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A Common Research Subject?

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A Common Research Subject?

by Kristoffer Kropp

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1. Is This a Research Program?

Camic, Gross and Lamont’s book [2011] is a rich book containing theoretical inventions and argumentation as well as thorough empirical analyses. It covers subjects from the development of research libraries (Abbott) over studies of interdisciplinary practices in “knowledge parks” (Strathern) to knowledge practices for social policy makers (Jasanoff). Its overarching purpose is to incorporate some of the fruitful theoretical approaches that have emerged in STS over the last twenty-thirty years into the study of social sciences and humanities, both within and outside academia. In the introduction the editors not only lay out the content of the book and point of departure, they also suggest a new concept (social knowledge) and research agenda for scholars studying knowledge practices that fall under their definition. In the following three sections of the book the concepts and research agenda are exemplified. The book is composed of fourteen chapters including the introduction, and I find the papers very interesting and well written. Of course many of them do not fit directly into my own research agenda, but a book like this is an opportunity to get acquainted with other subjects, theories and approaches. I have my favourite papers, for example Heilbron’s on Bourdieu’s theorising – because of my interest in Bourdieu’s work,– Igo’s on survey research – because I am interested in survey research myself and so forth. Thus, it is a nicely edited book from good and very often well-established – but almost exclusively US – scholars. However, taking a step

back and thinking once more made me wonder what keeps the thirteen substantive chapters together?

When I first heard about the book, without knowing more than its theme I had a clear idea about what kinds of chapters would be in it. When I finally had the book in my hand, I could see that what I had imagined surprisingly fit, more or less, with the actual content. In this way the book obviously has a cognitive coherence and fits nicely into the academic landscape. In other words the book gathers strands of research that analyse what the editors call *social knowledge* and tries to provide us with a common language and set of problems and assumptions from which to work onwards.

In the introduction Camic, Gross and Lamont write about what holds the book together and differentiates it from previous approaches. In contrast to many other edited books, there are no common objects sanctioned by other social institutions (the educational system, the EU, the scientific discipline sociology etc.), nor are the chapters held together by common events (the economic crises, educational reforms, etc.). Instead, the objective is to hold the chapters in the book together by the common concept of social knowledge. In their definition, which they admit to be rather expansive, the editors include:

descriptive information and analytical statements, excluding fictional and fabricated material and thus reserving the concept of social knowledge to types of knowledge that empirically claim about the past, present and future [p. 3].

Thus, the definition does not exclude much more than what we could call literature, leaving us with a rather undefined object.

This leaves me in a dilemma. On the one hand, I have a rather good idea about what kind of empirical object, theoretical concerns and methodological approaches Camic, Gross and Lamont are calling for in the programmatic statements laid out in their introduction. On the other hand I wonder what the field (or fields?) or researchers engaged in research in social knowledge are to gain with the concept, and how it can help us to set up new research agendas and foster common discussion that we could not have had without the concept. Is it an attempt to provide us with a concept that can create a common object of study? And is the concept clearly enough defined to be used in setting up a new research agenda?

2. Useful Themes?

Irrespective of whether the conceptual framework is intended to create a coherent field of research, it can still be fruitful inspiration or a thinking tool for research. In

the following section I will try to show how one could use the instructive themes [pp. 23-29] proposed in the book as a thinking tool, using my own current research as an example. At first my intention was to look at each of the instructive themes in relation to my own research to see how they could be used in practical research. Working my way through the seven instructive themes, I began to doubt their status. To be sure, they have emerged as common problematics, themes or conclusions that run through the book. In other words the themes are common elements that run through the contributions to the book. But what is the status of these themes and how are they meant to guide future research? Are they to be understood as provisional conclusions to be “tested” in different empirical settings? Or are they some kind of meta-theoretical framework, axioms or theoretical hypotheses? It is not clear to me and one of the reasons may be their form. Let me use the first instructive theme as an example. It sounds like this: *Social knowledge practices are multiplex*. At first this sounds like a theoretical assumption more than a question for further research, but I believe that we may gain more insight from the book if we try to turn this theme into a research question for empirical research. Let me try to show what I mean using my own research.

In my current project, I am looking at how questionnaire data is produced at European level. Survey methods and techniques were developed to work in relatively homogeneous cultural and linguistic settings, often within the nation-state boundaries. Simultaneously, the history of the development of the questionnaire survey is also the history about the interactions between different social fields such as what became commercial opinion-polling institutes, academic survey research for public surveys and so on. In my specific research I am trying to understand how European survey data is produced, how the production is organised, how techniques develop and spread, how European researchers connect and relate to European research institutions and so forth. However, how are we helped by the theme *Social knowledge practices are multiplex* in this research? First of all, looking at a European research project often entails looking at scattered projects with connections to different parts of Europe. Just looking at the home page of the European Social Survey we see that the Head Office is at City University in London, the Data Archive is in Bergen in Norway, while other parts of the survey are being taking care of in Mannheim, Barcelona, Leuven, Ljubljana and Amsterdam – plus all the national teams (in more than thirty countries) actually carrying out the survey. However, beyond this basic geographical aspect, we can ask how connections are established over national borders and how different institutions and scientific traditions contribute to hold the survey together [Desrosières 1991]. Looking at the history of the European Social Survey (ESS) can show how important it is to look for multiplex connections in trying to understand the history trajectory and contemporary practices of specific research

projects. At first glance the ESS presents itself as a purely academic enterprise initiated by a number of well-established (Northwestern) European scholars in order to provide high quality data for comparative research in Europe. Since starting, the ESS has carried out six rounds of surveys covering most European countries. It has been very successful in obtaining funds from the EU framework programs and national research councils and it was awarded the EU Descartes prize in 2005. In many ways this looks like a very successful research project, recognised by both peers and other social institutions – here the EU. However, looking closer, and keeping the idea about multiplicity in mind, we can see how this academic project entangles with mainly the EU and the European Science Foundation. From the very beginning, through the ESF, the scholars involved in setting up the ESS were in close conversation with the EU about funding, shaping both the calls from the EU and the ways in which the ESS worked to fit into the ideas and funding schemes of the EU. Therefore the ESS was not only working in the traditional academic sphere, but it also drew upon relations to the EU, ambitions in the EU bureaucracy about building up a European Research Area including the social sciences, as well as the symbolic dimension of European integration. As I indicated, here the instructive themes can be used in thinking about one's research and to remind ourselves of the ways we construct the object. Is this the way the themes were intended to be used? And how is this related to the concept of social knowledge?

3. An Engaged Program?

Following the more generally formulated instructive themes, the authors offer ten questions [pp. 29-32] to guide further studies of social knowledge in the making. Among the ten questions is the last one on reflexivity. In the following, I would like to discuss this question in relation to the Bourdieusian notion of reflexivity, or perhaps more in line with Bachelard's epistemological vigilance. Reflexivity has been one of the magic words in international sociology over the last twenty-three years, from Bloor over Woolgar to Giddens and Beck [Beck *et al* 1994; Bloor 1991; Woolgar 1988], but with great variation in what is meant by reflexivity. Furthermore, it seems that the program and the contributions in the book have not settled with regard to the role as an engaged or critical voice in relation to the subjects taken under investigation. Camic, Gross and Lamont write about reflexivity:

Reflexive implications. To what degree does training an analytical lens for the day-to-day practices by which other social knowledge makers carry out their work raise critical self-awareness of one's own unexamined knowledge practices? In what ways

can enlarged understanding of contemporary practices of social knowledge production, evaluation, and application lead to beneficial transformation in those practices? [p. 32].

The question raised by Camic, Gross and Lamont is thus twofold. On the one hand, how does studying other social knowledge makers change our own practices? And secondly, how can the knowledge we produce affect the social knowledge makers and their practices under study? I will try to discuss this in two steps, taking one question after the other.

It seems to me that the question lies very much in line with the Bourdieusian idea about the double rupture and reflexivity [Bourdieu *et al.* 1991; Bourdieu 2000 and 2004]. The idea about the double rupture and reflexivity is of course not unknown to the authors [Camic 2011; Lamont 2010], but since it is closely related to the discussion of academic autonomy and control, a further discussion seems important in a time of pressure on both sociology and academic institutions at large [Burawoy *et al.* 2010; Holmwood 2010; Kropp 2010].

To Bourdieu, epistemic vigilance and reflexivity are guiding principles in sociological work. He emphasized not only that we should critically examine presumptions and the everyday categories of our objects of study, but likewise we should critically examine our own position and dispositions as social knowledge producers [Bourdieu 1988]. However, unlike many others, the kind of reflexivity Bourdieu called for was a kind of reflexivity employing the sociological tools of objectification [Gingras 2010]. Bourdieu writes in the English preface to *Homo Academicus*:

Social science may expect to derive its most decisive progress from a constant effort to undertake a sociological critique of sociological reasoning [...] One cannot avoid having to objectify the objectifying subject. It is by turning to study the historical conditions of his own production, rather than by some form or other of transcendental reflection, that the scientific subject can gain a theoretical control over his own structures and inclinations as well as over the determinants whose product they are, and can thereby gain the concrete means of reinforcing his capacity for objectification [Bourdieu 1988, xii].

Here Bourdieu calls for what Gingras [2010] has designated a sociological reflexivity contrary to a textural or epistemic reflexivity. It is thus a reflexive practice, analysing not only theories and texts, but, just as importantly, the institutions, positions and trajectories of scholars and scholarly work that are implied in a Bourdieusian analysis. This is as I see it much in line with the intentions of the programme of Camic, Gross and Lamont. However, perhaps more importantly, the reflexive practices Bourdieu calls for should be used in order to gain better theoretical “control” over the object being studied. In this understanding, the sociological reflexive approach

is thus a necessary step in all sociological work and not an activity that can be left to an esoteric part (the sociology of sociology) of the sociological community. To which degree (if any) is the project of social knowledge ensuring that a kind of control over the research subject is part of the project? And how can this reflexive practice work in the bustling academic world striving for the next publication and research grant?

The last question relates to the second part of what Camic, Gross and Lamont write about reflexivity, that the knowledge we produce may not only influence ourselves, but also the people and practices we are studying. But how? And what is the role of the sociologists of social knowledge in the making? It is clear that it is not possible (nor desirable) for all sociologists to conduct a far-reaching empirical analysis of his or her research area. Much can be learned by reading studies about one's own or related academic field and then using these as thinking tools to understand one's own practices. It is of course here that sociologists of social knowledge making can play an important role in providing the discipline with reflections and empirical analysis of our history and current practices. When that is said, we also have to acknowledge that the job of transmitting the insight from our studies and – even harder – having other scholars change long-established social knowledge making practices, is not in any way an easy or harmless task. Especially not when and if this involves crossing epistemological boundaries in the social sciences.

From my own research on the production of European survey data, I have experienced that many researchers are very interested in telling me about the research they do, how they do it, the problems they run in to and how they solve them. However, from time to time I also meet a sceptical attitude to my project. The people I interview are survey researchers from all over Europe involved in constructing items, drawing samples, designing field work, instructing field workers, clearing and coding data, not to mention writing applications for funding, recruiting new teams for new participating countries and organising meetings etc. They are in many ways located in a “normal science” practice and they occupy a dominant position in a field of social science evoking the dominant view point of the academic field [Albert 2003; Kropp 2014].

The sceptical attitude I encounter often comes from the medium-level practitioners rather than the high-level organisers. Their reluctant e-mail-replies and critical questions about the purpose of my research and research ethics before allowing me to turn on the recorder show me that they in some way fear that the whole purpose of my research (and sociology of science and knowledge in general?) is to undermine their academic authority and the objectivity of science. On the one hand they do follow me when I explain that I am interested in the processes of making European survey data, the organisational challenges, the problem of finding good ways to construct

meaningful and simple educational variables for all countries in Europe etc. However, on the other hand, from what they tell me or what they write, I do not believe that they see their research as it is portrayed in the interesting empirical analysis or theoretical conceptualisation in *Social Knowledge in the Making*. So what is the role of sociologists of social knowledge making?

Taking these considerations further, we could look at the social studies of finance and economics. In the last twenty years we have learned many interesting things about finance and economics, and the field has contributed with interesting concepts and analysis. On the other hand we are experiencing the greatest economic crisis since the economic crisis of the 1930s; a crisis that the discipline of economics was not able to foresee (as the economists otherwise allege they can through modelling) or resolve. Even though this obvious paradox has been given some attention and reflexion within the field of economics, the critique and possible solutions have been modelled along the same epistemological lines as before crisis.

So, the question is how the knowledge gained from studies of social knowledge making should and could be transmitted to other social knowledge makers? And furthermore, how the insights from studies of social knowledge in the making can be used in the legitimate struggles within the field of social sciences about the principles of vision and division?

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