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# **Multi-Paradigmaticity, Scattered Cumulativity, Multi-Localized Ignorance: The Tumultuous Condition of Sociological Knowledge**

Mihai Stelian RUSU<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract**

One of the few objects on which there is still a quasi-unanimous intra-disciplinary consensus is the multi-paradigmatic condition of sociology. Beyond the acceptance of this fact, the consensus dissolves into general controversy over the positive or negative consequences of the multi-paradigmatic character of sociology. This paper analyzes the effects that meta-theoretical pluralism has had on the corpus of knowledge administrated by the sociological community, arguing that the effects of multi-paradigmaticity are negative for the most part, since they produce: a) cyclical progress, b) scattered cumulativity, and c) multi-localized ignorance, each of these being in turn accompanied by its own cortege of negative consequences. The analysis ends with the conclusion that, although both qualitatively and quantitatively inferior compared to that of the natural sciences, the cumulativity specific to sociological knowledge is not at all illusory. However, due to its familiarity and proximity to the common sense, the knowledge developed inside the sociological field of intellectual production is the victim of the “conceptual cryptomnesia effect,” by which the scientific origin of the sociological conceptions is forgotten along with their absorption into the lexicon of vernacular language.

*Keywords:* theoretical progress; scattered cumulativity; multi-paradigmaticity; scientific ignorance; sociological theory; conceptual cryptomnesia; meta-theory.

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## The multi-paradigmaticity of sociological theory

Sociology is recommended by its entire intellectual history as being a controversy-centered-discipline. Except for the short period of hegemonic domination of structural functionalism intellectually patronized by Parsons (1951) – who unified the entire discipline into a coherent paradigm – the pervasiveness of conflicts, disagreements, alternative projects, and different visions marked the evolutionary path of sociology. Sociology was from the very beginning pluri-paradigmatic in character, which prevented the accrual of knowledge in the manner prescribed by the Kuhnian model of scientific progress: cumulativeness by the systematic solving of puzzles. Of course, it is undeniable that sociological knowledge recorded some cumulativeness, but its pluri-paradigmatic character has turned the process of theoretic build-up into a more diffuse type of accretion, i.e. “scattered cumulativeness.” Furthermore, another consequence of pluri-paradigmaticity is that sociology has developed in time a multiple and conflict-generating identity, responsible for creating controversy over the discipline’s identity matrix: scientific versus humanistic discipline, value-freedom versus moral commitment, methodological asepsis versus humanistic empathy, detached representation versus social intervention, etc.

The negative attitude towards the multi-paradigmatic nature of sociological knowledge is not universally shared within the community of specialists (this total absence of unanimity on all issues is a further demonstration of the generalized dissension installed within sociology). Boudon (2005), for instance, rejects the alleged superiority of the mono-paradigmatic, internally integrated and unified model, in favor of the heterogeneity presumed by theoretical and methodological diversity. Stressing sociology’s pluralistic tradition as its identity symbol, Boudon asks “Unity: what for?” (2005: 15). On the same wavelength lines-up Stinchcombe (1994), who although characterizes sociology as having a precarious status inside the academic system, including it into the category of “disintegrated disciplines,” considers nevertheless that the present state of disintegration represents the optimal condition for progressing knowledge. The discontented ones with the current situation “should look to comparative literature, geography, speech, etc.” (Stinchcombe, 1994: 291). As attested by experimentally based research in social psychology, the cognitive strategy of downward social comparison increases self-esteem, acting as ego defense mechanism, but also leads to self-sufficiency and intellectual convenience (Festinger, 1954; Suls, Martin, and Wheeler, 2002). In these conditions, the “solution” suggested by Stinchcombe is not only sterile, but also epistemically detrimental. More recently, in an article with programmatic intentions, Tåhlin (2011) advocates for a “pluralistic sociology.” Noting that pluralism is the most distinctive feature of sociology – being even the identity marker of the discipline – Tåhlin concludes that reducing the theoretical pluralism constitutive to sociology would seriously impoverish sociological knowledge.

Even more radical, Cardwell and Kalab (1986) issued a manifesto for theoretical diversity in sociology, denouncing as harmful what the authors provocatively call “searching for the theoretical Godot.” But alas, irony, be it even of Beckettian flavor, does not substitute rigorous argumentation.

The multi-paradigmaticity of sociology generates two types of problems. First of all, the mosaical pattern of sociology – a discipline fractured into distinctive theoretical factions – prevents the consensus formation on elementary matters, due to different and often irreconcilable metaphysical assumptions possessed by the different schools of thought. And the inability of settling metaphysical disputes blocks effective factual research, as well as empirically anchored theorizing. Therefore, theoretical cumulativity and methodological maturation can not materialize. Secondly, the situation of metaphysical disputes cannot continue actively *ad infinitum*. Most often, cognitive wear and tear settles in, as a consequence of argumentative fatigue created by the awareness of the futility of attempting to rationally persuade the intellectual opponent. If the dispute remains open, the transition to the passive phase of the conflict is made, a stage characterized by *mutual ignorance* and *communicative deadlock*. At this phase, each group tries to materialize its own meta-theoretical project through empirical research. The side effects of these multiple disjoint efforts consist in producing a cavalcade of consequences: intra-disciplinary cleavage, theoretical-methodological sectarianization, the development of particular jargons, the proliferation of “statement equivalences” (Ilut, 2009), and semantic inflation. Probably the most notorious and representative case of intra-disciplinary sectarianization is the coagulation of the ethnomethodological sub-community of “True Believers” around the charismatic personality of Garfinkel (1967), whose isolationist strategy drew sharp criticism from Coser (1975). Analyzing the disintegrative process suffered by sociological discipline, Coser (1975: 698) identifies the recipe for successful segregation (i.e., a separationist guidebook) used by a faction that seeks institutional, cognitive, theoretical, and methodological autonomy: first, develop an “esoteric jargon,” whose corollary will be “lexical hypertrophy,” then, make sure that the members of your sectarian faction practice selective exposure to the works of their peers, and finally, take actions to instill loyalty towards the group’s specific method (in the case of ethnomethodology: “ethnomethodological reduction”) which is believed to provide privileged access to previously unavailable dimensions of social reality.

Science, just as the capitalist economy, works on the basis of the principle of “creative destruction” formulated by Schumpeter (1942), which means that the confrontation between rival theories favors the emergence of superior perspectives. The ideational conflict, although it implies the destruction through severe argumentation of insufficiently solid theories, produces a creative side-effect, by selecting only the surviving theories, which erect strengthened and enhanced by the tough competition. The mutual ignorance and communicative deadlock settled

into the community clog the process of creative destruction presumed by the competition within the marketplace of ideas. Historically, the scientific sphere came to self-regulate itself as functioning under an “intellectual battlefield” regime, in which theoretical ideas are caught up in a continuous confrontation where the stake is none other than intellectual survival. The sectarianization in theoretical parishes that come to accommodate themselves to the truce situation and develop a *modus vivendi* leads to complacency within a contradictory pluralism. Moreover, such conditions create the favorable premises for accrediting the idea that meta-theoretical pluralism is irreconcilable into a comprehensive formula; the next step consists in credibilizing the notion that pluri-paradigmaticity is an epistemological value, or even a scientific virtue. However, at this stage where an intra-disciplinary compartmentalization settled consistently, intellectual and empirical work does not come to a halt. Concrete research, although conducted from different perspectives based on different assumptional foundations, triggers the process of coagulating knowledge, but the cumulativeness resulted is selective and sectorial. But all these different strands of knowledge taking shape are doomed to remain unwoven. Integrating specific stocks of knowledge is not a feasible option due to metaphysical and methodological incompatibilities that stood at the basis of their production.

Boudon’s question can be now turned on its head: “Pluralism: what for?” provided that sociology’s multi-paradigmaticity produces both mutually incompatible theories and irreconcilable results. In the realm of science, pluralism is not a value, since science is not democratic! Viewed from political angle, science is a dual dictatorship of *reason* (i.e. compliance with the inferential procedures laid down by the canons of formal logic) and *experimentation* (understood in a broad sense, as the process of generating and validating knowledge claims through severe empirical testing). The thesis of simultaneous existence of multiple truths that can cohabit in a non-conflicting way by virtue of the principle of epistemological pluralism is a logical fraud. Paradigms are not sectarian doctrines. Nor are they incommensurable, as Kuhn (1970) notoriously claimed. If the pictures revealed by two different paradigmatic lenses focusing the same phenomenon are contradictory, the rules of formal logic compel us to exclude the possibility that both of them are true. The corollary of the logical principle of excluding the multiplicity of truth forces the conclusion that at least one of the two paradigms have to be ontologically, methodologically, or theoretically defective.

The conclusion that is taking shape with a great dose of certainty is that the multiplicity of paradigmatic projects and meta-theoretical visions, by submitting to the *ethico-political* principle of conceptional pluralism, hinders the materialization of the desideratum of forming a unitary integrated and internally coherent body of knowledge about human social reality. Moreover, the multi-paradigmaticity of sociology, by validating the non-conflicting cohabitation of

contradictory perspectives, promotes “pluralistic confusion” (Levine, 1997: 1), which consequently flows from theoretical pluralism.

### **The question of cumulativity**

Scientific knowledge is rationally-empirically warranted knowledge knitted into a system. The claim of epistemic superiority raised by the scientific method over all other available gnoseological methods (common sense thinking, theological revelation, philosophical reflection, literary fictionalization and so on) is based on two premises (Zald, 1995): a) the superiority of the methodological technology of testing, validating, and refuting knowledge claims made on reality, available under the form of methods of systematic observation and experimentation, and also as procedures of logically controlled inference; b) the possession of effective methods of ordering and organizing scientifically certified propositions into coherently systems of sentences in the form of theories, taxonomies, analytical schemes, etc. Cumulativity is then what remains systematically organized behind the progress made by scientific research through developing and testing specific hypotheses. The scientificity of a discipline is dependent on the degree of cumulativity that it is capable of making.

Sociology’s multi-paradigmatic condition deviates the process of accumulating knowledge from following the same pattern that characterizes the mono-paradigmatic natural sciences. The main reason why social sciences operate within their own regime with regard to cumulation is the lack of a universally accepted “core knowledge” (Cole, 1994). What counts as core knowledge in hard sciences – which is a prerequisite of integrated cumulativity – is sectioned, sectorized, and dislocated in the soft sciences due to their pluri-paradigmatic nature. Defining cumulativity, along with Cole (1994), as the result of the process of integrating new knowledge produced by research into core knowledge, sociology, since it does not possess a tightly welded hard core, is deficient in comparison to natural sciences. Multi-paradigmaticity creates a “poly-nuclear knowledge,” and the cumulativity determined by this configuration takes, as we shall see, a scattered pattern.

In order to understand the specificity of cumulativity in sociology, very elucidating turns out to be the distinction introduced by Collins (1994) between *high-consensus, rapid-discovery sciences* (sciences with high cognitive consensus and capable of generating breakthroughs in fast cadence) and *dissensus-dominated disciplines* with a low tempo of creativity. Prolific rapid-discovery scientific disciplines are characterized by four common elements: a) the existence of a high cognitive consensus on what constitutes reliable knowledge; b) the existence of a dynamic research front that moves in constant progress and generates new discoveries in fast-paced rhythm; c) possessing “research hardware” in the form of

“genealogical research technologies,” meaning that the methods employed have a venerable history of epistemic success and suffered multiple successive improvements that increased their efficiency ratio; d) producing pragmatic applications for the extra-scientific, lay world, often in the form of exporting technologies and apparatuses invented inside the esoteric community of specialists. The cognitive consensus postulated by Collins as *conditio sine qua non* for the scientificity of a discipline must be twofold: i) over the stock of knowledge stored and organized into system by the scientific community, which Latour (1987) calls *science-already made*; ii) over the specific areas in which the controversies are concentrated on the research frontline. Consensus over fundamentals and accumulated knowledge make the entire range of controversial issues to be firmly localized at the level of the research front, whose advance is conditioned by the definitive resolution of elementary controversies. The activity conducted at the level of the research front is described by Latour as *science in-the-making*. Therefore, science in-the-making is the avant-garde concentric wing of science already-made.

In comparison with disciplines that have undergone the “rapid discovery revolution,” which Collins (1994: 159) amounts to scientific revolution *tout court*, sociology lacks a functioning consensus from which to derive a research front that would produce fast tempo discoveries. Moreover, sociological knowledge does not benefit from research technologies with genealogies similar to the tradition inaugurated in astronomy by the invention of Galileo’s lenses. Therefore, since it is not progressing rapidly due to lacking an epistemic march mobilized by a unitary research front, in sociology cumulativeness does not consist in integrating new discoveries into the old structures of knowledge, but resides in interpreting and reinterpreting the classics, applying historical conceptual schemes to the new contemporary situations, in an “eternal return” to the origins in full accordance with the pattern of the myth investigated by Eliade (1999). Instead of “the ploughshare of research” (Peirce, 1931, CP 1.138) operating inside the epistemically matured natural sciences, the social sciences have developed the proclivity to use the backward oriented hermeneutical tool of exegesis. Due to these idiosyncrasies specific to sociology, it follows naturally that cumulativeness is configured differently in comparison with other disciplines.

A succinct comparative analysis reveals that we are dealing with cumulation patterns that vary by the characteristics specific to the discipline to which they belong. Accepting the idea that there is a difference between progress and cumulativeness (progress being the long term advance of the research front, while cumulativeness consisting in the selective retention and systematic organization of research results), three ideal types of scientific progress can be developed, each of them corresponding to three patterns of cumulativeness. I propose that they be called: a) *ideal-utopic rectilinear progress*; b) *staccato progress* (or “progress-trough-revolution”); c) *cyclical progress*. For each type of progress there are three patterns of knowledge cumulation: a) *ideal-utopic integral cumulativeness*; b) *selective cumulativeness*; c) *scattered cumulativeness*.

Figure 1. Rectilinear progress

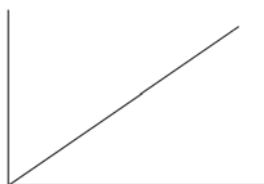


Figure 2. Staccato progress

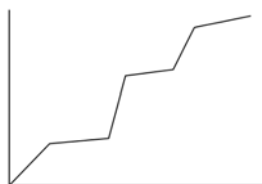
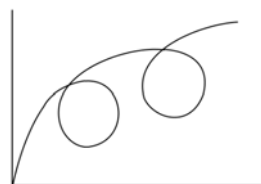


Figure 3. Cyclical progress

Table 1. *Types of progress and patterns of cumulativity*

Discipline	Type of progress	Pattern of cumulativity
ideal science	rectilinear	integral
natural sciences	non-linear (“staccato”)	selective
social sciences	cyclical	scattered

What may be designated under the title of “the myth of the linear progress of science” is constitutive of the naïve hope that characterized the Enlightenment project of knowledge. Even though it is evident from looking at the history of science that the evolution of scientific knowledge does not follow a rectilinear trajectory, the model can be kept and hypostatized as an ideal-utopian benchmark. According to this model, science is moving constantly towards truth, continuously refining its degree of truth-approximation by reducing the margin of error responsible for the shortcomings of the results it produces. Advancing asymptotically, scientific knowledge progressively approaches closer and closer to the truth. Worth mentioning is that this epistemic illusion functioned as a prime dogma of dialectical materialism (an intellectual offspring of the Enlightenment), which only accelerated the challenging of the ideal-utopian model. Moreover, the belief in the reality of the idealized model of rectilinear progress specific to the “Old Deferentialism” is currently responsible for the overdosed counter-reaction of the postmodernist “New Cynicism” whose adherents reject altogether the very notion of progress in science (Haack, 2003).

The twentieth century saw the forming of a unanimous consensus, to which philosophers of science of all doctrinaire commitments expressed their allegiance, that the evolution of science is discontinuous, the great leaps of knowledge taking the form of genuine revolutions (Kuhn, 1970; Popper, 1981). Scientific knowledge does not follow a straight path towards truth. A more realistic account of the route followed by scientific knowledge is the picture of a fractured, intermittent evolution, but still progressive despite its nonlinearity. Even Kuhn, the prime promoter of the historicist philosophy of science, admitted the idea of “progress through revolutions.” According to the Kuhnian conception, science has two operating regimes: a) normal science, in which scientists solve puzzles guided by



the prescriptions provided by the paradigm within which they act mentally and practically; normal science progresses by accruing empirical facts following an additive logic that further articulate the paradigm; b) revolutionary science, triggered by the accumulation of a critical mass of unsolved problems (i.e. anomalies) that leads to the loss of faith in the paradigm as the paradigm is sinking into deeper and deeper crisis. As a result of the abandonment of faith in the paradigm's heuristic power of solving puzzles, the previously quasi-dogmatic scientists with regard to their paradigm's fundamentals, suddenly activate their critical spirit and start to explore unorthodox ways of approaching anomalies. The development of a rival solution to the old paradigm puts practitioners to opt for one of the two competing perspectives. If the new paradigm receives the adherence of the majority of specialists from the community of practitioners, a scientific revolution is taking place, in which the new paradigm overthrows the old way of doing science. Despite Kuhn's controversial thesis of incommensurability by which he states that scientific revolutions are not cumulative, Kuhn nevertheless admits that the paradigmatic shift made by replacing one paradigm with another involves progress. Even under the most relativistic scenario allowed by reason, which the historicist analysis of Kuhn proposes, science is still progressive. *Natura non facit saltus*, but science does do. And it does it progressively. Even though the successor theory does not completely "swallow" its predecessor as a special case, the revolution nonetheless creates progress. In other words, although each sequence of succeeding theories involves a loss in explanatory power held by the obsolete theory (which came to be called "Kuhn-loss") that cannot be fully compensated, the gain outweighs the loss. This is why the last chapter of his famous work is called "Progress through revolutions," by which he self-refutes its incommensurability thesis, since if we accept the premise that science is progressive, it follows logically that the successor paradigm is superior to the one that it overthrows. Therefore, Kuhn does make use of a yardstick for comparison among rival paradigms, albeit he does it in a clandestine manner. *Ergo*, if science is progressive, then paradigms are commensurable and suitable for ranking according to their epistemic value.

Confining our analysis only to the operation of normal science, the cumulativeness of scientific knowledge appears under an additive form. However, the research front is not perfectly concentric around the core knowledge and it does not advance in all directions with the same progressive speed. The process of cumulation is not integral and indiscriminating (as it should be in the case of an omnipotent and finally omniscient science), but selective, since the concerted efforts are being unevenly distributed on the research front radius.

If in the case of natural sciences, the progress made, be it even discontinuous and interrupted, is clearly visible and unproblematic on the long term, within social sciences the progress follows a cyclical path, with ample returns to origins in the guise of reinterpreting the classics, contemporary adaptations, and intensive

exegetis. Sociological knowledge is set on a “retrospective mode,” oriented towards the past rather than towards contemporaneity and near future. However, despite the recursive pattern and passeistic orientation so typical of interpretative social sciences, the cyclicity is nevertheless progressive. For instance, simply adapting a classic’s conception to current situation denotes progress. This is exactly what Ritzer (1993) has done in developing his “McDonaldization of society” thesis, which can be seen as a contemporary update of bureaucratization theory formulated by Weber (1922/1978) in the golden age of classical sociology. Even though it resumes the Weberian theme of the “iron cage” and looks how it is reconfiguring within postmodernity, Ritzer’s analysis is still progressive, since it succeeds in refreshing the understanding of contemporary societal reality by means of a classic conceptual tool.

### **The specificity of scattered cumulativity**

Although cumulativity takes a scattered, diffused, and dispersed pattern in sociology, three levels at which it manifests can be identified: a) at the empirical level; b) at the level of concrete theory; c) at the level of theoretical research programs (cf. Wagner & Berger, 1985). At the empirical level, cumulativity refers to the production of descriptive data about social facts. However, as Abbott (2006) points out, cumulativity *qua* archivist collecting of descriptive data is theoretically inconsequential, exemplifying his argument through what he calls the “paradox of sociology”: the stock of data compiled about society available now at the disposal of the sociologist is incomparable superior to the data-banks to which the pioneer sociologist of a century ago could only hope for; on the other hand, despite this crucial data advantage, the major sociological perspectives haven’t undergone radical changes. Contemporary sociologists continue to visualize social reality through basically the same conceptual schemes developed early in the twentieth century, as the case of Ritzer’s thesis so eloquently demonstrates. The conclusion that is profiling with maximum clarity from the analysis undertaken by Abbott is that the mere storage of data, while a necessary condition for stimulating cumulativity, is not also a sufficient one.

At the level of what Wagner and Berger (1985) call “unit theory,” cumulativity develops by increasing empirical support and adequacy of a system of theoretical statements. A unit theory (i.e. a logically coherent system of falsifiable propositions that are descriptive, explanatory, and/or predictive in nature referring to social reality or to sections of it) can be considered progressive and therefore cumulative, if three requirements are satisfied: a) the precision condition: the unit theory improves its accuracy in that it develops a greater number of empirical consequences supported by observational data; b) the scope condition: the unit theory maximizes its breadth, extending its covering reach through developing o

broader range of empirical consequences backed up by observations; c) the conflict condition: the unit theory demonstrates its superiority over rival theories by developing empirically testable consequences supported by observations that contradicts the consequences of alternative theories. In short, the progressiveness of a theory is directly dependent on its empirical robustness. The long term effect of its successive improvements, refinements, extensions, and articulations consists in generating cumulativeness within sociological knowledge.

The process of cumulativeness is most clearly seen at work at the level of theoretical research programs, by analyzing the evolution of interconnected clusters of individual theories that interlock themselves forming theoretical traditions. A case in point of theoretical research program is the anomie theory of deviance, originally outlined by Durkheim (1897/1993), further developed by Merton (1938), revised by Dubin (1959), and recently revived by Agner (1992).

At the most abstract level of theorizing, corresponding to meta-theoretical frameworks (“orienting strategies” in Wagner & Berger’s 1985 terms), there can be no progress or cumulativeness, since meta-theories are stagnant structures resistant and intolerant to change. Understood as conceptual schemes of maximum abstractness providing ontological, epistemological, and methodological prescriptions, meta-theories do not evolve, because their axiomatic assumptions are protected against empirical refutation. Consequently, these rigid structures composed of empirically unfalsifiable directives are inertial frameworks that house and guide research.

Contrary to the hazardous thesis that sociological knowledge isn’t cumulative and theoretical progress is illusory, an analysis focused on the history and evolution of sociology reveals a specific species of progress (i.e. cyclically progress) and a special pattern of cumulativeness (i.e. scattered cumulativeness). Wagner and Berger (1985) argue that progress in sociology is camouflaged by the inability to distinguish between different forms of theoretical activity (unit theory, theoretical research programs, and meta-theories). Focusing on the evolution and development of theoretical programs, instead of looking at the inert meta-theoretical frameworks, brings to light the true extent of theoretical progress recorded by sociology. The thesis of the pronounced progress detectable at the level of theoretical programs is also stressed by Goldthorpe (2005: 58), who convincingly documents the progress made in the study of social mobility, whilst demolishing what he calls the “impossibilist position” regarding the possibility of sociological progress.

## Conceptual cryptomnesia and “l’origine pas contrôlée” of social-scientific notions

The real and consistent progress and cumulativeness produced by socio-human sciences are partially made invisible due to the process of massive absorption of its concepts by common sense. The takeover of concepts and ideas invented within the theories of socio-human sciences by vernacular language through their introduction into everyday colloquial lexicon contributed greatly to obliterating their origin. Systematically infusing common sense knowledge with the conceptual products forged within social-scientific knowledge creates what might be called a “cryptomnesia effect,”<sup>2</sup> referring to the process of forgetting the true origins of the concepts commonly used within everyday language as a result of their routinization as an integral part of vernacular discourse. Without claiming exhaustiveness, that could legitimately be raised only after a serious analytic inquiry, relevant examples of concepts that underwent the cryptomnesia effect and lost their controlled scientific origin can be pointed out: role model (Merton, 1968), self-esteem (James, 1890/1983), socialization (Simmel, 1909), stereotype (Lippmann, 1922/2009), opinion leader (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, 1944/2004). Even more technical terms like “cognitive dissonance” (Festinger, 1957), “conspicuous consumption” (Veblen, 1899/1994), or “groupthink” (Janis, 1971) have become commonplaces in lay popular discourse. Cryptomnesia effect is all the more pronounced as key social science concepts come to be advertised as cool phrases via pop culture. The transmission belt which transfers scientific notion into popular discourse is provided by the mass media, but the most effective vehicle of permanently implanting scientific expressions deep into ordinary discourse seems to be the hit song. Two instances of top musical hits are exemplificatory for the case in point: Eminem (1999) with *Role Model*, and the American punk rock band The Offspring (1994) with their single *Self Esteem*. Who will acknowledge Robert Merton for creating the term “role model” when Eminem is most likely to be associated with this phrase, and who is likely to know that William James concocted the term “self-esteem” when it is so popular amidst contemporary culture that it seems to have always been with us? Hence, even if theoretical progress and cumulativeness are an undeniable reality in sociology, their structure differs from that characteristic of natural sciences. Beside the fact that

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<sup>2</sup> The memory affection medically diagnosed as “cryptomnesia” consists in the inability to distinguish between personal and externally acquired memories (for instance, related by others facts are wrongly taken to be the product of one’s own witnessing). The term was introduced in social sciences by Moscovici (1996: 17) under the formula of “social cryptomnesia,” which refers to the process of forgetting the minority origin of social changes by the majority that wrongly attributes the initiation of social change to themselves. In short, minority groups act as agents of social change, but post factum, after the social change was made, the majority retrospectively considers that it was them that was responsible for the changes made, forgetting the minority origin of social change.

sociology's progress and cumulativity are both qualitatively and quantitatively inferior to those in natural sciences, their actual scope is further downplayed by the cryptomnesia by which the scientific origin of many concepts is forgotten as a result of their resorption into ordinary knowledge.

Even though the concepts of natural sciences are also taken over into ordinary language, its corresponding transmission process is different from that which operates in the social sciences. Both categories of notions feature what might be called "transferability", i.e. the proclivity to be transferred from the sphere of specialized discourse of science into the discursive universe of common sense. However, despite this communality, the transferability specific to natural sciences does not generate conceptual cryptomnesia. This absence can be explained by the fact that natural sciences are in possession of a specialized sub-system that fulfills the programmatic function of transferring information from the locus of its production, i.e. the narrow circles of esoteric expertise, into the far more larger space populated by lay consumers. The functional mechanism by which this transfer occurs consists in injecting the information through the channels represented by science magazines and other popularization of science media. Via these institutionalized means, common knowledge receives, in a radically simplified form, sophisticated concepts and counter-intuitive ideas, such as "black hole," "space-time," "dark matter," "entropy," and so on. However, due to their obvious strangeness in relation to daily life of ordinary individuals, and also due to the specificity of mass media responsible for transmitting specialized knowledge inside the social body (popular science magazines, radio/TV programs, public speeches, etc.), the scientific origin of the concept is not forgotten. In contrast, the social sciences have not developed a similar mechanism for disseminating the knowledge that they produce. One possible explication for this lack of media infrastructure is that the gap between social sciences and common sense is not so high, which make the most part of social-scientific knowledge to be intelligible to educated public even in the absence of a specific mechanism dedicated to its popularization. These proximity and intimacy between ordinary knowledge and social-scientific knowledge was theorized as "the continuity thesis" by Rotariu and Iluț (2006: 14). The fact that most of the cognitive content of social science is mostly free of mathematization, not being expressed in a highly formalized symbolic language, contributes decisively to its unmediated comprehensibility. Only recently a program similar to the one of popularization working in natural sciences was formulated in sociology, under the name of "public sociology" (Burawoy, 2004). Due to these differences between natural and social sciences (mathematically formalized language versus discursive language; counter-intuitivity versus quasi-triviality; specialized sub-system designed for popularization versus the absence of a specific mechanism of dissemination) social-scientific notions do not have a "controlled origin." Thus, conceptual cryptomnesia describe the process through which, in the course of time, ideas derived from social sciences end up being dissolved

and resorbed into conventional wisdom, their scientific origin being eventually forgotten.

### **Scattered cumulativity and multi-localized ignorance**

Within a scientific discipline that reached a stage of maturation, which involves overcoming the metaphysical debates over fundamentals and developing a joint research front, ignorance is strictly localized inside the knowledge structure assembled by the community of specialists. This is the case of “specified ignorance” (Merton, 1987), i.e. the collectively defined set of problems that are universally recognized as unsolved. Those issues become targeted by concerted attacks orchestrated by the specialists in the field. Mature disciplines that practice the style of normal science centered on puzzle-solving are capable of developing a unitary research front whose constant advance is sometimes hampered by the discovery of anomalies that prove to be refractory to repeated attempts of solving them. Consequently, their recalcitrance temporarily delays the progression of the research front, or, if the inability to resolve them persists, it may lead to the collapse of the paradigm along with the production of a paradigmatic shift.

The situation is quite different in disciplines that did not take the qualitative step implied by adopting a sole paradigm, i.e. *paradigmatization*. Taking this paradigmatic leap constitutes the surest symptom of scientific maturity, at least in Kuhn’s vision. For social disciplines, instead of precise localization of ignorance, we are dealing with multiple voids distributed fairly chaotic within the knowledge system organized by its community of practitioners. Specified ignorance, so characteristic of hard sciences, has its counterpart in social disciplines a sort of ubiquitous ignorance. The architectonics of knowledge developed by immatured disciplines contains multiple cracks and flaws in its resistance structure, features that allow enclaves of ignorance to subsist in different areas within the body of knowledge articulated in these disciplines. Scientific ignorance, far from being explicitly specified and positioned exclusively on the outskirts of the knowledge system, is instead multi-located and disorderly distributed so that it can affect inclusively the central cores of the system.

Responsible for this lack of scientific control of ignorance is the pre- and multi-paradigmatic character of the discipline concerned. Trapped into a pre-paradigmatic condition, the knowledge developed in a given field cannot be coagulated around a paradigmatic exemplar, whose functions are precisely those of structuring and organizing knowledge. Continual dissensus over the fundamentals, maintained amid the perpetuation of metaphysical commitments, prevents the formation of a community of inquiry solidarized around a specific model of an exemplary scientific practice. Essentially the same centripetal forces act within multi-paradigmatic disciplines whose internal fragmentation and deficit

of integration allow for the disorganized distribution of multiple pockets of ignorance. What if a program of specifying ignorance would be initiated in social sciences? Of course, it seems reasonable to try to explicitly define and list all the unanswered questions that bother social scientists. But will it have the anticipated effect, namely that of detecting and inventorying the unsolved problems of social science in order to be subsequently positioned on the line of the research front? Can such a massive operation be possible in a poly-nuclear discipline such as sociology? Most probably it would stupefy researchers by unraveling the pervasiveness of ignorance, which forms an archipelago located inside the knowledge-structure. Most likely, such a discovery would lead to a collective resignation before its inattackability.

The main source generating multi-localized distribution of sociological ignorance is the chronic disagreements over elementary, even abecedarian, foundational matters. For instance, a state of “definitional precariousness” continues to subsist, i.e. a flagrant lack of consensus on the most basic notions that make up the conceptual patrimony of social sciences in general and sociology in particular. Central terms of sociological lexicon along with constitutive concepts of social science discourse do not benefit from a unanimously shared acceptance. Furthermore, much of the nodal notions of sociological vocabulary have become serious candidates to the title of “essentially contested concepts” (Gallie, 1956), being in danger of becoming *completely compromise concepts* due to semantic inflation that has swept them. The semantic confusion generated in this way constitutes a major impediment to theoretical progress, as long ago noted by Hume (1748/2007: 45): “The chief obstacle, therefore, to our improvement in the moral or metaphysical sciences is the obscurity of the ideas, and ambiguity of the terms.” If the trend worsens, there is the risk that the entire field that cultivates definitional precariousness to become a “labyrinth of obscure sophistry” (Hume, 2007: 59). Without having surpassed this critical threshold, sociology tolerates and accommodated itself to the situation of definitional precariousness. Definitions developed in sociological literature are not only different, but some are even flatly contradictory. For example, in 1965, Childs inventoried no less than 50 definitions of “public opinion,” a concept subsequently ontologically abolished by Bourdieu (1994) in a much celebrated article entitled *L’opinion public n’existe pas!* A stronger illustration of the lack of consensus may be provided by the multiplicity of definitions of sociology itself. Is sociology the science of “social facts” (i.e. social institutions, statistical regularities, etc.) as it is conceptualized in the Durkheimian tradition, or is it the science of meaningful “social action” as imagined from a Weberian position? Or, following the model laid down by Simmel, is sociology the science “of those forms in which interactions take place between human beings”? (Simmel, 1896: 167) Far from being mere “statement equivalences” (Iluț, 2009), simple linguistic variations on the same ideational theme, reducible in the last analysis to the same semantic core, the classical definitions listed above propose disjunctive research programs.

## Conclusions

From what has been shown so far, the multi-paradigmaticity of sociology is responsible for a number of effects that reinforce the cognitive dissensus that keeps sociology in a critical condition: a) undecidable partisan conflict over the fundamentals, whose failure to conclude leads to b) mutual ignoring. With this a c) communicative jam becomes established within the community, which creates the premises for d) intra-disciplinary sectarianization, whose consequences consist in e) mutually unintelligible jargon production; f) the proliferation of “statement equivalences”; g) semantic hyper-inflation, and eventually h) pluralistic confusion. At the same time, sociology’s multi-paradigmatic status orients the discipline towards a i) cyclical progress, which corresponds to j) a pattern of scattered cumulativity, whose corollary is k) multi-localized scientific ignorance. All these series of numerous interconnected consequences that flow in cascade from the discipline’s pluri-paradigmatic nature encroach on cognitive consensus formation and block the constitution of a common research front that would have the potential to epistemically maturate sociological inquiry. To this end, the most plausible solution for internally integrating sociological knowledge seems to rely on the strategy of “meta-triangulation” advocated by Lewis and Grimes (1999), which encourages to construct theories inspired from different meta-theoretical frameworks, and whose prime epistemic virtue is that it promise to overcome “paradigm mentality” (Willmott, 1993).

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