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Misère du relativisme et progrès dans les sciences sociales

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Depuis plusieurs décennies, les chercheurs en sciences sociales se sont très largement engagés dans la voie du nominalisme épistémologique, allant jusqu'à nier l'existence d'une réalité sociale objective, indépendante de toute observation, de toute description ou de toute interprétation. Une telle attitude contribue à démobiliser collectivement les chercheurs qui pensent que la pluralité théorique est irréductible, qu'aucune synthèse intégratrice ni aucune cumulativité scientifique ne sont atteignables, et que l'idée de dégager des lois, des principes ou des invariants concernant le monde social est une folie positiviste d'un autre âge. C'est de ce relativisme et de ce manque général d'ambition que nous devons désormais sortir.

The poverty of relativism and progress in the social sciences

For several decades, social science researchers have been moving in the direction of epistemological nominalism, going so far as to deny the existence of an objective social reality, independent of all observation, description, or interpretation of it. Such an attitude contributes to the collective demobilization of researchers who believe that theoretical plurality is irreducible, that neither an integrative synthesis nor any scientific cumulativity is attainable, and that the idea of identifying laws, principles, or invariants concerning the social world is a form of positivist madness that belongs to another age. It is time for us to move past this relativism and this general lack of ambition.

For several decades now, social science researchers in general and sociologists in particular have been moving in the direction of epistemological “constructivism” or “nominalism.” But in placing the emphasis on the construction of points of view on the world, which is not a problem per se, they have ended up denying the existence of an objective social reality,

rejecting the idea that there is a reality that exists independently of any observation, description, or interpretation of it.

In adopting this position, nominalists place a clear distance between themselves and epistemological realism, which holds that reality not only exists independently of those who study it, but also puts up a resistance to certain (unsuccessful) scientific interpretations. Realism, which has proved fruitful in both physics and biology, holds that, far from being formless, reality (whether physical, biological, or social) is objectively structured by logics, mechanisms, forces, and laws. These same principles then also shape, structure, organize, and inform human societies and behavior, whatever the state (good or bad, right or wrong) of the sciences through which those societies try to comprehend them.

The nominalist or constructivist perspective, which ultimately leads to relativism, now enjoys a broad dominance in the social sciences (sociology, anthropology, history, etc.). Whether diffuse, implicit, existing as a vague assumption on the part of researchers, or expressed in a more sophisticated manner in writings on epistemology,¹ it has a number of problematic consequences for the practical orientation and prospects of research in the field.

An irreducible theoretical plurality?

First of all, the reduction of scientific activity to points of view on the world generally makes it difficult to distinguish “good” points of view from “bad” ones, or, to put it less bluntly, the most pertinent points of view from the not so pertinent. Since every point of view is considered equally legitimate, and every researcher has the right to develop their own, the question sometimes arises as to why anyone would then decide in favor of one particular point of view, unless for social reasons (allegiance to a school or current of thought) rather than scientific ones. This then suggests that the dispersion of theoretical points of view is inevitable and an irreducible fact. At the same time, it prompts doubt as to whether there is any point in debate or discussion, if ultimately everyone will just return to their base beliefs without having been perturbed in the slightest, with no one ever being convinced by “points of view” opposed to their own.²

This kind of relativism has been defended in philosophy by authors including Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who argued that discussions between philosophers reflecting on different concepts, and therefore problems (since “all concepts are connected to problems”), were not even possible:

The best one can say about discussions is that they take things no farther, since the participants never talk about the same thing. [. . .] Sometimes philosophy is turned into the idea of a perpetual discussion, as “communicative rationality,” or as “universal democratic conversation.” Nothing is less exact, and when philosophers criticize each other it is on the basis of problems and on a plane that is different from theirs and that melt down the old concepts in the way a cannon can be melted down to make new weapons. It never takes place on the same plane. To criticize is only to establish that a

¹ Jean-Claude Passeron, *Le Raisonnement sociologique. L'espace non poppérien du raisonnement naturel*, (Paris: Éditions Nathan, 1991) and Jean-Michel Berthelot, *Les Vertus de l'incertitude. Le travail de l'analyse dans les sciences sociales* (Paris: PUF, 1996).

² Bernard Lahire, “Risquer l’interprétation. Pertinences interprétatives et surinterprétations en sciences sociales,” *Enquête. Anthropologie, Histoire, Sociologie* 3 (1996): 61–87.

concept vanishes when it is thrust into a new milieu, losing some of its components, or acquiring others that transform it.³

In making these assertions, Deleuze and Guattari seem to be suggesting that every concept is “perfect,” right, relevant, or true from the outset, and could never be improved upon by any kind of discussion. Given that philosophy is an exclusively theoretical activity, whose access to reality is not governed by any recognized methodology, we can understand Deleuze and Guattari’s position, which acknowledges the impossibility or at least the futility of any discussion that would pit one brand of philosophy against another. But this conception of things becomes far more problematic when argued (or tacitly put into practice) by researchers in the social sciences. Because when we ask in the name of what, on the basis of what principles or elements, it is possible to decide between “points of view,” the answer must of course be: on the basis of our knowledge of empirical reality. To dissolve reality, leaving nothing but a disorderly multiplicity of points of view, amounts to ruling out any possibility of passing judgement on the knowledge produced.

An impossible integrative synthesis?

The implied claim of interpretive democracy or theoretical relativism that every point of view—and therefore every theoretical school (Marxism, structuralism, structural functionalism, genetic structuralism, symbolic interactionism, comprehensive sociology, pragmatism, ethnomethodology, etc.), since they all lead their own parallel and sometimes entirely discrete lives—is of equal value to its competitors, prohibits from the outset or at least seriously discourages any attempt at a theoretical integration of different points of view.

It is somewhat surprising to see how an author such as Jean-Claude Passeron, once the most fervent advocate of a Weberian nominalist epistemology in the social sciences, enthusiastically collaborated with Pierre Bourdieu upon the construction of a theoretical synthesis—a highly fertile one, which he never disowned—of the Weberian, Durkheimian, and Marxist conceptions of the social world. Writing in an integrative vein, gesturing toward what Bourdieu would later call “the law of reciprocal blindness and insight which governs all social struggles for truth,”⁴ the two authors of *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* declare:

One only has to compare the classical theories of the foundations of power, those of Marx, Durkheim and Weber, to see that the conditions which enable each of them to be constituted exclude the possibility of the object-construction carried out by the other two. Thus, Marx is opposed to Durkheim in that he sees the product of a class domination where Durkheim (who most clearly reveals his social philosophy when dealing with the sociology of education, the privileged locus of the illusion of consensus) sees only the effect of an undivided social constraint. In another respect, Marx and Durkheim are opposed to Weber in that by their methodological objectivism they counter the temptation to see in relations of force inter-individual relations of influence or domination and to represent the different forms of power (political, economic, religious, etc.) as so many sociologically undifferentiated modalities of one agent’s predominance (*Macht*) over another. Finally, because his reaction against artificialist conceptions of the social order leads Durkheim to emphasize the externality of constraint, whereas Marx, concerned to reveal the relations of violence

³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchill (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 16, 28.

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, “A Lecture on the Lecture,” in *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 177–198: 183.

underlying the ideologies of legitimacy, tends in his analysis of the effects of the dominant ideology to minimize the real efficacy of the symbolic strengthening of power relations (*rappports de force*) that is implied in the recognition by the dominated of the legitimacy of domination, Weber is opposed to both Durkheim and Marx in that he is the only one who explicitly takes as his object the specific contribution that representations of legitimacy make to the exercise and perpetuation of power, even if, confined within a psycho-sociological conception of those representations, he cannot, as Marx does, inquire into the functions fulfilled in social relations by misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) of the objective truth of those relations as power relations.⁵

If the plurality of theories were irreducible, if it were basically futile to compare, contrast, articulate, or synthesize them, then the theory set out in *Reproduction* would make no sense whatsoever, being nothing more than an eclectic collection of theoretical odds and ends with no coherence at all. But far from simply enumerating a number of rival theories (those of Weber, Marx, and Durkheim), the authors sought, and succeeded in proposing, a synthesis of the respective contributions of the three great founders of sociology. If we were to hold, as Deleuze and Guattari do in philosophy and as Passeron does as an epistemologist in the social sciences, that there is no point in theories entering into dialogue with one another, that controversy and debate are pointless, and that each theory proposes its own version of a reality which, in itself, is ultimately inaccessible, then scientific progress is rendered inconceivable.

Sisyphus the sociologist?

Here we touch upon one of the principal consequences of nominalism-constructivism in the social sciences: the conviction that no real scientific progress is possible, and that the accumulation of scientific results is an entirely illusory and therefore unattainable ideal. Not all researchers who hold this opinion believe (although some do) that the social sciences are indistinguishable from literature or philosophy, or that everything on the social sciences market is of equal value; indeed, some of them even think that it is possible to work rigorously, methodically, with theoretical clarity and a concern for empirical evidence, in order to achieve pertinent knowledge about the social. But to imagine that this accumulated knowledge could form a solid foundation upon which other researchers would then be able to build in order to clarify, improve, amplify, or generalize it, or that this knowledge can be articulated and integrated into more powerful models by researchers building bridges between sectors of knowledge that were formerly kept separate and do not communicate with each other⁶—this is a step that very few of these researchers take.

We can see an expression of this mistrust of any idea of scientific progress or accumulation in a sentence of Max Weber's that is often quoted but rarely critiqued. The German sociologist wrote that "there are sciences to which eternal youth is granted."⁷ His intention here was to emphasize the fact that idealistic concepts always depend upon the historical realities to which they refer or upon which they are based, historical realities which are subject to change. These eternally young sciences are the "historical disciplines," namely, "those to which the eternally onward flowing stream of culture perpetually brings new problems. At the very heart of their

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Sage, 1990), 4–5.

⁶ Bernard Lahire, *The Sociological Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. Helen Morrison (Cambridge: Polity, 2020) and *La Part rêvée. L'interprétation sociologique des rêves, volume 2* (Paris: La Découverte, 2021).

⁷ Max Weber, "'Objectivity' in Social Science and Social Policy," in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1949), 50–112: 104.

task lies not only the transiency of *all* ideal types *but* also at the same time the inevitability of *new* ones.”⁸ What Weber describes as the “perpetual reconstruction of those concepts through which we seek to comprehend reality,”⁹ however, only applies to concepts such as “caesaropapist Imperial power” and “charismatic domination,” which already contain within themselves certain elements specific to a historical period. Weber’s observation therefore should not prevent researchers from looking beyond the multiplicity and incessant variation of historical concepts and the historically determined situations to which they refer, in order to gain a better grasp on the real.

Taking a more realist approach than Weber’s, Norbert Elias contrasted Weber’s ideal type with the “real type,” lamenting the fact that researchers do not concentrate their efforts on developing an integrative and cumulative body of knowledge that would yield a progressively more adequate description of reality: “Real-typical models, as they emerge from the work of analysis and synthesis carried out across generations, are absolutely indispensable for sociological research. The fact that sociology at present largely lacks this continuity of research work developed over several generations is a major shortcoming.”¹⁰

When they bump up against reality, researchers unfailingly encounter a series of problems which stem from the properties of the real that they are seeking to uncover. Depending upon the characteristics of their discipline, the extent of their own scientific culture, and the current state of scientific work, they may be able to reformulate these problems; they may even discover other problems which their predecessors had not noticed, but they never completely invent the reality of these problems. And when they succeed in solving some of them, or when they manage to integrate all of them into a coherent theory, they are clearly making what may be called scientific progress.

The relativistic spirit of the times has ended up making a taboo of the word “progress”—which does nothing to encourage the desire to make significant advances. As Norbert Elias writes: “One sometimes gets the impression that sociologists do not believe that it is still possible to make discoveries in their discipline that would be as significant and verifiable as those made in the natural sciences. And indeed, since they don’t believe it possible, they are unlikely to succeed. Yet there are many discoveries to be made in the human sciences.”¹¹ In fact, a relativist, constructivist climate has descended over the social science research community, inhibiting any desire to compare competing research programs, which therefore are reduced to points of view all equally worthy of interest, even before they have been closely examined. This discourages researchers from delving into the profusion of work that has been accumulated over more than a century, in search of some footholds that would make it possible to identify invariants and make some scientific progress.

Specialization and reduced ambitions

In addition to all of the problems mentioned above, something else poses an obstacle to grasping the general properties of the real: specialization. Objectively speaking, the social sciences now play a quasi-journalistic role in informing people. In a complex, highly

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 105.

¹⁰ Norbert Elias, *La Dynamique sociale de la conscience. Sociologie de la connaissance et des sciences* (Paris: La Découverte, 2016), 314. **Translator’s note:** Our translation. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign language material in this article are our own.

¹¹ Norbert Elias, *Théorie des symboles* (Paris: Seuil, 2015), 30.

differentiated society, they provide insight into parts of the social world that the vast majority of citizens know little or nothing about. Their researchers take us into the inner circle of political parties, the world of finance, or the world of crack dealers; they plunge us into the heart of sports clubs, educational institutions, the most diverse businesses, and middle-class or working-class neighborhoods, in doing so responding to the legitimate need to know “what’s going on” in this or that sector of society. And the more esoteric a sector (law, science, finance, religion, etc.), the more energy the researcher can devote to describing and elucidating the very specific and complex individual activities that go on within it.

At a time when investigative journalists have become an increasingly rare species, it is true that the social sciences carry out investigative work and acquire knowledge about different parts of the world in a way that is not dissimilar to the best investigative journalism. As “super journalists,” in the words of Robert Ezra Park, former journalist and founding sociologist of the first Chicago School, they help us discover isolated pockets of the social world. But in focusing on the study of these isolated pockets and examining the practices and representations of people’s lives at school, in the family, in the workplace, in a neighborhood, a library, or in the halls of a museum, they risk reducing investigation to a kind of social phenomenology which, while precise in its descriptions of the practices, “motivations,” and representations of those involved, nonetheless does not go beyond the surface of things, and discourages us from asking more crucial questions. In simply describing the logics of actors within specific social sectors, researchers lose sight of any broad, general, or in-depth perspective on the social world. In short, they lose sight of the scientific ambitions that ought to be their primary concern. What do such monographs reveal about the structures of this world and its most common recurrent mechanisms? How are the worlds of practice they describe related to structures that have sometimes been built up over very long periods of time?

Growing awareness of the existence of major problems, processes, and fundamental mechanisms that continually appear just beneath the surface in research in the humanities and social sciences is leading to a revision of the current relativist and nominalist epistemology. Whether we consider the question of the social differentiation of activities or functions, that of inequalities and relations of domination, that of socialization and the processes of incorporation of the social world, that of the cultural transmission of knowledge, that of the production of artefacts of all kinds, or that of the practical and symbolic functions of language, the persistence of major questions in the most diverse scientific works is not merely the result of effects of *episteme* (in the Foucauldian sense of the term) or simply the outcome of common points of view; it has to do with the very structure and properties of the object studied.

Laws, principles, invariants

This brings us to the final sensitive point about epistemological nominalism-constructivism: its inability, and even refusal, to formulate laws and principles that govern the social world, as others have formulated laws and principles that govern the physical and biological worlds. As the great American physicist Lee Smolin (cofounder of loop quantum gravity theory) writes, very clearly: “This concept of a law is basic to a realist conception of nature [. . .].”¹² The aim of physics, according to Smolin, is then “to find the most general laws of nature, from which

¹² Lee Smolin, *Einstein’s Unfinished Revolution: The Search for What Lies Beyond the Quantum* (London: Penguin, 2019).

the multitude of phenomena exhibited by nature may all be explained.”¹³ The notion of scientific cumulativeness goes hand in hand with the notions of laws, invariants, constants, and regularities. But the relativistic (nominalist and constructivist) climate in which social science communities find themselves today has discouraged researchers from drawing upon the common treasury of all the work that has been done in the past, with a view to finding opportunities to identify invariants and make scientific progress.

What is urgent right now, however, is that we tackle the difficult but not impossible task of formulating or clarifying the “laws” and major social mechanisms that have already been brought to light—whether intentionally or not—by various works in the humanities and social sciences. Even if sociologists, historians, and anthropologists are not always able to express clearly the major problems underlying their studies, we might say that they are always manifested to some degree or other in those studies. However, these problems are expressed in very different ways in each case, and use different vocabularies, which does not help either the researchers or their readers to clearly identify them. Caught up in the specificities of a given field, group, institution, period, etc., and using highly diverse vocabularies that reflect distinct disciplinary traditions, disciplinary subsectors, or theoretical traditions, researchers themselves do not always see what their work may have in common with the results of work elsewhere. And since the prevailing relativist nominalism does not encourage them to do so, they end up to some extent substantiating Weber’s observation by imagining that they are studying irreducible singularities or particularities (of group, institution, period, etc.) when in fact they are often merely rediscovering what has already been observed, established, and formulated by others in completely different fields.

As we know, although he never discussed these issues at length, Bourdieu had no problem with using the concept of “law.” In his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, he wrote that:

Those who deplore the disillusioning pessimism or the demobilizing effects of sociological analysis when it formulates for instance the laws of social reproduction are neither more nor less justified than those who would criticize Galileo for having discouraged the dream of flight by construing the law of falling bodies. To state a social law such as the one which establishes that cultural capital attracts more cultural capital is to offer the possibility of including among the circumstances liable to contribute to the effect which that law predicts—in this particular case, the educational elimination of the children who are most deprived of culture capital—certain “modifying elements” as Auguste Comte called them, which, however weak they may be in themselves, can be enough to transform in line with our wishes the result of the relevant mechanisms.¹⁴

My own point of view is that the “great names” of the social sciences are not great simply for arbitrary reasons, as scientific relativism tends to think since it sees only extra-scientific reasons for the success of one scientific endeavor over another, but because of their ability to shed light, through their work, upon central questions relating to the nature of human societies, and at the same time, to grasp the fundamental features that structure life within society. For an author such as Bourdieu, these include the processes of incorporation, objectification, transmission and inheritance, the procedural and non-intentional nature of embodied memory, practical analogy, the social differentiation of activities, domination, and

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Bourdieu, “A Lecture on the Lecture,” 182–83.

so on. But a similar claim can be made for Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Marcel Mauss, Maurice Halbwachs, Jack Goody, Norbert Elias, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Françoise Héritier, Alain Testart, Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget, Henri Wallon, Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, Émile Meyerson, or John Bowlby. Some of them bring together and articulate a series of general problems in their theory (as in the case of Durkheim, Marx, Elias, and Bourdieu, for example), while others focus on a single problem or a more limited series of problems (as in the case of Goody, Bowlby, Halbwachs, etc.).

However, it is no coincidence that French anthropology, with authors such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Françoise Héritier, Maurice Godelier, and Alain Testart, has continued to make it an explicit aim to discover invariants, laws, or universal mechanisms in spite of the great risk, particularly in the case of structural anthropology, not only of naturalizing these mechanisms, but of seeing them solely in terms of “universal structures of the human mind” or “laws of mental functioning.” This risk has discouraged sociologists from searching for invariants, constants, regularities, or historical laws, even though such an approach was present from the very dawn of the discipline (with Comte, Marx, and Durkheim) and implicitly informs the work of Bourdieu. As Charles-Henri Cuin neatly summarizes it:

If we were to take stock of the sociological “laws” that claim to be such, and which may still be considered valid to varying degrees today, we would no doubt find that most of them were formulated before 1914. Ruling out the hardly credible hypothesis that these authors had already “discovered” most of the discoverable laws and that their successors were fundamentally incompetent, this would mean that we stopped looking for them very early on—which does not mean that we did not come across any . . . The second observation is that, although they deny it, the sociologists most concerned with explanation spend their time surreptitiously making use of more or less explicit laws, the most theoretical among them making efforts to construct such laws. The former would be hard-pressed to put forward the slightest serious interpretation without recourse to some relatively stable synthetic principles of analysis of empirical reality, while the latter would be hard-pressed to deliver theoretical knowledge of any generality or consistency. All of them, however, will only admit to using or proposing “frameworks of analysis,” “models,” or other “controlled interpretations,” denying that they have ever succumbed to the sin of “positivism” in any form.¹⁵

The arguments put forward to distinguish the humanities and social sciences from other sciences point toward the allegedly different nature of their object. Their objects are subjects (with consciousness, subjectivity, and intentionality); they are supposedly characterized by their historicity (the uniqueness of each social fact, which can never be repeated in the same way twice in history), and by their complexity. But each of these arguments can be easily countered: human behavior and human social structures can indeed be objectified even though they involve conscious individuals; regularities or constants over long periods of time can indeed be established, and comparisons between societies reveal as many commonalities as differences. Finally, the physical or living world is no less complex (or rich) than the social world, and we are going about the problem the wrong way if we take for granted their greater “simplicity,” when in fact we are reliant upon the knowledge acquired by scientists in work that has made it possible to identify major principles, mechanisms, constants, and laws. In this sense, the alleged complexity of the social as compared to the physical or biological is simply

¹⁵ Charles-Henri Cuin, “La démarche nomologique en sociologie (y a-t-il des lois sociologiques?),” *Swiss Journal of Sociology* 32, no. 1 (2006): 92.

the result of a lack of clarity and the lack of a scientific framework that would render the results of the human and social sciences more legible.

To abandon the ambition of establishing social “laws,” constants, or historical regularities is to confine oneself to the task of observing and describing the various social situations that might exist and, once again in Cuin’s words, to “renounce scientificity.” The humanities and social sciences would then satisfy the desire for knowledge of the different, the foreign, the strange, and the exotic; they would also fulfil the expectations of a readership broader than that which exists for the material and life sciences—expectations of concreteness, and sometimes narrative (this broader readership, as we are of course aware, does not have any spontaneous scientific expectations). But in doing so they would drift away from the objective of explicating, clarifying, formalizing, and accumulating knowledge.

Françoise Héritier posed, in my opinion quite satisfactorily, the question of the possibility of this search for invariants and in particular how it relates to well-defined empirical research. She distinguished between “different levels of approach, namely ethnography, ethnology, and anthropology”:

Nowadays, every student thinks that they are or declare themselves to be an anthropologist, whereas in fact anthropology is a place you may eventually arrive at, a kind of climax. Ethnography consists in gathering as many concrete details as possible about a practice, for example the construction of a boat or a house, or about an institution. Take the famous case of Pierre Saintyves, who studied practices of sneezing across all the world’s societies. What do people say when they sneeze? If we list all the known situations without drawing any particular conclusions, then we are doing ethnography. Ethnology [. . .] is the long-term work of understanding how a society functions. I am an ethnologist of the Samo, just as others are of other African or Amerindian populations. Anthropology is a particular level of study into which one is not obliged to enter, but which seems to me to be the only one that is, not just pertinent, but capable of giving you wings, delivering a real intellectual enthusiasm in addition to the bodily pleasures of the ethnologist’s work in the field. This great intellectual pleasure arises from the moment you begin to understand how a society works, when you become familiar with the work of others and try to use all of that information to find the general beneath the particular. In fact, what has always interested me is trying to find laws—even if it will be several centuries before we can hope to discover the essential laws of how the social works in its entirety.¹⁶

Alain Testart is also well known for his search for laws or invariants. In a tribute to the social anthropologist, Pierre Le Roux gives a very clear picture of the scientific horizon of Testart’s work:

One day in 1997, he told me something like the following: “There is a great deal of high-quality ethnographic data in the world. But too few attempts have been made to synthesize it in order to uncover general sociological laws. It’s high time we got down to it! Anthropology today is in its infancy, like physics was in Newton’s day. Just because we haven’t yet found laws in the human sciences doesn’t mean that there aren’t any. We have to look for them and find them. That’s the exciting challenge for us today.” Testart set about this task, tirelessly exploring a jungle of often little-regarded data, opening up new ways to extract general principles from this complex labyrinth. To do this, he drew upon methods and knowledge from different disciplines,

¹⁶ Françoise Héritier, “Une anthropologue dans la cité. Entretien,” *L’Autre, Cliniques, cultures et sociétés* 9, no. 1 (2008): 12.

relying on an implacable logic: his training as an engineer, the rigor of law, and the precision of archaeology. He sought out these mysterious laws, making it a duty and an intellectual joy, just as others in their time had sought out the sources of the Nile.¹⁷

Finally, and still largely if not exclusively in the field of anthropology, another lineage of researchers has endeavored to establish “universals” (of different types) valid for all (or almost all) human societies known by prehistory, history, ethnology, or sociology. This lineage would include figures such as George Peter Murdock,¹⁸ Robin Fox and Lionel Tiger,¹⁹ Donald E. Brown,²⁰ Christoph Antweiler,²¹ Charles F. Hockett,²² and Steven Pinker.²³

Donald E. Brown was responsible for the first and most solidly argued presentation of this search for universals. In essence, Brown says that anthropologists regularly conduct research that can only be carried out because the differences between “us” and the peoples studied are not as great as is usually thought within the discipline. As the American anthropologist explains, if we are able to understand human societies that are very different from our own, it is because differences do not preclude similarities—and by focusing on the differences, anthropologists have contributed to a denial of the underlying similarities.

Lists of universals have been drawn up by these researchers. The first was published by Murdock in 1945, who argued for the “psychic unity of humanity,”²⁴ but it is above all the list drawn up by Brown in 1991 that is now the most debated and discussed by anthropologists interested in these issues. Such lists nevertheless pose a series of problems. The most obvious is their lack of theoretical coherence, insofar as they enumerate a series of features that belong to very different levels of generality. It could be said that they suffer from a lack of theoretical problematization or from a sometimes rather naive positivism, and from a resulting failure to integrate the different universals in question into a framework that would enable them to be articulated with one another. The frequent alphabetical ordering of the items on these lists (there are 73 in Murdock’s work and around 400 in Brown’s) is a straightforward enough manifestation of this lack of theoretical structure or integration. For the reader, they tend to have the feel of an eclectic collection in the style of the poet Jacques Prévert’s *Inventory*.

Despite all the criticisms that may be levelled at them, studies in this field have made it possible to reexamine the question of invariants in human societies and to develop important arguments and counterarguments which have clarified an area of thought that is still underexplored: from the critical reflections of the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz²⁵ to those of the Canadian primatologist Bernard Chapais.²⁶ They have also led to some very convincing partial syntheses. To give one example, Murdock and Provost’s seminal article on

¹⁷ Pierre Le Roux, “L’inlassable chercheur de lois. Hommage à Alain Testart (1945–2013),” *Études rurales* 193 (2014): 9–12.

¹⁸ George P. Murdock, “The Common Denominator of Cultures” [1945] in *Culture and Society: Twenty-Four Essays* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1965), 87–110.

¹⁹ Robin Fox and Lionel Tiger, *The Imperial Animal* [1971] (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

²⁰ Donald E. Brown, *Human Universals* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1991).

²¹ Christoph Antweiler, *Our Common Denominator: Human Universals Revisited* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn, 2016).

²² Charles F. Hockett, “The Origin of Speech,” *Scientific American* 203 (1960): 89–96.

²³ Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (London: Penguin, 2002).

²⁴ Murdock, “The Common Denominator of Cultures,” 91.

²⁵ Clifford Geertz, “The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 22, no. 4 (1966): 2–8.

²⁶ Bernard Chapais, *Liens de sang. Aux origines biologiques de la société humaine* (Paris: Éditions Boréal, 2015).

the sexual division of labor in many hunter-gatherer societies²⁷ led to analyses by Paola Tabet²⁸ and Alain Testart, with Testart, for example, pointing out some “surprising constants”: that men were more involved in hunting while women were more involved in gathering, or, when involved in hunting, were kept away from sharp weapons. This traditional division of labor, he writes, “is astonishing in its constancy, its near-universality right up to the present day.”²⁹

Rather than “universals” in the sense of stable features that can be observed in all societies, what are brought to light here are invariants in the sense of “laws” or “mechanisms” that are combined differently and expressed in very diverse ways across the entire range of historically known societies.

Conclusion

It seems to me that a twofold epistemological attitude, at once realist and constructivist, ought to be adopted in the social sciences as it is elsewhere: it is a matter of being deeply convinced both that the sociohistorical real exists independently of the scholars who study it, and that the theoretical models through which we try to explain it are always constructions that may vary according to the background of the researchers, the extent of their efforts at synthesis, their specialist interests, and the levels of social reality upon which they seek to shed light.

There are indeed things to be discovered in the social world—regularities, recurrences, determinisms of all kinds—but these discoveries can only be made through or on the basis of constructs that include an element of arbitrariness on the part of those who develop them. Conversely, analytical models are all constructs, but they are not all equal: they may be more or less pertinent depending on what we are trying to reveal—and when researchers are concerned with empirical proof, they will always encounter resistance when they hit the “rough terrain” of the real.

As we have seen, contemporary forms of relativism and nominalism rest upon a set of beliefs about the social sciences: the impossibility or futility of comparing the relative heuristic power of competing scientific programs; the impossibility of articulating or integrating points of view and knowledge produced in a dispersed manner into a synthetic framework; the impossibility of accumulating knowledge; and the absence of any formulable laws or general principles about the functioning of the social world.

If we take all of these beliefs together, we can well understand why the idea of any kind of scientific progress is ruled out, judged naively scientific, positivist (or “naturalist”), and written off from the outset as doomed to failure. It is against this tendency, which, more than a hundred years after the modern foundation of our sciences, is reaching deadly proportions, that we must collectively struggle.

²⁷ George P. Murdock and Caterina Provost, “Factors in the Division of Labor by Sex: A Cross-Cultural Analysis,” *Ethnology* 12, no. 2 (1973): 203–25.

²⁸ Paola Tabet, “Les mains, les outils, les armes,” *L’Homme* 19, no. 3–4 (1979): 5–61.

²⁹ Alain Testart, *L’Amazone et la cuisinière. Anthropologie de la division sexuelle du travail* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2014): 15.