

Jean Piaget

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1 Introduction

In an article that appeared in *The British Journal of Sociology* in 1991, Richard Kitchener (1991) proposed and convincingly defended the thesis that Jean Piaget is quite possibly the most important sociologist that no (Anglophone) sociologist has ever read seriously (or has ever seen characterized as a sociologist). Kitchener diagnosis remains as true today as when his article was published almost two decades ago. Jean Piaget currently does not belong in (nor any attempts have been made to induct him into) the established (post-war) “canon” of traditional (“classical”) figures of sociological theory or a presence in “contemporary” social thought. His work is not usually discussed as having any sociological implications, nor is he thought to have made any substantive contributions to social theory or the methodology of the social sciences more broadly conceived.

This is puzzling for the simple reason that Piaget’s early reputation outside of Europe was developed as a sociologist (Hsueh, 2004), and that “sociological” issues were a constant theme in his thinking throughout his career. For example, it is not a secret (Piaget, 1977: 132) that Piaget taught sociology (however briefly) at the university of Geneva. In addition, a collection of essays of his sociological writings—originally published in French in 1965 and reprinted in 1977—has already been translated into English (Piaget, 1995). As Kitchener (1991: 422) puts it, “[t]hese works. . . form the basis of his complete sociological theory, a rich and complex theory having

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fundamental similarities to exchange theory, to symbolic interactionism, to functionalism, to Habermas' theory of communicative competence, and to certain versions of structuralism.”

Given this context, my job in this chapter is both easier and a bit harder than that of most of the other contributors to this volume. My job is easier because I do not have to engage in any sort of rhetorical acrobatics to establish the point that Piaget is a central figure in sociological thought. Both institutionally and intellectually Piaget was a sociologist (among other things). In what follows I could have easily concentrated on the relevance of Piaget's thesis that knowledge is an active *construction* on the part of the child for studies of socialization and work at the intersection of the sociology of culture and cognition (Bourdieu, 1990, Lizardo, 2004, Toren, 1999) or on Piaget's influential development of a brand of “generative structuralism” (Piaget, 1970) in which the classical concept of social structure is recast in a dynamic, historical way so as to liberate it from its connotations with static analysis.

Instead I will concentrate on Piaget's *metatheoretical* writings, especially as they pertain to broad issues on the Philosophy of Social Science. The reason for this is twofold: first, these are still the least well-known of Piaget's contributions to sociology; second, they reach at the core of fundamental issues in social ontology and epistemology—relevant to the conduct of social science at least since Durkheim's programmatic formulations in *The Rules*—e.g. structural explanation and the coherence of the notion of “social causes”, as well as the relationship between the styles of explanation used in sociology and those prevalent in other cognate disciplines—issues that have yet to receive a thoroughly satisfactory treatment in the philosophy of social science (Turner, 2007). We will see that Piaget's treatment of these issues was not only capable of sidestepping some of the basic conceptual dilemmas that beset the thought of the classical theorists, but that his solutions converge with some of the most “cutting edge” work in contemporary theory.

2 Sociological explanation

Is there such a thing as a specifically “sociological” mode of explanation? According to Durkheim, sociologists should rely on a mode of explanation that is no different from that of other sciences (establishing patterns of “concomitant variation” across two or more properly characterized phenomena). Sorokin (1937) and more recently, Archer (Archer, 1996) have argued that depending on the subject matter, explanation can take radically divergent forms:

1. Establishing covariation or “functional” relations of dependence between postulated causes and their corresponding effects (the Durkheimian view) or
2. Establishing “logical” or “meaningful” linkages between cultural (or institutional) items. This “dualist” argument is required if sociologists are to be able to make sense of such things as “culture,” “knowledge” or “ideas.”

Piaget appreciated the strength of the Durkheimian argument but in many ways sided with the dualist point of view. He saw this dualism between two forms of explanation (cause-effect versus logical or implicational linkages) as a key point of epistemological convergence between sociological and psychological explanation, since in both disciplines analysts resort to these two analytic frameworks in order to account for the coherence or patterning of phenomena. On the one hand, there are analysts who primarily resort to the postulation of *casual* (or “functional” in Sorokin’s terms) relations between distinct aspects of overall phenomena (as this is understood in traditional Aristotelian philosophy). On the other hand, there are those analysts who dispense with purely causal explanation and resort instead to the postulation of relations of logical (or socio-logical) implications, or “axiomatized analyses” in which different aspects of sociological phenomena are connected to one another by systems of relations that are less constraining than the asymmetric, non-reflexive strictures characteristic of the casual relation (see for instance Sorokin (1937) for an example of “implicational” analysis which dispenses with “causal” forms of analysis).

According to Piaget, relations of implication are in fact unique to those macro-level forms of cultural order that Durkheim referred to by the term “collective representation.” Cultural explanations based on the causes of cultural forms (which may include the postulation of material or interactional causes), are thus analytically distinct from those based the autonomous implicational patterns exhibited by the elements of a given cultural Gestalt. In both the sociological and psychological domains we can find analysts drawing on both implicational forms of explanation “alongside real or concrete explanations” based on concrete causes. In Piaget’s view, this duality of implicational and causal analysis cannot be easily transcended by appealing to either one-dimensional causal or implicational explanatory schemes (as has currently been proposed by Alexander (2003) in the case of the latter).

Nevertheless the “duality of implication inherent in collective representations and of causality raises a fundamental problem of explanation” in the social sciences. This problem has been a key axis of contention in classical social theory, especially in the work of Marx and Pareto. In classical Marxist theory, the duality of implication and causation took the form of the traditional problematic of “infrastructure” and “superstructure.” This is a problem that has been addressed in different ways by analysts in the Marxian tradition, and which received a classical treatment (in the form of his theory of “residues”) at the hands of Pareto. Piaget proposes that the seeds of explanatory progress—and transcendence of the base/superstructure problematic—are already implicit in the classical tradition. In order to solve this dilemma, sociologists must make the same theoretical turn that led to progress in psychological explanation: the *en-active* or *action-focused* turn (e.g Varela et al., 1991). It was precisely after psychological theorists realized that “the contents of consciousness alone explain nothing causally and that the only possible causal explanation must move back from consciousness to behavior” (Piaget, 1995: 35), that they were able to make progress on this front. It was only after psychologists turned from a preoccupation with the contents of consciousness and towards a systematic concern with *action patterns* that progress was made in psychological explanation.

Piaget recommends the same remedy to sociologists. These last, if they wish to propose causal forms of explanation must reject explanations “based on ideology, in favor of explanations through action.” In particular, actions related to what Marx called *praxis* (e.g. collective action “. . . carried out in common to preserve the life of the social group in a material environment”) and what Mauss referred to as *bodily techniques* (e.g. “. . . concrete and technical actions which become perpetuated in collective representations”). Thus for Piaget, after we take an enactive perspective, it is easy to see that “[t]he problem of relations between infrastructure and superstructure is, therefore, closely linked to that of relations between the causality of behavior patterns and the implications within representation” (Piaget, 1995: 35).

3 The Location of the Social and the Issues of “Levels”

Piaget’s basic strategy, as can already be noted, is to draw abstract commonalities between the explanatory projects of sociology and psychology (and biology) with an eye towards establishing the ultimate “location” of specifically “sociological” processes and mechanisms in relation to those studied in the other two disciplines. This is a contentious issue, since it gets at the core of the struggle to “differentiate” sociology from other disciplines, as well as dealing with the issue of whether there exists phenomena that are “purely” sociological (Durkheim, 1982, Parsons, 1937). Piaget takes a conciliatory stance in this debate, denying that there exist “sociological” phenomena *sui generis* while at the same time attempting to carve out a division of labor between the three disciplines, especially as it pertains to key distinctions in the *styles* of explanation that are routinely deployed in each field.

His main conclusion in this regard is that “[t]he mental. . . exists *between* the biological and the social” (italics added Piaget, 1995: 33). This way of formulating the issue provides us with an opportunity to establish a preliminary distinction between psychological and sociological explanation. But first, it is important to realize that the relationship between sociology,

psychology and biology cannot be readily conceived as comprising a series of hierarchical “levels” of inclusion (see (Wiley, 1986) for an example of this way of thinking about the issue), such that the biological is included in the psychological and this latter in the sociological (as suggested by the initial statement that the psychological lies between the sociological and biological). Instead, it is best to conceive of it as comprising “. . . a simultaneous link from biology to psychology and sociology together, these [last] two disciplines *having the same object* (italics added Piaget, 1995: 33).

In a surprising passage, especially for those who see Piaget primarily as a psychologist, Piaget notes that “human knowledge is *essentially collective, and social life constitutes an essential factor in the creation and growth of knowledge* (italics added Piaget, 1995: 30)” This assertion stands in sharp contrast to the usual pictures of Piaget’s conception of the knowing subject as an isolated individual interacting with a material world of objects in isolation from any form of collective or social influence (as in the naive textbook line of critique with invidiously contrasts Vygotsky’s “sociological” approach to Piaget’s “individualistic” approach to cognitive development). Instead, for Piaget, all forms of knowledge, in particular the most scientifically rigorous and logical forms are—following Durkheim (1995)—collective products through and through. It is clear that if Piaget belongs in any recognizable tradition of social theory (Levine, 1995), he is part of the French tradition of “collective epistemology” that begins with Comte and Saint Simon, and continues with Durkheim, Lucien Levy-Bruhl (a thinker that Piaget insists has been widely misunderstood and unfairly dismissed) and Marcel Mauss.

Piaget’s notion that psychology and sociology study the same set of phenomena but from alternative perspectives (mainly by giving different processes and mechanisms different *explanatory weights*) might sound controversial to some who prefer to draw a sharp boundary between the various disciplines, or those who think of sociology as an interpretative discipline and not a natural science. But this way of conceptualizing the issue is distinctive of the “French” tradition that Piaget belongs to going at least all the way back to Durkheim (Schmaus, 2004). Thus Piaget rejects as counter-productive the standard picture which suggests that there are three aspects

of the individual, the biological, the psychological and the sociological. Instead, for Piaget, “there is on the one hand the organism, determined by hereditary characteristics as well as by ontogenetic mechanisms” and on other hand there is human behavior and activity, which has both mental and social aspects. In this respect “[p]sychology and sociology are comparable, in their interdependence to two closely related biological sciences” (Piaget, 1995: 33).

In this respect, psychological and sociological explanation cannot be easily separated, and it has been the failure of most psychological and sociological theorists (including Durkheim) to have proposed shaky criteria with which to justify a hasty division between these two alternative forms of understanding and accounting for human activity. This also means according to Piaget that all of the problems of psychological explanation “are therefore also found in sociological explanation, with virtually the sole difference that the ‘I’ is replaced by the ‘we’, and that actions and [cognitive] ‘operations’ become, when a collective dimension is added, interactions” (Piaget, 1995: 33). This is a bold thesis, and a key to the understanding Piaget’s approach to one of the most contentious issues in the history of the social sciences.

As has already be noted, Piaget’s primary meta-theoretical move in this respect is to establish correspondences between the fundamental entities and activities (Machamer et al., 2000) that constitute the phenomena which psychology and sociology aim to explain. Thus, he draws a one-to-one correspondence between the primary activity that is postulated in psychological explanation—the notion of (mental) *operation*—with the primary activity that is postulated in sociological explanation: the notion of *interaction*. Piaget defines interaction in a very particular manner as consisting of “behaviour patterns which are capable of *reciprocal* modification.” This formulation—emphasizing the notion of reciprocal modification of activity on the part of two organisms—is reminiscent of that proposed by George Herber Mead (1913). The key point to keep in mind is that beyond these formal commonalities, all of the types of questions that figure prominently in sociological explanation have an “analogue” in psychology: “. . . [t]his is particularly true of the central notion by means of which Durkheimian sociologists have wished to sever all relations between soci-

ology and psychology, and this is the notion of totality” (Piaget, 1995: 34).

4 Beyond Holism and Individualism

To tackle the perennial issue of whether the individual should form part of sociological explanation (or whether the individual should be subsumed under some overarching construct), Piaget revisits Durkheim’s seminal argument, most clearly laid out in the essay “Individual and Collective Representations” (Durkheim, 1953), that the *sui generis* status of society has to be conceded if *sui generis* emergence is granted in other domains of inquiry (the biological, chemical and mental). Piaget notes that “[t]here is a very curious passage. . . in which Durkheim compares, by a sort of analogical proportion, the collective consciousness in relation to its individual elements with an individual state of consciousness. . . in relation to the organic elements in which it depends.” Piaget goes on to repeat Durkheim’s conclusion that just as any individual mental representation whether cognitive or perceptual is not the result of a simple combination between its organic elements each considered in isolation—e.g. individual neuronal synapses—but is “rather an unity from the outset” (its identity lies in the pattern of neural firing and interconnectivity across regions of the brain), “. . . so collective representations are not reducible to the individual representations whose synthesis they constitute” Piaget notes that “[t]his comparison of Durkheim’s is more far-reaching than he could have imagined in 1898” (Piaget, 1995: 34).

What are the (far-reaching) implications of Durkheim’s “emergence” argument (Sawyer, 2001) that Durkheim himself did not envision? According to Piaget, the notion of emergent totality constitutes in fact one of the primary linkages between sociological and psychological explanation because the phenomenon of *sui generis* emergence appears in both psychology and sociology. For Piaget, the prototypical example of emergent totality in psychology “corresponds closely to the notion of total form or ‘Gestalt’.” Piaget notes that while the objections that have been leveled at the Durkheimian notion of emergent totality are equally applicable to the notion of Gestalt, “more *relativistic* conceptions of totality can be

developed in both domains” (italics added Piaget, 1995: 34). It is precisely one of the goals of Piaget to develop a more “relativistic” notion of sociological totality (as he believed he did in psychology with the notion of “schema”) that bypasses the problems that he will outline vis a vis Durkheim’s notion. Piaget’s conception of totality relies on the specification of relational mechanisms that account for emergence, and thus is closer to his own metatheoretical position of *analytical interactionism*. From this point of view,

[s]ociety itself. . . is a system of interactions beginning with relations between two individuals, extending to interactions among each of these and the set of others, and extending also to the actions of all previous individuals i.e., of all interactions in history, upon existing individuals.

5 Conclusion

As we have seen, Piaget provides a distinct point of view on some of the perennial issues that have bedeviled social theory. From this point of view, sociology is neither the “Queen” of the social sciences (as was dreamed by Comte) nor is it a residual field without a subject matter of its own. Instead, sociology emerges as a field endowed with a (partially) distinct set of empirical phenomena (those related to interaction and the reciprocal modification of individuals) but not endowed with a particularly “unique” mode of explanation. Instead, sociology relies on explanatory strategies that have clear analogues in fields that deal with issues of “structured composition” and “emergence” of levels of higher-order organization from lower-order interactions (such as biology, psychology and has been discovered today in the field of “network science” even Physics). In the very same way, some of the subject matter that sociologists study end up being the same as those dealt with in other sciences. The only difference is that the sociologist always locates and contextualizes these phenomena (e.g. cognition, emotion, development, etc.) within a larger field of reciprocal interactions (both spatially and chronologically) with a spatial care to *analytically* emphasize these interactional linkages. Piaget thus shows a way of thinking of the

sociologically enterprise as tightly integrated with the other social, cognitive and historical sciences, even as demonstrating that there is indeed a particularly distinctive approach that deserves the name of “sociological.”

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