SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE
IN TIMES DETERMINED BY KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT: This article is a selective introduction to the description and characterization of the changes that have occurred in the sociology of knowledge since the publication of Max Scheler's book in 1924 to contemporary times, most often conceptualized by the term knowledge society. A brief review of the main threads in the field of sociology of knowledge was intended to draw attention to the theoretical and practical advantages of particular approaches, as well as their disadvantages, resulting in a trivial study of the phenomenon of knowledge in question. The descriptive character of this article also allowed for a number of systematizations within specific approaches (e.g. Michel Foucault) and within a broad perspective of the knowledge phenomenon.
KEYWORDS: sociology of knowledge, knowledge society, social existence, social consciousness, Karl Marx, Karl Mannheim

INTRODUCTION

The main goal of this article is to attempt an – unavoidably selective – description and characterisation of the changes happening within the sociology of knowledge, which happened between the publication of Max Scheler's *Probleme einer Soziologie des Wissens* in 1924 and the contemporary studies on the society of knowledge or the knowledge-based society. The philosophical reflections on the epistemological foundations of science, and the legitimacy of: (a) imaginations of the world as conceptualised in ontological categories, (b) knowledge, understood as a form of cognition of objective reality, (c) the ethical and (d) aesthetic cognition, will only serve as the background to considerations focused on the sociological determinants of knowledge. Bearing in mind that the concept of knowledge is in itself broader than the concept of science, as,

besides scientific knowledge, it also encompasses common, speculative and irrational knowledge, or artistic and literary knowledge, the sociological perspective allows the investigation to reach beyond the institutional dimension of science. Furthermore, as was pointed out by the aforementioned Max Scheler, the concept of knowledge is more heuristically productive than cognition or consciousness (Scheler 1976: 189). But above all, we should add that both knowledge and cognition together with consciousness are determined by the social context of both the "consciousness" itself, and the epistemological research.

According to Karl Mannheim, "[e]very individual is therefore in a two-fold sense predetermined by the fact of growing up in a society: on the one hand he finds a ready-made situation and on the other he finds in that situation preformed patterns of thought and of conduct" (Mannheim 1998: 3). This means that the social conditions of the functioning of an individual precede all the products of their actions, despite the numerous assurances of "objectivity" or "freedom from valuation" of the subjects' or social groups' actions. This characteristic, and often unconscious, rooting of human thinking in found structures of, broadly understood, knowledge and experience, shed light on these very processes, as well as undermine the speculative theses about the objectivity of the cognition processes (regardless of whether they pertain to the cognitive subject or the object being studied.

The position taken by the sociology of knowledge – that is, the mode of analysis of the surrounding reality from the perspective of the social determinants of cognition – has a relatively long tradition. Not only the purely social determinants are being applied in explaining and describing the functioning mechanisms of society and its parts. At least since the times of Marx and Engels, the class determinants have played a key role in a number of research traditions. Today, we would point out, on the one hand, the subjective factors – for example related to Alfred Schutz's research tradition and aspects of the sociology of everyday life – and on the other hand, the ideological, for example nationalist, factors, which are important elements in characterising the relationships between the conditions of knowledge creation and their content. Regardless of the detail of the social factors taken into account by the sociology of knowledge, it has to be noted that this research perspective is historically grounded, which means it rejects all forms of ahistorical explanations.

Studies of the social conditions of (creating and transforming) knowledge have been vividly articulated – although one should bear in mind the time when they were written (XVII century) – by Francis Bacon in his four illusions of the mind, called the idols of the mind. The English philosopher distinguished between the idols of the tribe, idols of the cave, idols of the marketplace, and idols of the theatre (see Zagorin 2001). It is a remarkably insightful analysis of the specificities of social conditions, which takes into account the human nature, the pressure of the social surrounding, language structures, and tradition. However, we will be most interested in the writings of Max Scheler (*Wissenssoziologie*) and Karl Mannheim, as the pioneers of methodically applied sociology of knowledge. The former, with strong ties to phenomenology (although, according to Roman Ingarden, the German thinker abandoned this approach already in 1925), assumed, that knowledge co-constitutes social bonds, and is the *de*

facto building blocks of society. This happens because social cohesion is warranted by group identity, in turn stemming from complex social relations. Scheler's works on the social conditions of knowledge bear visible traces of philosophical reasoning, although we'll also find there the theory of cognitive illusions, operationalised through the categories of: class, stratum, nation, or – on the lower level of analysis – occupational groups.

Mannheim's approach demonstrates intentional consideration of the social conditioning of knowledge, thus "the sociology of knowledge has set itself the task of solving the problem of the social conditioning of knowledge by boldly recognizing these relations and drawing them into the horizon of science itself and using them as checks on the conclusions of our research" (Mannheim 1998: 237). The historical conditions of influence on thought construction and consciousness have – also – been addressed in the context of studies of ideologies and utopias (cf. Swidler and Arditi 1994: 305-306). However, from the perspective adopted in this article, it is more important to include the issues of the social structure and its elements into the analyses of the sociology of knowledge. Mannheim, aware of the potential tensions between the aspects of knowledge (sociology of knowledge) and ideology (studies of ideology), clearly stated that "[i]n the realm of the sociology of knowledge, we shall then, as far as possible, avoid the use of the term »ideology«, because of its moral connotation, and shall instead speak of the »perspective« of a thinker. By this term we mean the subject's whole mode of conceiving things as determined by his historical and social setting" (Mannheim 1998: 239).

Marxist influences on Mannheim's sociology of knowledge become visible in these deliberations, with particular emphasis being placed on the problem of social existence and the dialectics of theory and practice (see Mannheim 1998: 97-171).

THE MARX AND ENGEL'S VIEW

The aforementioned frame of historicity of the sociology of knowledge brings to mind the way Marx and Engels approached social development, under the name of historical materialism (see Goff 1980). Attempting to answer the question about the objective sources of the conscious human desires and motives, or facing the determinants of human moods and actions, Marx and Engels focused on the material conditions of social life. Let us read through the well-known paragraph from *The German Ideology*, which touches upon this very issue.

> The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance. The individuals composing

the ruling class possess among other things consciousness, and therefore think. Insofar, therefore, as they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch, it is self-evident that they do this in its whole range, hence among other things rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch. (Marx, Engels 1974: 64-65)

One can hardly find a more suggestive paragraph that would clarify the relationships between the class aspect of human material actions as a whole, and – let us use the classic concept of historical materialism – "the ruling ideas", that is knowledge in the broadest sense of the term. It was in the writings of Marx and Engels that the relation between "social existence" and "social consciousness", that is the leitmotif of the established sociology of knowledge, has been appreciated as a fundamental problem (see Fig. 1). Karl Mannheim developed that relation in his works, adding to it his musings on valuation in social sciences, monopolistic mode of thinking, ideology, or class consciousness. It was Marx, however, who *expressis verbis* made this co-dependence the strategic focus of the broadly understood social sciences, emphasising that:

It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material forces of production in society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or – what is but a legal expression for the same thing – with the property relations within which they had been at work before. (Marx 1904: 11-12)

Figure 1. Social existence and social consciousness
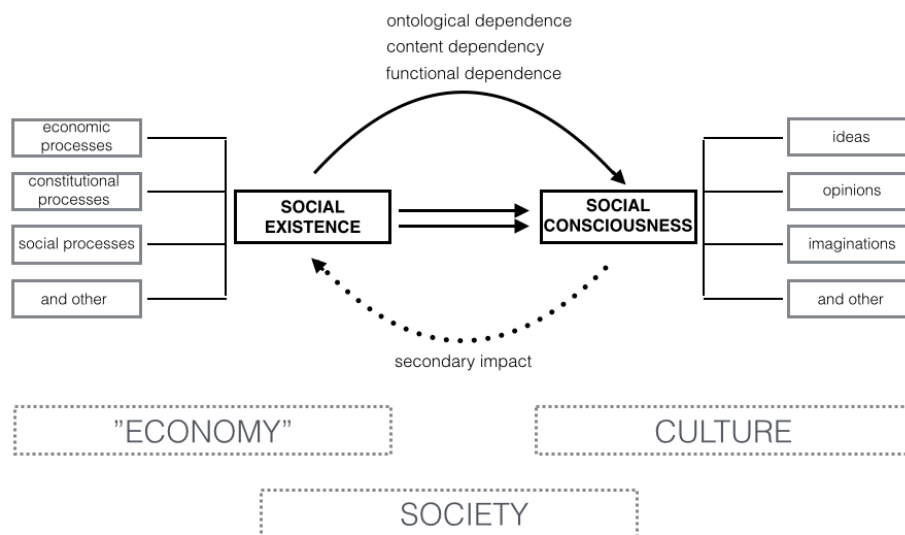
Source: own elaboration based on works of Marx and Mannheim.

In the figure, we see the relation of the impact of social existence on social consciousness, which is a development of the well-known Marxist constatation, that social existence determines the consciousness. This relation exemplifies the onto-

logical, conceptual, and functional dependence, with the assumption that social consciousness also impacts social existence. The latter is, first and foremost, conditioned by socioeconomic factors, which have been conventionally included in the sphere of the economy. The economy, in turn, is part of an overarching social system, which at the same time forms the connection with consciousness, which in turn is the domain of culture (particularly with regard to ideas, opinions, imaginaries, but also religious beliefs etc. [see Eagleton 2000]).

When it comes to the role historicity played in Marx's studies, with regard to the conditions of the objects' material existence, the issue is equally simple and explicitly expressed in his works. As the thinker from Trier remarks, "[m]an makes his own history, but he does not make it out of the whole cloth; he does not make it out of conditions chosen by himself, but out of such as he finds close at hand. The tradition of all past generations weighs like an alp upon the brain of the living" (Marx 1852: 1). This issue, developed further towards class tensions and revolutionary struggles, sends us towards ideological and utopian concepts, that is – again – the leading motifs of Karl Mannheim's works. The very model of how historical processes are formed in the consciousness of the subject of historical action, seems to be a monumental research problem for the sociology of knowledge, particularly because of the materialist perspective on the social relations that influence the conditioning of cognition.

Taking into consideration the materialist take on social relations, it is important to remember the relatively obvious constatation, that knowledge gives power and serves "becoming something else", as Max Scheler noted. The issues of ownership and knowledge are crucial elements of sociology as such (i.e. not only the sociology of knowledge) since it began functioning institutionally.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

It would be impossible, even within a preliminary draft on the transformation of approaches within the sociology of knowledge, to omit "the social construction of reality", that is Peter L. Berger's and Thomas Luckmann's sociology of the everyday life. With reference to phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schutz (1967), who in turn took inspiration from Edmund Husserl, particularly with regard to the "lifeworld" (*Lebenswelt*), Berger and Luckmann described their research goals as "a sociological analysis of the reality of everyday life, more precisely, of knowledge that guides conduct in every life, and we are only tangentially interested in how this reality may appear in various theoretical perspectives to intellectuals" (Berger and Luckmann 1991: 33). Referencing the works of Emil Durkheim and Max Weber, they formulated – what they called – the central question that the theoretical sociology needs to ask itself, that is "How is it possible that subjective meanings »become« objective facticities?" (p. 30).

Remembering that Alfred Schutz's primary concern was to re-formulate Weber's interpretive sociology in such a way to identify the basic elements of social action (Schutz 1967: 7), it is important to appreciate the contribution Berger and Luckmann made to the development of the reflection on the conditions and limitations of social

creation of reality. Furthermore, the broad impact their approach had on social theory as a whole, should also be considered a direct consequence of their uniquely understood sociology of knowledge. As they themselves said:

> The analyses of objectivation, institutionalization and legitimation are directly applicable to the problems of the sociology of language, the theory of social action and institutions, and the sociology of religion. Our understanding of the sociology of knowledge leads to the conclusion that the sociologies of language and religion cannot be considered peripheral specialities of little interest to sociological theory as such, but have essential contributions to make to it. (Berger and Luckmann 1991: 207)

The sociology of knowledge project, which looks at reality as socially produced, constitutes an important input into the development of sociology as a social science (that is why the aforementioned book, which was first published in 1966 [edition used in this text is from 1991], is one of the most important texts for the entire discipline). Particularly the issues pertaining to the foundations of knowledge of everyday life, as well as their objectivising roles, constituted, and still constitute, incredibly heuristically productive tools, both for theoretically and empirically oriented researchers.

POWER AND DOMINATION

The sociology of knowledge, encompassing the entirety of reflection on the social conditions of knowledge creation and development (in the aforementioned broad understanding) and the social references within its products, is connected with the problem of power. The writings of Michel Foucault clearly connect the issues of power and knowledge, although it should be noted that the French intellectual placed his approach between archaeology and the historical method (historical archaeology) (see Lemert, Gillan 1982: 29-56). However, the problems he devoted his time to not only belong the domain of the sociology of knowledge, but they also go beyond the narrow confines of sub-disciplines of social sciences and humanities, looking at the relations of economic production, social reproduction, symbolic exchange, ludic production, discourse analysis, etc.

As was noted by Thomas Popkewitz, Foucault's "consideration of change as ruptures and breaks, related to French philosophical and history schools, has thrown into sharp relief our conceptions of history and of the conventions of progress that underlie social and educational sciences. The pragmatism of Foucault's scholarship raises important questions about the relations of intellectual production to social practices, questions that are taken up as well within the work of Pierre Bourdieu, among others" (Popkewitz 1998: 47). We will be particularly interested in this relation in the context of power-knowledge, described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, where he wrote:

> We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge direcly imply one another; that there is no power relations without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge

that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. These 'power-knowledge relations' are to be analysed, therefore, not on the basis of a subject of knowledge who is or is not free in relations to the power system, but, on the contrary, the subject who knows, the objects to be known and the modalities of knowledge must be regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of power-knowledge and their historical transformations. (Foucault 1991: 27-28)

This particular political economy of power-knowledge suggests a complex nature of the relations between power and knowledge, particularly in the context of the prison system, as an important institution of control and part of the state apparatus. Foucault does not mean a simple system of stigmatising those who break the law and separating them from the rest of the society, because within a certain understanding of the state power structure they play a positive role.

In his analysis of the historical material on the prison institutions, Michel Foucault treated the punishment itself as "a complex social function" (Foucault 1991: 23), going beyond the standard formulations of the social sciences. The French thinker took into account the broad perspective of studied phenomena, in this case of the prison system, with the focus on exploration of historical facts, and this places him within the sociology of knowledge tradition. Let us take a look at Table 1, which shows three technologies of power described by Foucault, presenting at the same time the fluctuations of the perception of punishment and the institutional approaches to it.

Table 1. Three technologies of power

Old monarchical law project	Project for reforming jurists	Project for prison institution
the sovereign and his force	the social body	the administrative apparatus
mark	sign	trace
ceremony	representation	exercise
the vanquished enemy	the juridical subject in the process of requalification	the individual subjected to immediate coercion
the tortured body	the soul with its manipulated representations	the body subjected to training

Source: Baranowski 2009: 40 based on Foucault 1991: 130-131.

The old monarchical law project, based on the monarch's authority and power, used the stigma as a mechanism of punishment and prevention. The punishment itself happened to the body, which underwent painful physical practices, and in the case of attempted regicides were particularly severe. The punishment was publicly celebrated, to demonstrate the justice and inevitability, and to show the convict as broken and defeated. The technology of power project of the lawyers-reformists was the emanation of the social body and applied the sign. It was not about punishing the body of the convict, but aimed and their soul. The procedure itself was a spectacle, but preserving the subjectivity and legal rights of the person being resocialised. The prison institution project, which we know from the contemporary experience, is based on the administrative apparatus, the perfect bureaucratic machine. The penal process

itself, which Foucault wrote about, is based on an entire army of specialists, deciding about the guilt and innocence of the accused. The responsibility of the so-called justice system becomes dispersed, because the verdict is based on expert knowledge, i.e. expert witnesses, and the technologies they use to verify evidence material. Technology registers those who break the law, places them in databases, preserving the traces of their criminal activity. The direct punishment is applied to the body, although differently than in the monarchical law project, as in prison it undergoes training and not the practices of inflicting pain.

It doesn't need to be added that each of the methods of organising the technology of power is related to particular interests of certain social subjects and realises their orders. An excellent illustration of the intentionality of the power apparatuses is the phenomenon of popular illegalities, described by Foucault. They also exemplify the transition from the monarchical law project to the lawyers-reformists project. Hence,

> (…) under the Ancien Régime each of the different social strata had its margin of tolerated illegality: the non-application of the rule, the non-observance of the innumerable edicts or ordinances were a condition of the political and economic functioning of society. (Foucault 1991: 82)

These illegalities constituted the survival possibility for the weakest social categories, which, without alternative sources of income, would not be able to survive without a certain specific level of "breaking the law". Specific, because in reality upholding the existing social order, and not only easing the uneven distribution of goods within the community, but also allowing the existence of a broader group of the so-called social outcasts. However, in the 18th century, a shift occurred in the approach to these illegalities, and previously tolerated practices started being prosecuted. Foucault saw the source of this shift in the transformation of the institution of property, as land property which used to belong to the monarch, was transferred to the privileged parts of the society, i.e. the bourgeoisie. These "new owners", whose particular interests were in the protection of what became their "estates", became pushing for changes in the law that would introduce direct punishment for such transgressions against property, which had not been within the interest of the legal system before.

A detailed analysis of the crisis of popular illegality, as Foucault phrased it (1991: 84), shows a complicated context of the foundation of the changes in the law and punishment for certain types of behaviour, which were rooted in particular realities of articulated class interests. Even the changes in the law are determined by – let us phrase it indifferently – the social being, expressing certain social interests. However, to be able to illustrate this and explain using rich historical material, it was necessary to be able to use the notion of power-knowledge, which, for the scope of this article was included in the sociology of knowledge. As we can see, for Foucault, "knowledge" was dispersed within the mechanism of power-knowledge, which influenced not only the shape of social relations, but also state institutions, formulating and modelling the social reality.

In his work *The birth of biopolitics*, the French thinker (Foucault 2008) repeats Benjamin Franklin's constatation that "a virtuous and laborious people could always be

»cheaply governed« in a republican system (…)" (McCoy 1978:617). This remark can serve as an inspiration for the studies of the new forms on knowledge and the consequences they have on the shape of social relations. In this context, we should not forget the interest in the body in Michel Foucault's works, which brings to mind the issues addressed by feminism, for which the issue of knowledge is also vital (Byczkowska-Owczarek and Jakubowska 2018, Jakubowska 2017, Singleton 1996).

We should not forget about Pierre Bourdieu's momentous input into the debate on knowledge and power, particularly through the prism of the concepts of habitus, symbolic violence, field, or forms of capital. The reflexive sociology perspective of the French thinker changed the way sociologists approached various aspects of social reality, including the education system, class structure, and aesthetics preferences and tastes (Jenkins 1982, Maton 2003).

Let us look at the following quotation:

> (…) there are benefits (symbolic and sometimes material) in subjecting oneself to the universal, in projecting (at least) an appearance of virtue, and adhering externally to an official rule. In other words, the recognition that is universally accorded official rules assures that respect (formal or fictitious) for the rule brings about the profits of regularity (it is always easier and more comfortable to act according to rules), or »regularization« (in bureaucratic realism, the term »regularization of a situation« is sometimes used). (Bourdieu 1998: 142)

The issue of legitimacy of not only the law, but also knowledge or informal behaviours, which are discussed by the French sociologist, focus the attention on the subtle mechanism of universalisation. This observation allows on the one hand to explain the complex processes of social coherence and conformity, and on the other the need for universal rules (Graeber 2015), which social scientists should be aware of.

NEW TIMES AND NEW CHALLENGES

The stylistic figure of the "society of knowledge", which functions in the academic and journalist discourse, undergoes various operationalisations, which means that it really does not have a precise meaning. Nevertheless, the changes caused by the broad access to teleinformatic technologies are both noticeable and important for a number of perspectives, including the sociology of knowledge (Young and Muller 2010). Wide access to the Internet and – relatively cheap – devices that connect to it (even in the less developed economies, see Davison et al. 2000, Wolf 2001) has a visible impact on social relations (cf. Heath, Knoblauch and Luff 2000), including the modes of (a) communication, (b) economising, (c) information sourcing, (d) cultural participation and (e) political and civic participation, to name a few. These conditions, where old and new media converge (Jenkins 2006, Jenkins and Deuze 2008) give rise to new modes of social formation (like the Chinese social ranking system, the so-called "social credit" (Raphael and Xi 2019) or more broadly – surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019)). This, in turn, requires new methods of investigating the social reality (Rogowski 2013: 54-68), which becomes increasingly entangled in the said technologies and manifested in

vast amounts of information (big data), collected nonstop by sophisticated software (Morozov 2019, Peters 2019, Scribano 2019).

In the context of the previous, historic approaches to the sociology of knowledge, in which macro-, micro- and mezzo-structural perspectives intertwine, we see that the theoretical apparatus of this subdiscipline will need to be used in its full scope in the contemporary studies. It requires a "re-formatting", adaptation to the new social reality, and the latter seems gloomy. Let us take a look at the Chinese project of introducing "social order", which resembles a dark science fiction film:

> The system is being tested until 2020 by 43 municipalities, each with its own criteria, system of letters or points, and name: in Suzhou it is called Plum Blossom Social Credit; in Xiamen, Jasmine. Nearly all use data from social networks or smartphone apps, besides sophisticated video surveillance. By 2020 most major Chinese urban public spaces will be equipped with facial recognition cameras under the Skynet system. In many rural areas, the Sharp Eyes project enables people to connect their television sets or smartphones to surveillance cameras at the entrance to their villages. (Raphael and Xi 2019)

This Kafkian scenario, wrapped in "a growing panoply of public and private mechanisms that assess individuals, officials, businesses and professional sectors, reward the good and punish the bad" (Raphael and Xi 2019), directs an advanced system of social control of an unprecedented scale, with the simultaneous lack of organised, mass social protests (see Baranowski 2013, Baranowski 2016, Baranowski 2017). This system not only deeply interferes with the lives of the individuals or entire communities, but it also systematically re-shapes the society, effectively becoming technologically advanced social engineering. These shifts are influencing knowledge, or, rather, its perception in the contemporary societies, increasingly addicted to technologies. The scale of the impact these technologies have on globally important issues is not hard to predict (Beck 1992), as it has been recently pointed out by Michael T. Klare, "it may prove impossible to prevent the creeping automatization of even nuclear-launch decision-making" (Klare 2018).

The new reality also requires tidying up the neologisms, so characteristic of the contemporary contexts, in which we use concepts such as "sharing economy", "gig economy", platform capitalism or "cognitive capitalism" (see Mika 2019, Wong and Cantor 2019). These terms are not only not precisely defined, but they often mislead the readers, like in the case of sharing economy, which has nothing to do with "sharing", but it has a lot to do with commodification (in this introduction we will not look into the socioeconomic specification of the difference between ownership and property, cf. Baranowski 2011a, Baranowski 2011b). When dealing with modern sociology of knowledge, one should bear in mind David F. Noble's warning about "a collective fantasy of technological transcendence" (2011: xi).

CONCLUSIONS

Looking at the sociology of knowledge in the times determined by heterogeneously understood information and its influence on shaping the behaviours and opinions of large masses of people, it is worth looking back at the "classic" analyses of the social institutionalisation of the ideology critique. This critique seems particularly important in the times of media domination, including the so-called new media, both in the context of the formation of worldviews of individual groups (e.g. politically motivated), and the broader social structures (e.g. multidimensional and opaque ideologies which are not perceived as ideologies). The objective aspect of the surrounding social reality seems to be "calling" for such an analysis, aimed at unpacking (or, rather, unmasking [see Polanyi 2009]) the foundations of the current waves of exclusionary, populist, racist and fascist tendencies appearing in various places around the world. Demystifying the "manufactured" social conflicts can be successful, as long as it acknowledges the entirety of the human action interests and their consequences for the social order. Thus partial projects, like the one proposed by Luckmann and Berger, which reduce the sociology of knowledge to analyses of chosen aspects of everyday consciousness, have a very limited application in "dismantling" the existing, ideologically determined, relations of dominance and dependence (although the impact of these authors on the sociology of knowledge is unquestionable).

A number of similarities can be observed in sociological (clearly or less articulated) approaches to social phenomena (cf. Table 2).

Table 2. Two dimensions of social phenomena

Author	Dimension I	Dimension II
Karl Marx	base (*Unterbau*); social existence; ideology	superstructure (*Überbau*); consciousness; false consciousness
Max Scheler	real factors (*Realfaktoren*)	ideal conditions (*Idealfaktoren*)
Karl Mannheim	ideology	utopia
Vilfredo Pareto	derivatives	residues
Robert K. Merton	public functions	hidden functions
Michael Polanyi	explicite knowledge	tacit knowledge
Peter L. Berger & Thomas Luckmann	society as objective reality	society as subjective reality
Pierre Bourdieu	forms of capital	habitus
knowledge management	*know-what, know-why, know-who*	*know-how*

Source: own elaboration based on literature review.

Although these approaches stem from different theoretical and methodological traditions, it is hard to deny that they have a common denominator in the structuring of social reality. The subtlety of each approach may be used in different degrees to study particular dimensions of the surrounding social life, with its visible and hidden mechanisms.

Considering the theoretical issues within the sociology of knowledge, we should

bear in mind two things: (a) our entanglement in the structures we are trying to de-scribe (we are not an exception and our views and postulates are bound by the same limitations as the ones we are criticising) and (b) the public character of the sociolog-ical knowledge *in toto*. Bearing in mind the latter issue, let us consider the warning Ryszard Kapuściński issued in his book *Imperium* (1995: 569-570):

> Three plagues, three contagions, threaten the world.
> The first is the plague of nationalism.
> The second is the plague of racism.
> The third is the plague of religious fundamentalism.
>
> All three share one trait, a common denominator – an aggressive, all-powerful, total irrationality. Anyone stricken with one of these plagues is beyond reason. In his head burns a sacred pyre that awaits only its sacrificial victims. Every attempt at calm conversation will fail. He doesn't want a conversation, but a declaration that you agree with him, admit that he is right, join the cause. Otherwise you have no significance in his eyes, you do not exist, for you count only if you are a tool, an instrument, a weapon. There are no people – there is only the cause.

Reflection on the threats facing our societies needs to take into account the Marx-ian-Mannheimian reminder, that "no human thought (…) is immune to the ideologiz-ing influences of its social context" (Berger, Luckmann 1991: 21). Particularly within the contemporary abundance of news media, the constatation that "mass media do not carry ideology with them, they themselves are ideology" (Eco 1999: 158), should be extended to include all types of media and the so-called new media. The illusion of freedom and emancipation brought by new technologies and forms of communica-tion based on them edges on intellectual short-sightedness or even blindness (which is particularly well-visible in the case of the Chinese rating system, the "social cred-it"). The need for "critical" – which does not mean free from ideology, as it is unfea-sible – knowledge, which could blow up the foundations of the "powdered" society based on knowledge, with its cognitive, platform, or teleinformatic tentacles. Umberto Eco proposed a form of cultural guerrilla warfare (communication), which would be a "Culture complementary to the culture of Technological communication, a persistent correction of perspective, verification of codes, ever-new interpretation of mass com-munication. The world of technological communication would be traversed by groups of guerrilla fighters, who would thus contribute to the re-introduction of critique into the passive reception" (Eco 1999: 167). This idea by the Italian semiologist is reminis-cent of Mannheim's "socially unattached intelligentsia" (*freischwebende Intelligenz*), although the term itself was borrowed from Alfred Weber (see Berger, Luckmann 1991: 22).

It is not only the new media that require a critical analysis of their form and (ideo-logical) content, but also the institutionalised state narratives, which can take the shape of, for example the "official", public and formal history (Althusser 2014). The best example that comes to my mind is Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (1980), which is the emanation of hidden and falsified knowledge. A similar en-terprise was undertaken by the research director of the School for Advanced Studies

in the Social Sciences (EHESS) in Paris, Gérard Noiriel, in his book *Une histoire populaire de la France. De la guerre de Cent Ans à nos jours* (2018). In the times of "common availability" of information, we should make sure that that information represents plurality in the broadest sense possible. Pluralism, which is capable of denouncing the existing worldviews, in the historical, social, political, economic and cultural aspects. The sociology of knowledge is more important today than it ever was in the past.

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