs and the larger society looking up to the outcome of these relations are enormous.

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