



**TEORIE VĚDY**  
**/ THEORY OF SCIENCE**



## WHY IS SOCIOLOGY A CRITICAL SCIENCE?

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### *Abstract*

*This article affirms the modern origin of sociology as a science and posits a critical posture as its fundamental component. As such, sociology is opposed to any dogmatic conception of knowledge. The critical stance has both internal and external dimension. Sociology is under the obligation to observe a constant vigilance towards the knowledge it produces. A considerable methodological privilege bestowed upon the researchers in sociology requires that they have to be capable of criticizing their conceptual tools and operational procedures. Furthermore, critical attitude consists also in questioning conditioning of results linked to the dependence arising from the subsidizing of research. These preconditions of critical posture are illustrated by consideration of the challenges of researching the so-called “school failure”. Ultimately, responsibility commands a sociologist to respect the principle of precaution. When political action is concerned, the researchers must demand that their rights of intellectual property be preserved. To criticize, in this sense, is not to denounce; nonetheless, sociology will only remain faithful to what can pass legitimately as its essence by demanding the right, against threats and seductions, to speak the truth about social reality*

**Keywords:** *sociology; critical science; criticism; methodological privilege; scientific autonomy*

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My intention here is not to write anew, be it in a very succinct manner, the history of sociology, of which the name will serve, in the following pages, to summarize the whole of the empirical social sciences, even if this claim may, in the course of one or the other statement, be brought to pieces. One will be content to remind that it was brought into being by importers of the model of nature sciences. One knows it was a difficult birth, as is obvious from the hybrid patronymic of our discipline, formed from a Latin radical and a Greek ending. Indeed, among the possible parents, the philosophers who were preoccupied by the government of the human societies, from Plato to Hegel, could rightly claim an important share of its genotype. In this connection, sociology did not depart from the destiny of most sciences, all issued from the more or less programmed philosophical corpus. Whatever the case might be, to quote the words of Zygmunt Baumann, “sociology was born as a modern project, and like all the other modern projects, it has followed from the start and through all (or at least most) of its history the Comtean task of ‘*Savoir pour prévoir, prévoir pour pouvoir*’”.<sup>1</sup> This task, once again, Auguste Comte, author of a very systematic classification of the sciences, assigned it to all the scientific disciplines.

Like all the scientific disciplines anxious to conform with the epistemological canons laid down by the modern tradition, sociology is under the obligation to observe a constant vigilance towards the knowledge it produces. This critical posture, of which the most achieved expression has been proposed by the Kantian criticism (and it is probably with reference to this descent that one should preferably qualify it as criticist) is opposed to any dogmatic conception of knowledge. Science comes within the framework of the disenchantment of the world, and sociology should display, by petition of principle, a radical aversion to the deviance which threatens it most, i. e. ideology. No more than a “Marxist” biology (Ly-

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<sup>1</sup> Zygmunt BAUMANN, *Society Under Siege*. Cambridge: Polity Press 2002, p. 1.

senko, for instance), for sociological souls of noble birth, Marxist sociology (or fascist, or liberal, etc.) should never have existed.

I shall content myself with one illustration of this necessity to exercise critical vigilance, which is the guideline of the critical mission assignable to sociology. If every scientific activity consists in the research of transsituational invariants (there is only science if it can be generalized: whatever the circumstances, the universal law of gravitation keeps its enforcement), the same can only be established, in sciences of the social field, by taking into account a moving temporal element, not only due to the sole movement of the arrow of time, but because of the constant new configurations, appearing on this arrow of the competences and intentions of the actors. The need to precise the moments when a novelty of this kind was revealed to the astonishment of the researchers is clearly obvious as is also how it was determined by these moments, which come down to attribute to it its intrinsic historical depth.

Any human production, it needs to be reminded constantly, comes within the framework of a future having its roots in a more or less distant past. It is probably not false to pretend that sociology is concerned with events at the forefront of historical development, at the moment when they are in the course of appearing. Sociology feeds on making offs. Every researcher should never lose out of sight that what he is trying to explain was produced in a given setting of place and time and that it would be dishonest for him, intellectually speaking, not to sketch the genealogy (in the Foucauldian sense of the word, but at the same time giving more attention to the built up factualities) of his data, whilst not hiding anything about the manner how the latter were produced. I shall come back in a more detailed manner on this necessary condition underlying the formulation of any sociological knowledge.

## Deconstruct and interpret

If it wishes to remain faithful to the knowledge acquirement programme assigned to it by its founders,<sup>2</sup> sociology has for mission, I dare say, to deconstruct the conditions of the actions performed by the agents of the social reality by highlighting the blind spots inscribed in their behaviour patterns. To “deconstruct” should not be understood here fully in the sense given to the word by the post-structuralists (Derrida, etc.). It goes rather about the “disarticulation” of the various components of a collective behaviour, so as to confront them to the totality, as extensive as possible, in the constantly present perspective of the existence of social interactions. Therefore, when it concerns e. g. behaviours qualified as delinquent of certain groups of supporters during a football match, the important thing is: a) to designate which institutional device states this qualification (legal system, journalists, sports leaders, etc.) and b) to relate this behaviour to the sport institution in general, in given places and moments, with its modes of functioning, its norms of behaviour, its claimed or hidden values, its links with other institutions or subsystems (economical, political, educational, etc.). One is far here from the classical diagram which I called, according to a widely spread practice in criminology, “go over to commit the act”.<sup>3</sup> This consists in letting the whole production of a collective behaviour bear on the actors themselves, most often through the collecting of modal frequencies attributed to variables or standardized characters, considered as so many determinants of the studied behaviour. One will say, for instance, that “the more the youngsters are coming from the immigration, the more they are of masculine gender, the more they belong to families where the father is absent, etc., the more they will have a tendency to find them-

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<sup>2</sup> Raymond BOUDON, *À quoi sert la sociologie?* Paris: PUF 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Claude JAVEAU, *Petit manuel d'épistémologie des sciences du social*. Bruxelles: La lettre Volée 2003, p. 39.

selves in a situation of dropping out of school”. One easily finds out that this mode of reasoning cannot explain the individual variations within the groups to which the studied behaviour is ascribed and, moreover, no account is taken of the interactive character of any behaviour. In other words, that “excluded” corresponds to “excluders”, “qualified” to “qualifiers”, “instituted” to “institutioners”, etc. The outline of the going over to commit the act, one will have to admit, is grafted in a privileged manner on the practice of statistical surveys, polls or others, with which the public is, unfortunately, too often tempted to confuse the whole of the sociological activity.

The task of the researchers, from the viewpoint of deconstruction I have just sketched, consequently consists in interpreting the studied behaviours by looking for the meaning they reveal not only in the eyes of the actors, necessarily nearsighted in this connection, but also with regard to a historical context which the researchers are aware of and can interpret in its turn. “To interpret”, is not only to go over to a certain hermeneutical approach of the behaviours, falsely assimilated to statements, but to associate Weber’s *Verstehen* with the digging up of explanatory causalities (causal imputations). This procedure of interpretative explanation, when wisely applied, allows in my opinion to overtake the classical and outdated scholastic opposition between “explanation” and “understanding”.<sup>4</sup>

It will be pointed out in a relevant manner that in this methodological aim a considerable privilege is bestowed upon the researchers in sociology. Indeed, it is up to them to discover what most often escapes the actors they have under their magnifying glass, namely the actual foundations of their image-actions (or ideological determinants), what I have called “the blind spots”. This privilege may seem exorbitant, but only because to the result of the deconstruction, the actors under scrutiny can themselves oppose their own interpretations of their actions, and that common sense

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

would order to give them credit of having a better knowledge of the said determinants than exterior observers. But this is the spontaneous illusion. The first astronomers who declared that the earth goes round the sun and not the opposite, so as common sense ordered to believe, did it at the risk of their life, as for example Galileo. And yet, they were speaking the truth. And if one raises the objection that it does not concern here simple material facts, but well mental facts open to multiple renderings, which I will not deny, I shall reply that experience shows that both our ignorance of the context of our actions and the rationalizations we resort to in order to explain them to others or to ourselves, make that we are most often the less good interpreters of them. Whereas the sociologist, capable through a thorough documentary research of knowing the context, and practicing towards us the “distant look” advocated by Levi-Strauss, can adopt towards them the detachment leading to the objective stance called for in the scientific approach and which constitutes the key for the formulation of what sciences call the truth.

To report on the actions observed, besides the fact that supposedly one has good observation instruments at disposal, as well as elements of context, considered as merging with “horizons of meaning”, in order to give them sense (their “targeted sense”, *Gemeinten Sinn*, according to Weber), is certainly not an easy task. For the sociologist, it supposes both historic and socio-political erudition, imagination and questioning finesse. But no one will deny that every scientific activity demands, besides quite a lot of intuition (Popper), a capacity for analysis which is akin to artistic activity, the latter being either visual, literary or musical. It goes without saying that the sociologist, like each one of his colleagues from other scientific disciplines, may be mistaken, and even sometimes heavily so. To pretend to know, better than those he studies, what they are doing entails more than often the heavy risk that, to put it flatly, he will come a cropper.

### **About a few criticisms within the sociological field**

The critical attitude which, when referring to the radical criticism developed at the time of the *Aufklärung*, becomes necessarily associated with the objective attitude itself inscribed in the hub of the scientific approach, extended in the social sciences through the questioning, one can also call “critical”, of various doxas pervading the social sphere. The famous saying of Bourdieu that “the fact is conquered against the illusion of immediate knowledge”,<sup>5</sup> apart from the fact that in this instance immediate knowledge is more a source of error than of illusions, must be understood in the field of social sciences as an offensive aimed not against facts, but against judgements which, in the end, are always “of value” (since the question, about so-called judgements “of fact”, is about their evaluation, possibly in view of valorising or de-valorising them). This enables to consider that the critical attitude of the sociologists springs from a second-degree criticism, insofar as the question is to criticize mental systems themselves capable of criticism. As in other scientific disciplines, those that are linked to the social field are obliged to put their own house in order. This means that they have to be capable of criticizing their conceptual tools and operational procedures. This leads to the necessity of extending the criticizing position of principle I dealt with above. These internal criticisms will aim at both the knowledge bases of the sociologists and the instruments they make use of to draw on them and to feed them.

In the first instance, the important thing is not to lose sight that the choice of instrument and practical construction of the object go hand in hand. The object “crime” will not be approached in the same manner whether one plans an approach of an anthropological type, the elaboration of a model starting from a literature perusal or a statistical survey of respondents supposed to constitute a representative sample (of what? that is the question). The instrument should never be considered as neutral in

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<sup>5</sup> Pierre BOURDIEU, *Science de la science et réflexivité*. Paris: Raisons d’agir 2001.



face of the object: not only does it propose a mere representation depending from its own modes of functioning, but it shapes it in accordance with its needs and forces it to become integrated, be it at the expense of several of its dimensions, in an imperative heuristic mould. Surveying public opinion (taking for granted that this object does exist and that it is liable to be measured) on its perception of the crime, will not deliver of the latter the same image, if this is the appropriate word, as from a sojourn by an observer participating in one or the other province of the underworld. And the difference would be just as noticeable if one had tried to survey, instead of citizens considered as honest, criminals duly recognized as such by the qualifying system in use.

Hence, the strong mistrust one is bound to show towards any attempt of generalization on the basis of data collected haphazardly, with the help of various instruments, among populations situated just as variably in time and space. One often has the impression that the sociologist, citizen of lower middle-class origin or from the well-to-do layers of the middle class, draws his whole experience of the social realm from his original sociotope and transposes it on every investigation and especially on every speculation bearing on the present state of social reality. This remark is applicable first of all on the lexical elements used: for instance, a gang of youngsters from Neuilly going wild during a rave party is not a “tribe” in the traditional anthropological sense of the word, already quite suspect.

But it also applies to the formatting of the approached phenomena, to connecting them with each other and with the totality being referred to. To take another example, talking about prostitution without taking into account the fact that this behaviour also includes an economical dimension amounts to amputate it significantly. If one does not take into consideration the fragmentation of the sex trade, from the ultraeconomical pass carried out on the street to the hiring, for one night in a luxury hotel, of an escort girl, one risks losing sight of the fact that prostitution, a polysemous phenomena, cannot be declined on a single register but that quite a num-

ber of prostitutions exist, in accordance with the relationship each type of prostitutional behaviour has with the various market segments concerned and with the various categories of actors, individual or institutional, playing a part in a place and in a given moment on the market. In the same path of pitfalls to be avoided, I shall mention the anachronisms and the anatopisms, which are cases of particular risk for generalisation abuse. Which is, for instance, true for France in the matter of sociology of education, is not true for French-speaking Belgium, notwithstanding the close linguistic proximity. And what is true for the sixties, for instance in the matter of family sociology, is not true for the eighties. And, vice versa, if one may say, in the one and the other case.

Even more pernicious is conceptual borrowing from other fields, sometimes very distant from the field of the social sciences. Lately arrived in the concert of sciences, they are often compelled to gather their lexemes from the reservoirs available in already more strongly established disciplines. "Function", one will remember, was imported by Durkheim from biology (and not from mathematics). Later on, Bourdieu will do the same with "market", of economical origin. One then must never forget that these borrowings entail a metaphorization of the imported lexeme. Regarding e. g. "market", one will remember that in economy it already concerned a metaphor of the market in the material sense of the word (the village market). A sociological function cannot be confused with a biological function: the circulation function of information is not purely and simply a copy of the blood circulation in the human body. Amongst others, information does not regenerate, whereas blood does, during their circulation. On the contrary, it becomes continuously degraded (another metaphor, borrowed here from the vocabulary of physics).

Among the most current and most disputable borrowings, one will recall those drawn from the medical field, particularly when there is question of "social pathologies", "civilization diseases", etc. It is not certain that all these uses are simply thought of as metaphors, no more than the

one, extracted from the business of the psychoanalysts, of “collective unconscious”. This is not only a question of semantic vigilance, like the one that should prevail over the too frequent and too uncontrolled uses of the notion of mechanism, amongst others. Above the words, we have the concepts, and it is especially for them that it is necessary to exert the most constant prudence. To talk of mechanism is to postulate a society ruled by forces. One knows that social matters, to say it simply, are much more complicated. Besides, the word “society” itself should be taken with delicate conceptual tweezers: when one thinks about it, “society” absolutely means any kind of dyad (“I like very much his or her society”), a grouping of people around a common goal (a charity organisation), a reunion of individuals, above all a statistical notion, on a given national territory (the French society), or also the whole of beings responding to the definition of men, not a simple one to state, since their first appearance on earth (the human society).

There has even been mention of animal societies, but this use should also be considered with the greatest prudence. In the same trend of ideas, one should refrain from any rash naming. A phenomenon does not arise from nowhere because one has given it a name:

To give something a name is as gratifying as to give a name to an island, but it is dangerous: the danger is then to be convinced that the main task has been achieved and that the phenomenon thus named is at the same time explained.<sup>6</sup>

Conversely, an explanation of tautological character does not give existence to a phenomenon, even if the latter has a seriously sounding name.

Finally, one will watch out for explanations, which may sometimes have a very complicated aspect, which only constitute one or the other

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<sup>6</sup> Primo LEVI, *Le métier des autres*. Paris: Gallimard/Folio Essais 1992, p. 188.

mishap of the famous sleep inducing virtue of opium. This, amongst others, is true for most of the references made of notions such as need, expectation, tendency, etc; to say, for instance, that the French are chauvinistic because their history commands it, is no more consistent than to say that coffee has a sweet taste because one has melted one or two lumps of sugar in the cup. The history of sociology is full of false correlations and hollow reasoning. One will luckily avoid such pitfalls by confronting the proposed interpretations to the false evidences of common sense. If the two units are too easily superimposed, it will be wise to look elsewhere. Having no wish to turn this article into a catalogue of useful recipes, I shall limit my dwellings on internal criticisms, which arise first of all from a discourse of the method, to these few considerations.

### **And about a few external criticisms**

Over the last decades, sciences of the social field, of which sociology in these pages is the emblem, often chose (or were imposed to chose) the direction Raymond Boudon has named “cameralist”, a name borrowed from Schumpeter, who qualified as “cameralist” the activity having as purpose to “inform” real or supposed financing partners about the social phenomena rather than to “explain” them. This distinction is important because one readily notes that a major part of the social sciences’ activity comes in fact under this type. Therefore, a lot of sociological works have as main object to “grant some visibility to social milieus and phenomena obvious for the actors concerned, but which remain unrecognized among the public and the decision makers.”<sup>7</sup> This activity corresponds to what is usually called contractual research. One will not deny that certain products of this research are of an excellent quality. But it is not forbidden to consider that, in many cases, the financing partner, most often institutional, readily

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<sup>7</sup> BOUDON, *À quoi sert la sociologie?*, p. 150.

puts on the tunic of the Menon mentioned by Plato: roughly put, one never finds but that which one had to look for and one only looks for what one is supposed to find.

Most often the financing partner imposes, if not the result of the research he finances, at least the type of result he is expecting or the portion of cognitive space in which he expects that this result will fit, and sometimes even to respect methodological ways and means more or less carefully marked out. Therefore, the critical attitude consists in questioning this conditioning of result linked to the dependence arising from the subsidizing, for instance by opposing the capacity of making available the symbolic capital of the active partner as compared to the availability of the economic and political capital of the financing partner. Then sociology is reduced, to refer to an expression dear to Jean-Marie Brohm, "to go along with the world as it goes", which contradicts according to him (and according to me) its real mission of analysis based on an approach of deconstruction.

Whereas one may not reproach many sociologists, bound as they are as everyone else by career duress, to try to satisfy institutional orders, one can raise the question as to the actual cognitive contribution of such works (one recalls here, amongst others, the study on the youngsters commissioned by the Baladur government in France in 1996). Criticism, I repeat, will not only bear on the relevance of the results, but on that of the instruments that were used. Unfortunately, this criticism is rarely taken seriously either by the professional or by the public at large, for want of a minimum media sensitivity. It therefore often remains, if not clandestine, at least underground. Which does not prevent the creation of a paradox: the tax payers who, with regard to institutional orders, would have every right to know what use was made of their money, appear to be completely uninterested to know in what conditions researches (or studies) have been led, and to what extent their money, actually, has been diverted to serve sectarian aims.

What Boudon qualified as “missionary ambition”<sup>8</sup> is not incompatible with the cameralist kind, what he also stresses incidentally. In short, it is not only a question of observing, but rather of condemning (exclusion, poverty, school failure, prostitution, etc.). But the assimilation he proposed to the critical posture as illustrated by the Frankfurt School seems to me abusive and refers maybe, unconsciously, to the proper missionary ambition of the author. This does not mean all productions of this school should be taken at face value, but they should not be mixed up with a militant sociology. And if Boudon introduces as an additional synonym the qualification of “committed”, in my opinion he contributes to get us on the wrong track.

If one may say of works serving a cause or a party, however noble they may be, that they are “committed”, it nevertheless seems to me undesirable, in so doing, to advocate every denying of commitment on behalf of the researcher. The ambiguity linked to the notion of axiological neutrality (*Wertfreiheit*) has been fully recognized, if not by all sociologists. To be neutral most often consists in refusing to discover the blind spots in the collective behaviours submitted to sociological investigation, in taking at face value the explanations the objects-subjects supply themselves about their behaviour and attitudes. The results obtained by means of standardized questionnaires are nearly always assessed with the same complacency.

The first commitment of the researcher is of course in favour of the truth, taking into account that the manner in which to clear it from the empirical as constructed in a certain manner arises from the arrangement of the positions within the scope of the research.<sup>9</sup> Criticism, in the sense I mean, bears not only on the questioning of the complacency referred to above, but also on the conditions relating to the organization of the research field which favour this complacency. Probably one of the first

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>9</sup> See BOURDIEU, *Science de la science*.

steps leading in that direction rests on the necessary taking into account of the distinction between “social problem” and “sociological problem”, in the masterly way P. Berger recalled it.<sup>10</sup> As far as possible, and this is liable to imply fierce negotiations, it should be up to the sociologists themselves to problematize their objects of research. To take an example from Berger, a research on divorce (social problem) should in reality be a research on marriage (sociological problem).

If I have made myself clear, it is not at all a question, notwithstanding the position taken up by Boudon on the subject, of confusing two modes of commitment. The sociologist, in his quality of citizen, cultivates his ideological preferences, makes choices, sails between the ethics of conviction and that of responsibility. This does not differ from the sociologist as researcher. The ethics of conviction lead him to state the truth (in this case what is not false for the time being), by surrounding the production of his discourses by a whole lot of precautions about which I proposed here above a few illustrations. However, at the same time, in his or her quality of agent in a field of production of a specific good, in this case of intellectual nature, he or she is responsible for his own career and possibly for that of other persons. This responsibility commands him or her to respect various expressions what in the modern discourse is called the principle of precaution. One will not hold it against him or her to respect the rules when entering and leaving the field, which cannot of course be assimilated to an irenic Garden of Academy. But one may at least expect from him or her that he or she be conscious of this necessity and even that he or she takes it upon himself or herself to explain in so far as his or her personal lot and/or that of his team do not risk to suffer excessively in consequence. Precaution should not become excessive pusillanimity.

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<sup>10</sup> Peter BERGER, *Invitation to Sociology. A Humanistic Perspective*. Harmondsworth: Pelican Books 1966, pp. 49–50.

**An essay of illustration: the social problem of doing badly at school**

The fact, both in terms of aggregated statistics and stated behaviours in daily life (I think for instance about the trouble expressed by the parents concerned), which has been christened “school failure” occupies in the contemporary opinion a prominent place. It is approached from different angles. One of them is the moral judgment: to do badly at school (the indicator of which is nearly exclusively constituted by the repeating of a year or the definite dropping out of school), is to cause a waste, refuse to meet an expectation, trigger confusion or resentment among various categories of persons: parents, teachers, class mates, etc. Another is of an economical aspect: school failure betrays the bad capacity of the school system, which is then approached from the angle of the extra costs it entails. A third is of political nature: school failure, in international comparisons, is an indicator of the quality of the implied social system, in the same way as the quality of the achievements during various tests, as shown by the stir caused by the spreading of the results, country by country, of the PISA tests. There are probably other angles of appreciation, but I shall limit myself to the above.

Most often, the problem of school failure is entrusted to pedagogues, patented specialists of the normative discourse, abusively adorned with scientific virtues. The task consists in finalizing procedures of remediation which borrow both from the medical re-education model and from that of the social work: homogenization or heterogenization of the classes, closed or open fields of study, discriminations strangely named “positive”, repeating of a year recommended or advised against, etc. This intense tinkering, as multidimensional as it is polysemous, has contributed over the last decades to fuel whole libraries of which the obsolescence rate is particularly high. One will not dispute that at school level measures should be taken, be it only to allow parental anxieties, in these times of school problems, to water down some. Some of these measures have proved pertinent and



even sometimes efficient. But to limit one to distinguish between good and bad measures should not be sufficient as a legitimate task for the so-called education sociologists.

School failure can of course be considered as a social problem, which then demands solutions of a social nature, i. e. first of all political, in so far it is the political decision makers who have to conceive and implement them. But the sociological problem, which is the only one the sociologists should pay attention to, is not having done bad at school, but well the functioning of the school as a whole, so the school itself. What is claimed by the scientific problematization, in this case sociological, is to conceive the questioning of the mundane obviousness as not being allowed to be estranged, upstream from the constitution of the object, except by the proper analytical capacities of the questioning subject (who is a member, it is to be reminded, of a collective subject related to a historically and topologically constituted field), these pertaining not only to cognitive aptitudes, but also to the mass of available material for the as extensive as possible investigation. In order to avoid

the impression of obviousness and necessity of what is real, (of an appearing which becomes appearance if one loses sight of the questioning process it arises from, which is just what happens if one leaves it to the propositionalist tradition which, for lack of being able to conceive the questioning, only theorizes on its effects. The possibility of the facts, their confirmed independence with everything puts this forward as difficulty of conceptualization (Berkeley), will emerge as static results of a non existent and untraceable process according to the very terms of the model,<sup>11</sup>

it is important to go back up the chain of the possible questionings (the putting into questioning), in order to find the blind spots which mask the

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<sup>11</sup> Michel MEYER, *De la problématique. Philosophie, science et langage*. Bruxelles: Pierre Mardaga 1986, p. 280–281.

actual process at work and the effective contingencies of the facts which force themselves at first sight (and even at second sight) as obvious. In this consists the critical posture, much more than in a committed approach in favour of one or other denunciation, of which the school field has been abundantly the receptacle and also, it should be admitted, the cemetery. Institution as much as system, place and environment, text and context, according to various approaches (and there are even more), the school has, account being taken of its multiple materializations, its historical roots. It is in connection with this multifaceted history (which, as distinct object, is constituted through its historical process, following the modes pertaining to the discipline of history) that the social problem of school failure can as such be cast as a set of problems. So, one will see that this theme has not sprung all armed from the brain of privileged actors in the school field. In accordance with the positions occupied by these actors and by actors of other categories generally considered as non privileged, the turning of school failure into a problematical issue will take on such and such other modality, every one of which deserves to be taken into consideration.

But the essential part of the approach cannot be summed up in reeling off these sets of problems side by side, but in endeavouring to detect the relations which become established between each other, of what ever nature they may be: connivance, occultation, opposition, etc. It is this model of problematical relations which becomes the object the sociologist has, in his or her turn, to cast as a set of problems, in accordance with his or her own procedures and of which, as much as possible, he or she has to undertake to remain master. One has not remembered enough the lesson of Georg Simmel: "The truth, far from being absolute, is a special representation of 'something'. So it is always relating not only to an object, but also to the subject who figures it out in the same way as his or her other representations".<sup>12</sup> It is to the extent that it is critical that sociology takes

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<sup>12</sup> Christian, PAPILOUD, *La réciprocité. Diagnostic et destin d'un possible dans l'œuvre de Georg Simmel*. Paris: L'Harmattan 2003, p. 45.

place within the prospect of this relating process which, since it concerns a human material, is of course entitled to claim a specific consistency.

The sociological problem of the school can be approached from different angles, with the help of variable analytic tools, what the tradition of the institutional analysis calls analyzers, term honoured again by Jean-Marie Brohm in his works on the body<sup>13</sup> and on sport.<sup>14</sup> He notably calls in René Lourau: “One will give the name of analyzer at what makes it possible to reveal the structure of the institution, to challenge it, to force it to speak.”<sup>15</sup> If one accepts that “institution” stands for everything that results from a process of institutionalizing (in a prospect that echoes Simmel’s position in favour of the society as process, “*Vergesellschaftung*”, as opposed to society as a given state), school is indeed an institution constantly in the process of being re-instituted and the analyzer chosen, is in this case school failure, issued from its casting as a common sense problem setting.

It is not my aim here to describe, be it only roughly, the results of a research having as purpose the sociological casting into a set of problems of the school with school failure as privileged analyzer. The highlighted processes of institutionalizing would refer to the strategies of a plurality of actors, each one of them incorporating a blind spot. It falls then on the researchers to submit all these blind spots to a rigorous (and) vigorous lighting. These strategies are inspired by the image-actions (in another lexicon, the ideologies) of the actors in question. These necessarily present apologetical aspects, consubstantial to any ideological position, and inside of which the blind spots are nested. All these image-actions are the product of history; to clear them in the prospect of excavating the blind spots around which they organize themselves, is to put one’s finger on political positions, phenomena of alienation, organized lies, etc., all matters which

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<sup>13</sup> Jean-Marie BROHM, *Le corps analyseur. Essais de sociologie critique*. Paris: Anthropos 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Jean-Marie BROHM, *La machine sportive*. Paris: Anthropos 2002.

<sup>15</sup> René LOURAU, *L’analyse institutionnelle*. Paris: Minuit 1970.

can only highly displease the financing partners of smooth and reasonable studies having for theme one or the other social problem liable to benefit, at a given moment, and in a given place, of the honours of the press and the media, which is not necessarily without reason.

The question we are now brought to ask ourselves is: supposing human and material means are granted to carry out a research starting from such a set of problems, where could it lead as far as political action is concerned? Put more crudely, I would say that there does not lie the problem in which the researchers are concerned. If the decision makers agree to listen to them, so much the better. It remains however very doubtful that the decision makers will listen with more than half an ear. At least, the researchers must demand that their rights of intellectual property be preserved. Scientific research is a *sui generis* activity, which does not need to lead to a social use, be it normalized or not. But it is of course not prohibited for the researchers to search, through their publications and other public speeches, to put pressure, if not on the institutional decision itself, at least on the global setting of the debates being established with regard to the problems they have approached, within their own specific prospect.

The pitfall to avoid is that, in so doing, the autonomy of the scientific field finds itself even more threatened, whereas it should constitute the major care of those who drive and illustrate it. To those who consider that here we have a luxury that only an arrogant elitism can dream of justifying, I shall say that the research for the truth (or truths), since the period of the *Aufklärung*, is one of the main pillars supporting our entire civilization. The most important thing is to know if one wishes for it to be perpetuated or not. I will not start on this debate here, but by refusing more and more to consider the stakes arising round the question of final issues, one clears the track to quite a lot of compromises.

Suffice it to remind us that the fate of the sociologists and their associates is not to turn into therapists of the social field; as is judiciously stated by Henri-Pierre Jeudy:

From now on the human sciences are committed in a vast project for the transformation of society, using their past criticisms for constructive aims in the future. They have kept the habit to be on the side of the authority and to consider subversion as the memory of a bygone time period due to naïve idealism. Even the most protesting actions are accomplished within an atmosphere of public assistance to the political power. The rebellion against exploitation gives way to the apology of integration as principle of social unification.<sup>16</sup>

Let us remain without shame naïve idealists: to criticize, in the sense I have tried to define, is not to denounce and if the threefold task has to be maintained, it is not for the sole decision systems of the public or private authorities to make them effective. Sociology will only remain faithful to what can pass legitimately as its essence by demanding the right, against threats and seductions, to speak the truth about this reality, notwithstanding its changing and random outlines, the social reality. To what it can only pretend if its critical posture, which has given birth to it and remains its “*raison d’être*”, never deserts it.

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<sup>16</sup> Henri-Pierre JEUDY, *Sciences sociales et démocratie*. Belfort: Circé/Poche 1997, p. 31–32.