A Review on European Philosophy of Social Science

Chiu Cheng-Kai 邱政凱

[clotha87762@yahoo.com.tw](mailto:clotha87762@yahoo.com.tw)

Monday, 25 April 2016

Introduction

This is the 8th chapter of “Philosophy of Social Science”. In this chapter, Rosenberg elaborated the changing and development of philosophy of social science in recent centuries in Europe. Previous chapters mainly discussed about whether social science should be predictive or interpretative. However, the central idea of this chapter is to introduce a system of philosophy which originated from Hegel. This system of philosophy aimed to discover the hidden meanings of individual or the society, independent of the beliefs and desires of individual agent, and expose them to people.

There might be some problem with such arrangement of this chapter. The relation between all philosophy and theories mentioned in this chapter isn’t simply a linear one. And such, as described by Rosenberg, global holistic interpretationalism might be affected by different school and generation of philosophy theories and has complex interaction with each other. However, it is still a good chapter to briefly get acquaint with continental philosophy of social science.

Hegel’s Historicist View

Hegel held a historicist philosophical view of the world. He regard the deep meaning of the history as a process to achieve absolute human freedom. All agents in history responds to the purpose of some superhuman “spirit” that can’t be easily understood. Many Adaptions of his theory also identify purposes served by human affairs but replace the agenda form “spirit” to economic class, race, gender or something else. This view is quite similar to teleological view and thus be attacked a lot during the heyday of logical positivism.

As what I feel about Hegel’s theory, Hegel’s view of “deep meaning” is rather “superficial” that lacked too many details. He used too many abstract concept or jargons that are really hard to catch. And due to the over abstractness of his theory, many people might conceptualize his idea in very different ways, thus made discussion hard to coordinate (at least for me). Fortunately, his followers concretize his idea using more concrete agenda. However, it indeed inspired a new paradigm to interpretationalism and expand the frontier of philosophy of social science.

The Research of Deep Meaning

Freud adopted the methodology of seeking deep meaning and further elaborate it in psychoanalysis. He regarded neurosis or misbehavior as the result of repression, and that social institutions are the aggregated product of neurotic behavior of the members of the society. To cure it we must find out the hidden beliefs or desires and reveal them to the agents. Marx is another one to seek the deep meaning of the society. Marx thought the superstructure that can’t be easily detected is actually the ideological rationalization determined by the means of production. Capitalism reduced the relationship between labors and their product to merely money, thus achieving the purpose of “alienation” and maintain the power of authorities.

Many people have argued that their theories are indeed intentional and historicist. In order to understand or predict the subsequent states of a system, we must have knowledge about the past states of the system, which differs a lot from causal theories, and thus make Freudian and Marxian theories impossible to be scientific. Ironically, Freud and Marx both regard causation and prediction as the root of their theories, thus put lots of obstacles to the interpretation of their theories from their followers.

I don’t think that the lack of causality would hinder them from being intelligible. I would take such phenomenon as the legacy of the age of enlightenment, the desperate search for rationality. “Scientism” had been distorted and mistakenly used in many cases. The boundary of “science” should be extended in order to energize the potential of “scientific search”, not stuck to the causality of theories. Science, in many cases, has already become a religion rather than methodology.

Foucault’s Inspection of Power and Knowledge

Foucault inherits Marx’s notion of ideological superstructure of social life and put emphasis on the changes of central concept of social life such as mental illness, imprisonment and sexuality. These “structure of meanings” constraint people’s choice and behavior without their awareness. Rosenberg also noted that the support of Foucault’s view is that the words and language people use can shape what people think to be possible to do. Foucault’s theories popped the importance of the interplay between knowledge and power, they are different aspects of an unified force. His theory seemed authority and power as embedded in the society, which forms a network of meaning system, rather than a mere top-down relation of a hierarchy. Bourdieu used an similar approach as Marx, however, he thought “cultural capital”, rather than Marx’s “Material capital” is the fundamental elements of social structure.

Foucault’s theory is really interesting to me. Rosenberg only briefly introduces some basic ideas of him, however I think there are some hidden ideas of Foucault’s theory. Due to his analysis of power-knowledge, it seems like that people will never be able to free themselves from the structure embedded in meaning, and any political action taken would inevitably come to a dead end. But to think in a different angle, I would like to regard Foucault’s theory as an encouragement or desperation for pluralism, which echoes with my political position as a pluralist.

Critical View of Knowledge

Rosenberg also mentioned critical theory, which I would look it as an epistemology. Habermas divided “knowledge” into three sorts ─ descriptive, practical and how to emancipate ourselves from social structure. Empirical knowledge aims to control and predict, practical knowledge discussed normative matters. People also found that social sciences are “reflexive”, which means theories itself might affect the behavior of its subjects. And such reflexive property, due to critical theorist, revealed that social sciences have to at least combine two sorts of knowledge, predictive and practical, mentioned above. The science of human not only affect the agents, but it *should* affect. It should not only provide how the world is but also positive guidance the way the world ought to be, which is different from natural science that only provide descriptive knowledge.

Just as these critical theorist suggest, social science aim to provide another sort of knowledge that is different from those provided by natural science (and other knowledge produced by same methodology). I think this is a good point to respond the questions proposed in the previous chapters in *“Philosophy of Social Science”*. It is not because human is too complex to predict that we turn to interpretation as an alternate approach for social science. It is because social science (or human science) somehow contain the normative part of knowledge so it *can’t* use the same approach used in natural science paradigm. The reflexive property is indeed a “feature” of human science, not a drawback or obstacle of the research.

Conclusion

To sum up, European philosophy of social science in recent centuries had indeed opened a door and become the basis of modern social science and stimulates lots of discussion toward philosophy of social science. The approach to treat social life as a whole and that there are large-scale hidden meaning behind human affairs are the common idea among these European philosophy of social science. Compared to the dispute over mind-brain, intentionality, behaviorism or rationality of individual actions, such large-scale meaning seems to be much more difficult and impossible to justify and reason whether it is predictive. However, its impact on social science is significant and impressive. Such phenomenon might be interpreted as that what social scientists care about had begun to change. In my opinion, I think it is still hard (or impossible) to settle the dispute over whether social science can fit into the paradigm of so called “scientific approach”, but it might be well for everyone to think over the very essence of knowledge.