



Beyond the Comtean Schema: The Sociology of Culture and Cognition Versus Cognitive Social Science¹

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In this essay, I argue that the very form of the grammatical construction “a sociology of culture and cognition” (which is a specification of the more general schema “a sociology of [X]”) is symptomatic of a deeply entrenched form of “Primitive Classification” (which I will refer to as the “Comtean schema”) that governs the way in which sociologists conceive of their place in, and engage with other denizens of, the social science landscape. I will also argue that while this style of disciplinary engagement might have worked in the past when it came to dealing with the standard (nineteenth-century) social science disciplines and even some late-twentieth-century upstarts, it will not work as a way to engage the now-sprawling postdisciplinary field that I will refer to as “Cognitive Social Science” (CSS). The takeaway point is that if sociologists want to be part of CSS (and it is in their interest to be part of it because this constitutes the future of the behavioral sciences), then they will have to give up the Comtean-schematic thought style.

KEY WORDS: classification; cognition; cognitive social science; culture; interdisciplinary.

INTRODUCTION

I will begin by doing the pedantic thing and refuse to answer the thematic question of the forum. I will then reframe the question into one that I actually can provide an answer to. The reason for my refusal is simple: I believe that the very form of the grammatical construction “a sociology of culture and cognition” (which is a specification of the more general schema “a sociology of [X]”) is symptomatic of a deeply entrenched form of “Primitive Classification” (which I will refer to as the “Comtean Schema”) that governs the way in which sociologists conceive of their place in, and engage with other denizens of, the social science landscape. This style of disciplinary engagement, while seemingly open to interdisciplinary influences, is actually close minded and only succeeds at creating a sense of pseudo-interdisciplinarity, trapping sociologists within a closed disciplinary circle of their own making.

I will also argue that while this style of disciplinary engagement might have worked in the past when it came to dealing with the standard (nineteenth-century)

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social science disciplines and even some late-twentieth-century upstarts, it will not work as a way to engage the now-sprawling postdisciplinary field that I will refer to as (following M. Turner [2003]) “Cognitive Social Science” (CSS). The takeaway point is that *if* sociologists want to be part of CSS (and it is in their interest to be part of it because this constitutes the future of the behavioral sciences), then they will have to give up the Comtean-schematic thought style.

COMTEAN PRIMITIVE CLASSIFICATION AS A FORM OF (PSEUDO-) INTERDISCIPLINARY ENGAGEMENT

How do sociologists engage other disciplines? A cursory look at the (continually expanding) list of ASA sections reveals the rudiments of an answer to this question. In addition to the usual “theme/problem” sections (e.g., Sex and Gender, Race and Ethnicity, Work and Occupations, Mental Health, Development, and so on) there are a set of “subdisciplinary” sections (e.g., Economic Sociology, Political Sociology, etc.). In fact, we can find an “avatar” (in the sense of Abbott 2005) of each of the major nineteenth-century social science disciplines represented here. Each avatar conforms to the “*a sociology of [X]*” schema. Economic sociology represents the “a sociology of economic life,” the culture section is built around the notion of a “sociology of culture,” political sociology represents a “sociology of political life,” and so on. I call this basic schema “Comtean” because it presumes that sociology is not just a field among other social science fields, but a “meta-field” that can incorporate other social science fields into its ambit, insofar as every other

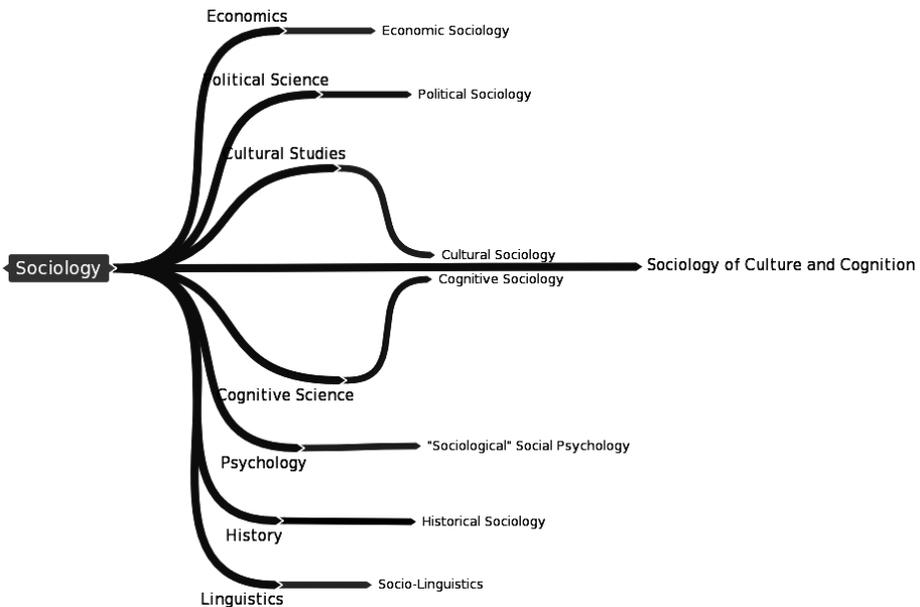


Fig. 1. The place of Cognitive Sociology in the sub-disciplinary division of labor of the Comtean schema.

social science discipline studies “society” or “the social” in some form or another (see Fig. 1).

We can read the history of the various incorporations as attempts by sociology to deal with disturbances in the disciplinary landscape (especially disturbances that challenge the basic premises of the Comtean schema). Thus, when economics began its push to conquer adjacent social science fields in the late 1970s and early 1980s (under the influence of the recently departed Gary Becker), sociologists reacted by generating a homegrown “economic sociology.” When cultural studies began to blossom in the late 1970s, the same thing happened (the creation of a “Sociology of Culture” section); the efflorescence of interest in linguistics and pragmatics of language use following the decline of behaviorism resulted in the same thing (the emergence of Sociolinguistics under the umbrella of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis). These novel sociological subfields joined the already-established Comtean attempts to incorporate the long-institutionalized social science disciplines such as Psychology (leading to Social Psychology); History (leading to Comparative Historical Sociology or “Social Science History”), and the “Sciences of the State” (Comparative Politics, Political Science, and Political Theory) in the form of “Political Sociology.”

But do not be fooled: These subdisciplinary avatars have been created *by* sociologists *for* sociological consumption. In contrast to the truly interdisciplinary “interfields” that exist in other corners of science (such as molecular biology or network science, where actual cooperation occurs between persons who belong to distinct disciplines), the sociological avatars are continually plagued by questions of their relationship to social science disciplines of which they are supposed to be the “sociological” offshoots. The result are recurrent ritualistic sessions at the ASA meetings on “political sociology and political science,” “economic sociology and economics,” “sociological social psychology and psychological social psychology,” and so forth. Ultimately these attempts at “dialogue” devolve into the sociological avatars and their respective nonsociology guests passing one another like two ships in the night.³ In this sense, the Comtean schema has created the bizarre situation of sociologists basking proudly in their presumed interdisciplinary openness, while *de facto* having created a monodisciplinary field with relatively little real interaction with representatives of other social science disciplines.

Under the Comtean schema, the “Sociology of Culture and Cognition” is actually a sub-subfield that emerges as the illicit offspring of the so-called “Sociology of Culture” and the attempt by sociologists to incorporate Cognitive Science under the Comtean schema (more on that below) in the form of an abortive “Cognitive Sociology.” This (rather unflattering) image of the sociology of culture and cognition in fact corresponds to the actually existing embodiment of Cognitive Sociology as a sociological thought collective. This only exists as a loosely bound invisible college of people with heterogeneous interests in the cognitive science/sociology connection (a good chunk of whom are part of this forum) and as

³ See, for instance, Zuckerman (2004) on the (failed) connection between Economics and Economic Sociology.

an overgrown ASA roundtable (part of the “research networks” organization within the culture section). It is clear that if it was not for Karen Cerulo’s indefatigable efforts to keep it together, the whole thing would have broken apart a long time ago.

COGNITIVE SOCIAL SCIENCE AND THE COGNITIVE TURN(S)

What is different about Cognitive Science? The main difference is that in contrast to the nineteenth-century disciplines, which went through a period of gradual institutionalization, high-boundary maintenance, and the creation of strong disciplinary traditions, Cognitive Science was since the beginning an interdisciplinary *federation* (including at the very least Psychology, Philosophy, Anthropology, Linguistics, and Artificial Intelligence) and not a “discipline” in the standard nineteenth-century sense. Each of these disciplines in its turn had to go through a “cognitive turn” in order to make them ready to join the federation. This happened in Psychology and Linguistics first during the 1950s. This is an important observation, because it is misleading to think of Psychology today as *naturally* cognitive, when in fact Psychology was anti-cognitive (“behaviorist”) throughout most of the twentieth century. The same goes for Linguistics, which was a generally anti- or noncognitive until the Chomskyan intervention in the 1950s.⁴

The same thing happened in Anthropology. “Cognitive Anthropology” was a subfield that had (and continues) to struggle against highly entrenched anti-cognitive traditions within the discipline, from Boasian anti-mentalistic “culturology,” to various forms of biological and ecological reductionism, along with the perennial anti-science rhetoric.⁵ Economics has been noncognitive (and sometimes hostilely anti-cognitive) throughout most of its existence (Mirowski 2002). It wasn’t until the late 1970s due to the influence of Herbert Simon, Kahneman, Tversky, and others—via the development of so-called “Behavioral Economics” (which is really Cognitive Economics)—that that spell was broken. Today, Cognitive (and now “Neuro”) Economics is one of the fastest-growing subfields in the discipline. Finally, in Philosophy, the Philosophy of Mind, an action had to break with long-entrenched anti-cognitive, dualistic, anti-mentalistic (and, ultimately, anti-naturalistic) prejudices inherited from the both the classical Cartesian and Kantian traditions as well as post-Wittgensteinian approaches to the “Philosophy of Mind and Action.”⁶ While today the Philosophy of Mind is essentially cognitive scientific meta-theory (Clark 2001), this was not always, or naturally, the case.

I mention these “success” stories for two reasons. First, to underscore the fact that there is nothing natural or inexorable about “cognitive turns” in the social science disciplines. Some disciplines have never undergone one (e.g., Political Science, History) and most (with the exception of Psychology and Linguistics) undergo only partial ones. In my estimation Sociology has never had a true cognitive turn, and

⁴ Today “Cognitive Linguistics” is a sprawling subfield at the cutting edge of linguistic theory (see Evans and Green 2006).

⁵ See Chapter 1 of D’Andrade 1995 for a succinct history.

⁶ See Bernstein (1971: Chapter IV) for the definitive treatment.

given the ideological and institutional organization of the field it is unlikely to have one in the near future. Second, it is important to emphasize the fact that cognitive turns (even partial ones) *are generally a good thing for social science disciplines*. All of the disciplines mentioned above have benefited greatly from undergoing a cognitive turn: Some of the most important advances in Cultural Theory have occurred within Cognitive Anthropology (Bloch 2012; D'Andrade 1995); the benefits of the Behavioral (Cognitive) turn in Economics and Decision Theory are hard to overstate. Clearly, no area of Psychology (from Personality Science, to the Psychology of Action, Motivation, Self-Regulation, and Morality) has been left untouched (for the better) by the cognitive turn.⁷ Religious Studies have been shaken out of its doldrums due to the development of the "Cognitive Science of Religion" (Pyysiäinen 2003). The examples could be multiplied indefinitely. Even fields usually classified as the "Humanities" such as Literary Theory, Rhetoric, and even Performance Studies have all undergone incipient cognitive (and more recently "neural") turns.

Thus, with M. Turner (2003) and S. Turner (2007), I would argue that the future of the social sciences (and the so-called "humanities") is cognitive. Breaking with the nineteenth-century prejudice of separating studies of "mind" from those of "society" (or deriving one from the other as Durkheim, James, and Mead tried to do in their distinct ways), it is clear that if anything has a future it is a Cognitive Social Science. Under this anti-Comtean schema (see Fig. 2) the nineteenth-century disciplines fit as subdisciplinary elaborations of a larger interfield/disciplinary federation centered on the study of cognitive processes and the cognition/society interface (broadly conceived). A properly "cognitively turned" sociology would be one among equals; no longer the pseudo-Queen of the (social) sciences.

Is this future plausible? In many ways it is already happening; in this sense, a Cognitive Social Science is a *fait accompli* (M. Turner 2003). Nevertheless, the makeup and composition of CSS is still up in the air. Will Sociology be represented? This is up to sociologists themselves. One thing that is certain is that the CSS issue cannot be resolved via the internal avatar-generation route; creating a section on culture and cognition or cognitive sociology housed within the ASA structure will not make sociology ready for CSS.

That said, we must be realistic about at least three obstacles standing in the way of sociology becoming a workable part of CSS. All of these are liable to be underestimated by sociologists under the influence of the Comtean schema (mostly because they are the result of the very same schema).

Sociology's routine sense of disciplinary self-sufficiency generates disincentives against true interdisciplinary learning. Most sociologists today have as much knowledge of Cognitive Science as Emile Durkheim and George H. Mead did; they operate with a (workable for their limited purposes) nineteenth-century theory of cognition (S. Turner 2007). Sociological interest (outside of the small culture and cognition group) in reading and learning about twenty-first-century Cognitive (Neuro)Science is generally low; neuro-cognitive illiteracy runs rampant.

CSS does not actually need sociology in order to thrive. This means that CSS scholars will *not* come to sociologists in search of their "unique" intuitions. This is for two reasons. First sociological intuitions are actually not that unique (they are public knowledge and can easily be learned and applied by others). Second, there's an asymmetry in knowledge. Sociologists know

⁷ For the case of Moral Psychology, see Haidt (2012).

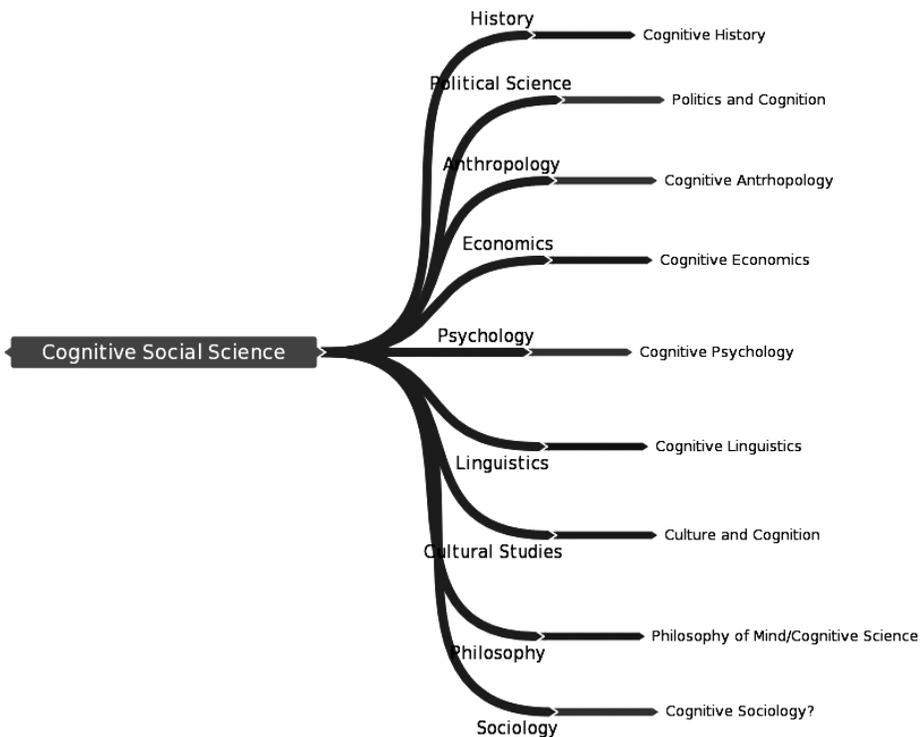


Fig. 2. The place of Cognitive Sociology in the disciplinary division of labor of Cognitive Social Science.

less cognitive science (see point 1) than cognitive scientists know social science (and there's more cognitive science to learn than the reverse), if only because there have always been social scientists (via Anthropology) working in cognitive science all along but there are no cognitive scientists working in Sociology.

There are well-entrenched *theoretical* forces in Sociology working against a cognitive turn. In fact, Sociology has a currently active avatar of probably every single one of the discredited anti-cognitive positions that had to be defeated in Psychology, Anthropology, Economics, and Philosophy for those disciplines to undergo cognitive turns in the twentieth century. These include good old-fashioned anti-naturalisms (of all flavors: phenomenological, interpretive, anti-science, etc.) along with equally old-fashioned anti-mentalistic “culturologies” recycled from early twentieth-century anthropological theory. This is without counting all sorts of Durkheimian thought dinosaurs that see “Psychology” (as “individualism”) as the discipline's main explanatory foe and which leads social theorists to generate a whole panoply of ontologically spurious anti-cognitive pseudo-objects (e.g., “relations,” “networks,” “structures,” as opposed to, say, *persons*) to serve as the discipline's “true” object of study.

CONCLUSION

The “Sociology of Culture and Cognition” will probably *exist* in the future, and people differ with regard to what the field should look like (see Cerulo 2014; Danna 2014; Ignatow 2014; Pitts-Taylor 2014; and Shepherd 2014 for other

perspectives). But as a sub-subfield buried deep within the recesses of the subsumptive hierarchy of the Comtean schema, it *has no future*. But neither does Sociology (in the long run) unless it itself undergoes a true cognitive turn and joins the postdisciplinary entity that *does* have a future in the twenty-first century and beyond: Cognitive Social Science.

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