

Vive la crise!

*For heterodoxy in social science*¹

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The crumbling of orthodoxy and its legacy

When I was invited to take part in the creation of *Theory and Society*, I saw in the advent of this new journal, which made a first dent in the monolithic bloc of the sociological establishment, a symptom of a profound change in the social sciences. In point of fact, *Theory and Society* was to become the global rallying point of all the dominated and marginal sociological currents, some of which have since undergone a spectacular and healthy development. As one might gather, I did not despair over what some described as a crisis, namely the destruction of the academic temple, with its Capitoline triumvirate and all its minor gods, which dominated world sociology during the fifties and early sixties. Indeed, I think that for a variety of converging reasons, including the desire to give sociology a scientific legitimacy — identified with academic respectability and political neutrality or innocuousness — a number of professors, who held the dominant positions in the most prominent American universities, formed a sort of “scientific” oligopoly and, at the cost of mutual concessions, elaborated what Erving Goffman calls a *working consensus* designed to give sociology the appearance of a unified science finally freed from the infantile disorders of the ideological war of all against all. This fiction of unanimity, which some today still strive to restore, resembled that of those religious or juridical orthodoxies that, being entrusted with the preservation of the symbolic order, must first and foremost maintain consensus within the community of doctors. This *communis doctorum opinio*, a social fiction artificially created and supported, is the absolute antithesis of the agreement, at once full and provisional, over the body of collective achievements of a scientific discipline — principles, methods of analysis, procedures of verification, etc. — which, far from serving to produce a sham consensus, make possible the merciless and regulated

confrontations of scientific struggle, and thereby the progress of reason.²

Thus there is no reason to mourn the crumbling of an orthodoxy. At the same time, however, one must recognize that the complementary oppositions, the oppositions within complementarity, which were the pillars of the old division of the labor of scientific domination can survive the waning of the fiction of synthesis that crowned it. The gap between what in the United States, and in all the countries dominated by the American academic model, is called theory and what is called empirical research has perhaps never been wider than at present. Although the greatness of American social science lies, in my eyes at least, in those admirable empirical works containing their own theory produced particularly at Chicago in the forties and fifties but also elsewhere, as with the spate of remarkable studies now coming from the younger generation of social scientists and historical sociologists, the intellectual universe continues to be dominated by academic theories conceived as simple scholastic compilation of canonical theories. And one cannot resist the temptation to apply to the "neo-functionalists," who today are attempting a parodic revival of the Parsosian project, Marx's word according to which historical events and characters repeat themselves, so to speak, twice, "the first time as tragedy, the second as farce."

Such "theoretical" theory, a prophetic or programmatic discourse that is its own end, and that stems from and lives from the confrontation with other (theoretical) theories (as in its French neo-Marxist version, which reduced it to a pure exercise in the reading of canonical texts), naturally forms an "epistemological couple," as Bachelard would put it, with what in American social science is called "methodology." This compendium of scholastic precepts (such as the requirement of preliminary definitions of concepts, which automatically produce a closure effect) and of technical recipes, whose formalism (as, for instance, in the presentation of data and results) is often closer to the logic of a magic ritual than to that of a rigorous science, is the perfect counterpart to the bastard concepts, neither concrete nor abstract, that pure theoreticians continually invent. Despite its pretense of utmost rigor, this formalism paradoxically abstracts from critical assessment the concepts used and the most fundamental operations of research, such as data coding procedures and choice of statistical techniques of analysis.

Thus, if you will allow me to plagiarize Kant's famous dictum: theory without empirical research is empty, empirical research without theory