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Knowledge: Towards a Sociology of Human Orientation

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The following reflections were stimulated by Ananta Kumar Giri's essay, 'Gift of Knowledge: Knowing Together in Compassion and Confrontation', with which I am largely in agreement. The reflections in one respect embed his arguments in a theoretical and philosophical context and in another reconsider them in somewhat more formal analytical terms. The intent, however, is to complement his thought-provoking ideas dialogically, thus continuing our exciting journey of 'knowing together' which had started several years earlier already.

I

Human beings and their socio-cultural form of life are an integral part of an encompassing natural historical process. Knowledge is a collaborative, conflictive, cooperative and therefore collective outcome of the permanent human endeavour to orient itself in an appropriate manner in participating in this larger set of relations. The inherited natural cognitive (intellectual, normative, emotive) endowment of human beings is the basis from which arose this overriding human concern with adequate, justifiable and congenial orientation. This endowment formed over millions of years in the course of a natural historical process in which embodied beings actively engaged in a variety of ways with their environment. Through their attempts to deal with the numerous problems, challenges and threats that vulnerable beings unavoidably face under historically specific, concrete, situational conditions, they underwent individually experienced and interiorized collective learning processes which crystallized out the domain of relations with nature and the domain of socio-cultural relations.

As these learning processes became reflexive, as human beings became aware that they are undergoing learning processes and are not only able, but in fact responsible for seeing that they continue in order to secure their form of life and to integrate the new generation, two corresponding major permanent human tasks were taken on and deliberately organized, both socially and culturally – namely, problem solving and world creation. At this reflexive stage, the socio-cultural organization of learning processes drew the attention to the orientation function of cognition and knowledge and, through the further deepening of reflexive awareness, orientation intentions and the communication of orientations and concurrent goals aimed at mobilizing others, teaching, learning and so forth came progressively into view.

Not only could ideas, criteria, standards and ideals, which transcend the actual situation and stimulate its potential improvement through the pursuit of their approximate realization, now be spelled out and projected for different domains – whether utilitarian and instrumental, theoretical and technical, moral and ethical, religious and aesthetic. But these reflexive, generative, regulative rules could now also be practically used in a

variety of different ways, in which case the particular form of practical rationality followed depends on the context of application and its conditions. Among the different uses made of such normative or regulative ideas by appealing to the goals they project and hence their orientation function – besides the many good and legitimate ones which, of course, are not necessarily without their own problems – were and today still are ones that could decidedly be evaluated as unjustifiable. In keeping with the extraordinary significance that appropriate orientation has for social human beings, the fitting standard of evaluation in such cases is provided by formally reconstructed moral-ethical considerations appropriate to the human social form of life in conjunction with the actual orientation intentions put forward in the concrete situation and the mode of communication of orientation with which this is being done. Political prestige, power, wealth, profit, rationalization, illusion, delusion and the like allow authoritarian, ideological, repressive and obfuscating social structures and mechanisms to distort, deform, obstruct and prevent the practical use and realization of the potential of these ideas and thus fracture adequate orientation in a variety of different areas.

On the one hand, orientation complexes and the goals they symbolize become one-sidedly stressed and utilized, distorted or reified, leading to real reductive or abstractive fallacies manifested in a whole series of debilitating socio-cultural 'isms' – from particularism, ethnocentrism and racism, through etatism (fixation on *raison d'état*), imperialism, Eurocentrism, capitalism and neoliberalism, to scientism, fundamentalism and aestheticism. There even looms the danger of two of the most important leading ideas of our time, the ecological and the cosmopolitan orientations, falling foul of such a pathogenic fate. On the other hand, such selective, distorted or reified forms imposed on orienting generative regulative ideas represent structural problems which in turn induce cognitive deficits in individuals and groups. Reflexive competences and the corresponding practices of orientation, evaluation, justification and criticism are obstructed, with the result that problematic, alienated or unjust situations in ordinary everyday life are rendered either inaccessible to those involved or indeed recognized by them yet not sufficiently understood to be subjected to criticism and correction.

II

Sociology as a form of cognition and knowledge production is a part of the social practices whereby the socio-cultural world is constituted and organized and the latter's relation with nature is maintained. Through its contributions to problem solving and world creation and the learning processes underpinning them, it is a form of responsible cognitive participation in the elaboration of a justifiable society and a sustainable relation to nature which makes human orientation central in a way that gives sociology an evaluative and critical capacity. As such, therefore, it is best conceived as philosophically presupposing a weak naturalistic ontology, a pragmatic epistemic realist epistemology and a critical-reconstructive methodology.

Ontologically, sociology sees society as a continuation of nature yet for the most part, but by no means exclusively, treats it in its own socio-cultural terms. Epistemologically, it focuses on problematic social situations about which theoretical knowledge can be developed, first, in terms of reconstructed formal and actually presupposed pragmatic features enabling and constraining social practices and, secondly, with reference to real societal structures or mechanisms and related processes – all of

which requires to be validated communicatively or discursively both in the scientific theoretical context and, crucially, in the public practical context in relation to its addressees and, more generally, the public. Methodologically, it seeks to offer critical, explanation-based directions for how to deal with reality, focusing specifically on a crucial juncture where appropriate intervention could potentially lead to learning processes, the transformation of reality and self-transformation of members and groups. It allows a materialist or realist theory of society to guide it to zero in on an instance of a powerful yet contingent interference of a societal structure or mechanism for the purposes of explicating its distorting or blocking causal impact which gives rise to the problem situation from which it started in the first instance. Rather than deduction and induction, as in positivism, empiricism and interpretativism, sociology characteristically makes use of the multi-valued logical yet imaginative abductive mode of inference – what C. Wright Mills with a pragmatist and critical theory education in his wings famously called 'the sociological imagination' – in order to creatively forge insightful, theoretically fruitful and practically effective links among the micro lifeworld, the macro structural and – note well! – the typically neglected or underplayed normative (or human social orientational) dimensions.

Unless all these dimensions are creatively fused and pursued with an explanatory and critical intent, both sociology's epistemic function and socio-genetic relevance are threatened. Sociology not only fails in its specific cognitive and knowledge producing assignment, but also reneges on living up to its assumed responsibility as a cognitive and knowledge producing participant in the collective constitution of society and nature.