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Transatlantic Entanglements

(doi: 10.2383/72707)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, settembre-dicembre 2012

Ente di afferenza:

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Transatlantic Entanglements

by Johan Heilbron

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Christian Fleck's book proposes a detailed analysis of what is no doubt the major transformation of the social sciences in the Twentieth century: the shift in leadership from Western Europe to the US [Fleck 2011]. After the Second World War, social science came to be identified with what was produced, published and debated in the US. Soviet Marxism had no intellectual significance beyond orthodox believers, and critical currents that challenged the dominance of the American main stream were often themselves tributary to American scholarship and American institutions. In his analysis of this development Christian Fleck focuses on the core period in which the shift from Europe to the US occurred, the turbulent middle part of the Twentieth century between the early 1920s and the 1950s.

Fleck is interested above all in empirical social research and how it has been promoted, organized, spread, financed, and practiced. Neither epistemology nor grand theory are of particular appeal to him, and when in the course of his study conceptual and theoretical issues arise his treatment is pragmatic. Empirical social research is not only the focus of his study – Fleck has proceeded by doing extensive empirical research himself. The acknowledgements and footnotes list a quite impressive number of archives and other primary sources, and the 24 tables and 12 figures testify to the author's identification with the very object he has been researching: empirical research.

The primary source are the archives of the American philanthropic Foundations, which have promoted "inductive" social research in both the US and in Eu-

rope. After the introductory chapter on the rise of American universities and the American science system, with its departmental organization and project-based research model, Fleck skillfully exploits the richness of the archives of especially the Rockefeller Foundation, and provides much new material on the development of the social sciences. In first instance this is done through an analysis of grant programs and institutional projects. Among the documents used are reports, letters, and proposals that European correspondents sent to the Rockefeller Foundation. This includes an interesting, confidential report of Alva and Gunner Myrdal about the state of the social sciences in Germany in the early 1930s and the plan of Austrian correspondents like Hayek and Von Mises for setting up an interdisciplinary research institute in Vienna. In the latter case Fleck discusses the plan, offers well chosen quotations, and demonstrates why it never materialized, thus provoking a shift in the Rockefeller policy from institution building to supporting Austrian exiles. All this clearly presented material gives the reader a rare sense of the perception and politics of major figures and provides a view of the social sciences of the time from the inside.

The long, middle chapter of the book is a rigorously constructed collective biography of the 800 German and Austrian social scientists. Aside from data about age, gender and career, Fleck constructs indicators of their productivity, visibility and recognition, and on that basis presents a triple comparison: between Germans and Austrians (confirming the remarkable vitality of intellectual life in Vienna), between two generations and between *émigrés* and those who stayed behind. Here Fleck mobilizes quantitative techniques, including a “correspondence analysis,” the originally French statistical method which has become known mainly through the work of Pierre Bourdieu. This method allows him to explore the differentiation of his population, demonstrating, for example, that it is not age or social origin which accounts for the main internal differences, but religion, the country where someone worked, and the contrast between home-guards and immigrants. Although this is already a long and innovative chapter, I would have liked to know more about how the results of this quantitative analysis compare to what is known from more qualitative studies. What would an analysis of the actual experiences of members of these generations contribute to our understanding of the patterns that Fleck observes? The quantitative analysis objectifies the process and demystifies certain interpretations, but a proper sociological understanding of this complex process requires a reflection on the experiences of the individual actors as well. In the concluding chapter this is what Fleck advocates as well, but how his statistical objectivation relates to other dimensions of sociological understanding remains largely an open question.

By analogy we may think of Sorokin and Gurvitch. Both were Russian emigrants, both very productive scholars, and both reached the highest academic level

in their respective countries, namely Harvard and the Sorbonne. And yet if we leave the experiential dimension of their success out of the analysis, it is quite difficult to understand the intellectual choices they made and the work they actually produced.

The latter part of the book focuses on particular research projects and redirects the attention to more micro processes. In his detailed account of the Princeton Radio Research Project Fleck narrates how the collaboration between Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton took off and how in the process the “focused interview” and “panel design” were invented. Fleck also shows why the collaboration between Lazarsfeld and Adorno was far less fruitful, and why the interpretation that Adorno and the editors of his collected works have given of this episode is highly selective and biased. In the dissection of the study that is classically referred to as Adorno *et al.*, *The Authoritarian Personality*, Fleck shows in detail how Adorno appropriated the work of others and succeeded in getting more credit than he reasonably deserved. Adorno’s companion Horkheimer does not fare much better, and Fleck effectively debunks some of the well established legends of the Frankfurt School in exile. Empirical social research is indeed itself a social process, and struggles for credit and recognition are particularly salient in a universe in which symbolic capital is the primary currency.

With its focus on the history of empirical social research, Fleck’s book belongs to a particular tradition of inquiry, one that was initially promoted by Lazarsfeld and some of his students, and that has, more recently, has resulted in major studies by scholars like Martin Bulmer, Jennifer Platt, and Jean-Michel Chapoulie. In part as a result of this research on the history of research, a radically different picture has arisen of the development of sociology, one that is fundamentally at odds with the textbook accounts, which continue to be organized around canonical ideas and eminent theorists.

To this tradition Fleck adds several contributions of his own. One is the use of more quantitative methods, which represents an important enrichment, although it obviously raises new questions as well. Fleck occasionally pushes quantification a bit too far. One may legitimately call into question, for example, that the number of pages produced by a researcher is a valid indicator of the researcher’s contribution to a project. This kind of bibliometrics *avant la lettre* can be very useful, but it cannot replace a more qualitative judgment. Some of the most original minds are among the most productive scholars, but do the more productive generally contribute more to a research project than those who produce less pages?

Another important contribution of Fleck’s study is its transatlantic framework. Instead of focusing on one national context, his study is about transatlantic interactions. The German original of his book was appropriately entitled “Transatlantic enrichments,” *Transatlantische Bereicherungen*. That perspective effectively breaks

away from concentrating on more or less self-contained, local or national settings and has lead him to redirect attention to transnational mobility and exchange, and to the various forms of hybridization that such encounters can produce.

While the richness of this study is impressive and the fruitfulness of the approach is aptly demonstrated by its manifold results, it is perhaps a bit undertheorized. In the *Introduction*, for example, Fleck states that he will rely on the typology that Johan Galtung once proposed for different national intellectual styles [p. 4]. But he soon recognizes that this is “too broad” to be able to account for the “subtle distinctions that can be shown even among the German speaking professors” [p. 48]. Unfortunately, however, he does not return to the issue of national styles or national habitus. He similarly characterizes the historical process he investigates as “crystallization,” but does so in passing without paying much attention to its conceptual implications. In the course of his analysis, he uses insights from several sociological specialties, but it is not exactly clear what his position is in the sociology of the sciences. There is no indication that he is particularly impressed by “social studies of science” and in his sociological preferences he seems to be more of a Mertonian, but it would have been relevant to know where he stands with respect to some of the main issues in the sociology of the social sciences, in particular on the question how to articulate the analysis of the social conditions of knowledge production with an understanding of the content of the knowledge produced.

In addition to the theoretical questions he has raised and the numerous empirical results his book is filled with, Fleck’s study is perhaps most significant as a systematic effort to pull the history of the social sciences out of its antiquarian corner into the broader field of historical sociology.

References

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Abstract: A theoretical and methodological review of Christian Fleck's book, *A Transatlantic History of the Social Sciences: Robber Barons, the Third Reich and the Invention of Empirical Social Research*.

Keywords: *History of empirical research, American foundations, transatlantic exchange, scholars in exile.*

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