DISEMBEDDING

TEMPI E SPAZI DI MODERNITÀ RADICALE
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La collana intende raccogliere i contributi degli studiosi che, rispetto al percorso gnoseologico e epistemologico intrapreso, si collocano all’interno della riflessione sociologica tendente alla comprensione e alla spiegazione del fenomeno di *disembedding*, termine coniato dal sociologo inglese Antony Giddens, ma ormai diffusamente utilizzato e applicato da parte della sociologia contemporanea. Tale processo focalizza la “disaggregazione” come principale caratteristica delle relazioni interpersonali nelle società contemporanee e multiculturali.

L’incertezza e la separazione spazio/temporale, la contingenza dell’assioma fondamentale delle interazioni tradizionali basate sullo *hic et nunc*, comporta inevitabilmente il declino delle interazioni *face–to–face*, la frammentazione delle identità personali e sociali, all’interno di un quadro di pluralità delle appartenenze che dovrebbero invece essere caratterizzate da concretezza e durevolezza.


La collana adotta un sistema di valutazione dei testi basato sulla revisione paritaria e anonima (*peer–review*). Ogni proposta sarà pertanto valutata sulla base dei seguenti criteri:

— la coerenza teorica e la pertinenza dei riferimenti rispetto agli ambiti di ricerca propri della collana;
— l’originalità e la significatività del tema proposto;
— l’assetto metodologico e il rigore scientifico degli strumenti utilizzati;
— la chiarezza dell’esposizione e la compiutezza d’analisi.
The series wants to collect the contributions of scholars who apply the sociological research to know and explain the disembedding phenomenon, a term coined by the English sociologist Anthony Giddens but extensively used by the whole contemporary sociology. Such a process focuses on the disembedding as one of the main features of the interpersonal relationships in the contemporary and multicultural societies.

The uncertainty, the time/space separation and the hic–et–nunc interactions, inevitably involve the decline of the face–to–face interactions and the fragmentation of personal and social identities, in disagreement with an idea of plurality of membership which, on the contrary, should be characterized as concrete and long–lasting.

In the day–to–day practice, it’s more and more difficult to cope with the disembedding phenomenon, together with the several differentiation and reproduction processes, and inside the excessive sources of identification. Even if “the development of social relationships from interactive local contexts and their reorganization through time/space indefinite frames” do not facilitate the sociological investigation of such processes, it’s important to interpret them so as to reduce the social complexity.

The collection will be a peer–reviewed one. All the proposals will be valued according to the following criteria:

— theoretical coherence and relevance to the fields of interests of the collection;
— originality and significance of the topic proposed;
— the methodology and the accuracy used;
— clarity of expression and completeness of the analysis.
Vincenzo Mele

Aesthetics and Social Theory

Simmel, Benjamin, Adorno, Bourdieu
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c) Theodor W. Adorno’s Social Physiognomy was presented as paper at the Symposium Positivism Dispute 50 Years Later: A Debate, (Dept. of Social and Political Science, University of Pisa, December 19, 2011).


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Chapter I

Aesthetics & Social Theory
Some Signposts

1.1. Sociology as an Art Form?

Sociology has entered a post-disciplinary age: cultural boundaries are being transgressed and shifted; science is undergoing many previously only conceivable, and now necessary, transformations. Even if we live in an age of epistemological freedom and creativity, the social sciences run the risk of closing themselves off in an illusory disciplinary conformism, or to conceive of themselves as a mere assemblage of techniques. Sociology’s position as a discipline today is probably the best confirmation possible of Mao’s chaos theory: “the situation is excellent; there is great chaos under heaven.” It is not difficult to experience this “great chaos” in the discipline today: one need only attend a world (or even regional) sociology conference. In such a context, it is easy to feel literally overwhelmed by the variety of topics and approaches lumped under the form of knowledge called “sociology”. The usual reaction of conference participants is to spontaneously ask: what actually is sociology? Does such a unified discipline exist? The response to this contemporary—though not new—situation may be twofold. On the one hand, sociologists may be tempted to think that the solution to this state of affairs lies in one word: “method”. Following this inspiration, it is only by going back to a form of pure “scientific sociology”, based on statistical analysis, problem design, hypothesis, verification, replication and theory construction, that sociology can be spared the chaos inherent in being a
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pseudo– or even non–discipline. On the other hand, another way forward is possible: accept the challenge that comes from the current “epistemological insecurity” of the postmodern age and try to re–think sociology as a form of knowledge. In this sense—as has always happened in the history of human thought—the realm of art and aesthetic sensibility can provide a fertile ground for freshening up our “sociological imagination”.

A qualification is in order here: by no means are we proposing an equation of the sort “sociology=art form”. Sociology is not an art form, nor can science in general be easily encompassed by art. This was not Robert Nisbet’s intent when he published a book by this title several years ago. What Nisbet actually meant in his *Sociology as an Art Form* (ed. org. 1976; republished 2010) was more along the lines that “none of the great themes which have provided continuing challenge and also theoretical foundation for sociologists during the last century was ever reached through anything resembling what we are today fond of identifying as ‘scientific method’”1. In this brilliant little book, Nisbet convincingly showed that the theories of the founding fathers of sociology, such as Marx, Toennies, Weber, Durkheim and Simmel, are variously linked to the artistic sensibility of their times. A blind search for “method” in social science would have the consequence of limiting any kind of “sociological imagination” (C. Wright Mills). Not only sociology, but the entire sphere of thought, would be far poorer if it relied solely on sterile problem design, meticulous verification and rigorous methodology. Despite some weaknesses2, Nis-

2. He himself wandered why his little but original book didn’t receive so much success. “For a long time now, though only really since the early nineteenth century, we have perpetuated the delusion that art and science are by their very nature very different from one another. It is high time this delusion is ended, and reluctant sociologists may take heart from the fact that for a good while the really great scientists of our century, in physics, mathematics, biology, and other spheres, have been emphasizing the basic unity of art and science” (ivi, pp. xxv–xxvi). This “maximalist”
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Bet’s book offers many interesting arguments and it is worth to be discussed here as an introduction to the present work. One of these argument has already been mentioned: both science and art have common “sources of imagination”. Surely science begins with the perception of problems, as Karl Popper rightly said in the famous \textit{Positivist Dispute} with Theodor Adorno\textsuperscript{3}. Nevertheless, the logic of scientific discovery is not wholly or even largely the simple consequence of what is today commonly called “problem–defining” or “problem–solving” thought. Many questions, insights, ideas that come to the artist as well as to the scientist seem to come often from wide, eclectic and unorganized experience. This is true for natural scientists — as many of them admit sincerely — and it is even truer for sociology and especially sociological theory. A common place in the field of this discipline — took for granted even if not explicitly told — is that there is something called theory in sociology and that the aim of (empirical) sociological research

view of unity between art and science may be a reason of the relative unsuccessful of this book, whereas in a notorious study dedicated to the “Rise of Sociology” Lepenies more prudently speaks of “three cultures” — sociology, natural sciences and literature — that intersects one another but remain distinguished (Wolf Lepenies, \textit{Between Literature and Science: The Rise of Sociology}. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Probably the lack of welcome depends on the implicit epistemological problems that he raised in his argumentation, without further go deep into them.

3. T.W. Adorno, K. Popper et al. (edited by) \textit{The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology}, translated by Glyn Adey and David Frisby. London: Heinemann, 1976 (orig. pub. 1969). As we will see later, Popper states that the misguided and erroneous methodological approach of naturalism or scientism has often been quite uncritically accepted by the social sciences in general, and sociology, in particular. This form of scientistic common sense «urges that it is high time that the social sciences learn from the natural sciences what scientific method is». This method expects the social scientist also to «begin with observations and measurements»; «proceed, next, by induction to generalisations and to the formation of theories». On the contrary for Popper «observation becomes something like a starting–point only if it reveals a problem; or in other words, if it surprises us, if it shows us that something is not quite in order with our knowledge, with our expectations, with our theories. An observation creates a problem only if it clashes with certain of our conscious or unconscious expectations» (ivi: 89). In this perspective, the “critical” and surprising function of art, which is able to make the familiar become “unfamiliar”, can play an important role for the developing of science. But this will discussed later in chapter 4.
should be that of advancing theory. The experience confirms that very rarely a genuinely good or seminal work in the history of sociology was written or conceived as a means of advancing theory — no matter if “grand theory”, “middle–range” or small. More often every research has been written in response to a single, compelling intellectual problem provided by the immediate social and intellectual environment. Nisbet rightly observed that theory conceived as a collection of principles and corollaries, abstract and, often, geometrical in character is just a dry, simplified version of what used to be called metaphysics, without the creativeness and the insightfulness that characterized old idealistic systems of thought. If on the contrary we reduce our pretense and with theory we have in mind only that sense of discovery and illumination — *theorein* in Greek means “to see” — that accompanies any genuinely research of the social world we live in, than we can easily find in such theoretical style in the works of Simmel, Merton, Adorno, Bourdieu and even other authors who cannot be entirely ascribed to the sociological discipline — this is the case of Walter Benjamin, as we will see later.

A second important characteristic science and art share in common is the importance of the vital context: “the most fertile conditions of science, on the historical record, are identical with the most fertile conditions of art”\(^4\). This observation moves from the confrontation that very often historical periods great in art are often great in science and in technology. Great art and great science have commonly emerged in small, informal groups where a people attracted by their elective affinities “can stimulate one another in autonomous intimacy”, forming schools of thought, circles, clubs, ecc.; “the small, intimate, autonomous association is a commonplace in the history of both art and science”\(^5\). Nisbet believes – quite romantically – that science and art have basically a similar vital and creative contexts, which is threatened

\(^5\) Ibidem.
by bureaucracy, government, and totalitarianism. This happens because of the “essential unity of the arts and sciences”, whether conceived as “actual achievements or in the light of their motivating psychological and social conditions”⁶. Here we find the weakest point of not just Nisbet’s but of every argumentation that assume this substantial unity of art and science — and more specifically art and sociology. Nisbet in particular seems to be still indebted to the idealistic conception and “rhetoric of the genius”, both in science and art: “the greatest advances of sociology, as with any science, have come indeed when some obsessing problem was being dealt with by a mind of genius”⁷. A sociological approach to the crucial relationships between art and science cannot neglect the social structures influencing both practices. It may be even true that art and science are two similar form of knowledge, but with modernity they came to be two different practices divided not just by the “polytheism” of values (Weber) but also by what Pierre Bourdieu — as we will see in ch. 5 — calls “field” and “habitus”. Even if we consider art and science two different but related form of representing reality, we cannot ignore that their respective fields have different rules and require a different habitus. We will see later in detail what actually are the implications of Bourdieu’s point of view. In any case, a sociological analysis of the different fields cannot be substituted by the rhetoric of the artistic genius and the sociological “titanism” of the classics. Another point that seems neglected in this analysis is the consideration of sociology as something assimilable to a science or, at least, a consolidated discipline. This perhaps was at Nisbet’s time, since he was writing his pamphlet during


⁷. For Nisbet the “creative genius, in plainer terms, works through processes which are common to our kind, but these processes are superlatively enhanced”, (ivi: 5), and “the artist is the most sensitive individual in society. His feeling for change, his apprehension of new things to come, is likely to be more acute than that of the slower—moving, rational, scientific thinker. It is in the artistic production of a period, rather than in its thinking, that one should search for shadows cast in advance by coming events, for prophetic anticipation”, p. 6.
the hegemony in the acaof Parsons “structural functionalism”. Today it is no more in this way. To quote a vision of sociology coeval with Nisbet’s: Adorno’s.

Sociology is not what in mathematics is called a ‘determinate manifold’. Furthermore, it entirely lacks the kind of continuity which is generally supposed to be peculiar to the study of disciplines which impart ‘knowledge conferring control’, to use an expression of Scheler’s.8

Even with these gaps, Nisbet’s analysis is still able to identify the “themes” on which sociology and art can be compared. A theme can be defined by a specific question being asked, or an ordering of experience and observation from a special focus. Many themes found in art as well as in science have their origins in very ancient myth, ritual, metaphor, and other expressions of mankind’s effort over countless millennia to convert chaos to order. What is notable here is that through the narrative and heuristic expedient of “themes and styles” it is possible to sketch “sociological landscapes” or “sociological portraits”, with the help of heterogeneous material: literature, music and painting, as well as the social sciences. It would be hard to find a period more productive of sociological landscapes than the nineteenth century. Nisbet shows persuasively that the same shared conceptual imagery has been drawn upon by social scientists and artists alike in rendering such “sociological landscapes” as:

a) the rise of the masses and the eclipse of community;
b) the advent of power with the French and Industrial Revolutions coupled with the waning of older forms of authority;
c) the nature of the factory system and its accompanying social form,
d) the metropolis.

Artists and sociologists have also constructed similar “sociological portraits” or ideal role–types, individual representations of various groups or classes. Here, for example, we find writers ranging from Edmund Burke to Charles Dickens to (especially) Karl Marx all constructing similar portraits of the bourgeois capitalist. So, too, was Marx instrumental in furnishing us with another portrait, the worker, though the rediscovery of the idea of poverty by many intellectuals of that period produced other portraits of the proletariat in literature and in art. The bureaucrat and the intellectual are two more portraits singled out by Nisbet as similarly sketched in both the artistic and scientific communities. One original and intriguing metaphor — similar to Benjamin’s use of “kaleidoscope” to indicate modernity as such — is that of “diorama” (that nice technological device to reproduce landscapes) to represent small–scale social motion. For Nisbet “Marx’s Capital is a diorama, complete with figures called workers and capitalists and with constructs called factories and offices; and out of his diorama comes a sense of movement, of becoming just as surely as the same sense is given to us by the sculptor working with a block of marble or the painter with brushes and oils on canvas”.

We can watch the motion and the conflict in capitalism against the broader, panoramic background of the entire history of class struggle, just as Weber’s diorama of bureaucracy is merely a part of the more sweeping, long–term process of rationalization.

Nisbet’s contribution is important because he indicates a method, both in sociological research and in the history of sociology: working with “landscapes” and “portraits”, more than with taxonomic definitions. For instance, “Metropolis” is one of the most significant nineteenth sociological landscapes. Nisbet states that in this case the relationship between art and soci-

9. R. Nisbet, Sociology as an Art Form, p. 106.

ology is a reciprocal one: sociology can be considered an art form insofar it draws inspiration from the same basic sources as literature and painting in the nineteenth century. On the same time, we can describe a great deal of literature and other art of the age as imaginative forms of sociology. This is true of Baudelaire’s Paris, Dicken’s London, and Dreiser’s Chicago as well as for the lithographs by Dore, Daumier and Gericault and of paintings by the Impressionists and Naturalists. Regarding the history of sociology, Nisbet rightly said: “how different things would be, one cannot help reflecting, if the social sciences at the time of their systematic formation in the nineteenth century had taken the arts in the same degree they took the physical sciences as models”\textsuperscript{11}.

In conclusion, Nisbet failed to highlight the differences between art and science, art and sociology — which is at the center of Lepenies very detailed and careful historic–systematic reconstruction — but succeeded to indicate a promising research field and research method\textsuperscript{12}. It is this “intersection” between art and sociology that we want to investigate in this book, analysing four exemplary figures of sociologists. We want to see how art and more general aesthetics are interwoven with social knowledge from every point of view: epistemologically, as object of reflection, as a normative model to understand social life.

\textsuperscript{11} Ivi, p. 8.

\textsuperscript{12} One of the other weaknesses of Nisbet approach is that he assumed that there is something like a unified discipline called “sociology”, whereas today it would be better to speak about a plural social sciences that constantly interchange with other disciplines. Like Adorno rightly said, “it is that sociology itself, as it exists today, is an agglomerate of disciplines which first came into existence in a quite unconnected and mutually independent way. And I believe that many of the seemingly almost irreconcilable conflicts between schools of sociology arise in the first place – although I am aware that deeper issues are also involved – from the simple fact that all kinds of things which initially had nothing to do with each other have been brought together under the common heading of sociology” (T. W. ADORNO, Introduction to Sociology, p. 7).
1.2. Aesthetics and Experience

Assumed that art and aesthetic sensibility can freshening up our “sociological imagination” (Mills) and that the equation of art and sociology (or sociology as a form of art) oversimplifies a complex relationship, we have to specify what is meant by exploring the connection between “aesthetics” and “social theory”. Even if in most of the cases “art” and “aesthetics” could be used almost as synonymous, actually they are not. Today “aesthetics” is mainly considered that branch of philosophy which is trying to define the concept of “beauty” but if we look at the history of the term things appear to be more complex. In his seminal book W. Tatarkiewitz shows that the intermingled terms of art, beauty, aesthetics have separated origins in the Western tradition. Originally aesthetics is less related with the concept of “beauty” and it concerns that form of knowledge based on the perception through the senses. Aisthētikos comes from aisthēta “perceptible things”, from aisthesthai “perceive” and also indicates a form of knowledge that comes directly from the senses. It was with the Enlightenment that the concept of “aesthetical experience” becomes closer to the actual

13. A recent study from Austin Harrington (Art and Social Theory. Cambridge, Polity 2004.) investigates the same topic. The author successfully fills a gap in the sociological literature, providing a comprehensive introduction to sociological studies of arts. The book addresses some of the most important debates of social theorists and sociologists about the place of the arts in society and the sociological significance of aesthetics. The author tries to answers some seminal questions like: what is art from the point of view of social analysis? Does art consist in universally recognizable qualities, or is art simply what different cultural institutions declare to be art? How are tastes in art differentiated by social class, status and education? Can art bring about a better society? Here we choose to focus on “aesthetics” instead of “art” because for the four authors at the centre of this book — Simmel, Benjamin, Adorno and Bourdieu — can be considered exponents of an “aesthetic paradigm” of social thought, since they don’t just put art at the center of their interest but develop what can be called — with a simmelian term that fits to all — a “sociological aesthetics” (on this see the book by B. Carnevali, Le apparenze sociali. Una filosofia del prestigio. Bologna: il Mulino 2012).

term: the emotion we feel in front of beauty and art. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten was the first to use the word “aesthetics” in the modern sense of “experience of beauty” — Aesthetica (1750). Coherently with the immanent philosophy of the Enlightenment the question starts to be: what do actually men like? What do they think is beautiful?

The aesthetic experience so conceived was in any case an inferior form of knowledge since it was not intellectual but related to the senses. It was with Immanuel Kant that the various conceptualizations about aesthetics in the modern age found an original synthesis. For Kant “the judgment of taste is therefore not a cognitive judgment, hence not a logical one, but is rather aesthetic, by which is understood one whose determining ground cannot be other than subjective”\textsuperscript{15}. The aesthetic experience is something more than simply a pleasant experience: it requires a universal legislation which, even if it is not fully founded, is nevertheless irrefutable. The other main characteristics of aesthetic experience for Kant are: that it is disinterested; it is “a–conceptual”; it regards only the “form of the thing”; it is founded not only on sensation but also on imagination and judgment; there is not a general rule to understand which things will be liked. As Tatarkiewitz stated\textsuperscript{16}, the aesthetic experience is for Kant a highly complex and paradoxical experience which is characterized by being disinterested, a–conceptual, formal, involving the entire intellect, necessary (even if subjective), universal (even if rule less). The essential of Kantian aesthetics is the discovery of the transcendental of aesthetic experience as a personal pleasant feeling which is not subjectivist, like it was for the previous philosophical conceptions: the judgment of taste has its own universality even if it is subjective, founded on the same faculty of communication on


\textsuperscript{16} W. Tatarkiewitz, \textit{History of Six Ideas}, p. 323.