The Paradox of Leisure

1

Preamble: On the nature of theory

The application of theory to research poses a number of problems. If we can define theory to mean, in a common-sensical way, an idea that attempts to shed some light on a research phenomenon, then we can (ideally) describe data (taken singularly) as either the phenomenon itself (data = reality), or an interpretation of that phenomenon (Craib, 1992). Generally, theory is seen as the brainwork and the data that is related to that theory comes from the research. In the sociological case, such data is presented in the form of interviews, observations and statistics. Yet the relationship between theory and data is not as simple as it first appears.

One argument is that theory must be explanatory (Friedman, 1974; Lipton, 1991). A theory must be able to explain the data, not just describe it. It is not enough to present the data, one must also say what the data is. What this entails is the traditional, scientific approach, which suggests hypotheses taken from theory are tested by the field (Hempel, 1966). In essence, the field becomes a site for proving or disproving (Popper, 1968) theories. This approach has a number of flaws, especially when applied to sociology (Winch, 1958). It assumes a scientific method actually exists, though a definition of what that is has proved elusive to philosophers and sociologists of science (Feyerabend, 1975; Latour, 1987; Lipton, 1991). It ignores problems of objectivity, representation and truth correspondence (Hesse, 1980), such as the problem that any one set of data can be explained by a number of opposing hypotheses, with no way of deciding between them without recourse to inductive logic (Chalmers, 1982).

Another approach suggests that the researcher enters the field without any preconceptions, and listens to the field without prejudice.
From the data collected, the researcher sees patterns that form ideas, which are supported by further fieldwork (Ely, 1991). This method forms the basis of naturalistic paradigms, and this position of theoretical production is known as grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). However, the assumption that anyone can enter the field without any preconceptions is untenable. We have all gone through a system that has enculturated us with mental tools of reckoning, language and perceptions that are all laden with theory (Latour, 1987). This book, even in its introductory chapter, has used already a wealth of theoretical language with no apology or qualification, as it belongs to the tacit knowledge we share (Bloor, 1974; Collins, 1985; Simons, 1989). In addition, and perhaps despairingly, it can be argued that all data is theory laden (Kuhn, 1977; Chalmers, 1982).

Schaffer (1989) describes the role of Isaac Newton’s hegemony and self-interest in early modern natural philosophy in ensuring Newton’s optical data was accepted as ‘true’. What counted for Newton was that the optical data conformed to his larger theoretical framework, and data that did not conform challenged this framework. Hence, when he became President of the Royal Society, it became a matter of defining good results and good apparatus (that is, what was real) as those that supported Isaac Newton. What is important in Schaffer’s work is that data that is still used now (the data that helped design my spectacles) is not only theory laden, but shaped by theory. Harry Collins (1985) has also shown that theory plays a large role in shaping and describing data. So the idea that we approach data without any theoretical assumptions is erroneous – it is unrealistic and elitist of us to expect we can shake off our preconceptions and indeed our cultural background (Thomas, 1979; Baudrillard, 1988), though some would claim to try (Gellner, 1985).

My solution is pragmatic, and attempts to avoid the pitfalls of philosophy. I am creating language from the field, but at the same time I am working in a particular ‘language-game’ (Wittgenstein, 1968) that has a corpus of theories at its base. As Fleck showed (1935:1979) many years before Kuhn repeated the observation (1962), the production of facts and knowledge in academic enterprise is fostered by ‘thought collectives’ in which individuals operate in a particular normal paradigm (Kuhn, 1962). Some theories are givens, they are accepted as facts (such as logic, though see Woolgar, 1989), while others are contested (structure versus agency, truth correspondence, and so on). I write in the language of the thought collective of critical sociology, of Leisure Studies, so I communicate with others who share the game.