

# Sociology of Knowledge

JEFFERSON D. POOLEY

*Muhlenberg College, USA*

The sociology of knowledge is the subfield of sociology devoted to the interplay between social conditions and ideas. This definition leaves plenty of room for the many different ways that “social conditions” as well as “ideas” have been conceived in this polyglot tradition. The one shared assumption is that the empyrean view of knowledge—that better ideas win out over worse ones because they are better—does not match well the messy, earth-bound reality in which knowledge is created, circulated, and adopted. There are, in the broadest terms, four distinguishable “social” factors that tend to get emphasized: (1) *external, nonintellectual* developments, like military funding or patent policy, that constrain and enable the knowledge produced by intellectuals; (2) *external, intellectual* factors, like public controversies or trends in adjacent disciplines that spill over into the intellectual sphere under study; (3) *internal, nonintellectual* dynamics, including personal rivalries and competition over grant dollars, which may animate published work without, however, leaving visible traces in this work; and (4) *internal, intellectual* factors, like a scholar’s sense of herself as an intellectual, or the claims of a widely circulated textbook. Though the language of “internalism” and “externalism” has fallen out of favor, for its unwanted philosophical baggage (Shapin, 1992), the *internal/external* distinction is a useful, and always relational, heuristic; the same kind of caveat applies to the putative contrast between *intellectual* and *nonintellectual*. As key figures have observed from within the sociology of knowledge tradition, what counts as “knowledge” is not just contested, but itself a sociology of knowledge question. The wider the net is cast, the more relevant the subfield is to media and communication theory.

## Emergence of the sociology of knowledge

The German philosopher Max Scheler (1874–1928) coined the expression “sociology of knowledge” (*Wissenssoziologie*) in 1924, and the term (if not Scheler’s doctrine) was quickly embraced by the Hungarian-born sociologist Karl Mannheim (1893–1947), whose name remains indelibly linked to the subfield. Scheler’s engagement was brief, and yoked to his broader philosophical project. He identified three timeless drives (libido, hunger for power, and avarice)—the so-called “real” factors—that shape the conditions for the “ideal” world of ideas. Science, art, religion, and philosophy, however, are not *determined* by the real factors. Instead, the social substrate helps to select the ideas that, in any given place and time, are likely to flourish. For Scheler the sociology of knowledge stops there, at the agenda-setting stage. The ideas themselves have their

*The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy.*

Klaus Bruhn Jensen and Robert T. Craig (Editors-in-Chief), Jefferson D. Pooley and Eric W. Rothenbuhler (Associate Editors).

© 2016 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2016 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

DOI: 10.1002/9781118766804.wbiect209

own, independent logic and standards of truth. Sensing the relativistic implications, Scheler erected a wall to keep sociology from overrunning the house of truth.

Mannheim (1968) broke down Scheler's wall, though he too wrestled with the specter of relativism. The basic problem is endemic to the approach: If knowledge reflects social conditions, then all truth claims—including the sociologist's—are relative to particular contexts of existence. Mannheim faced the issue directly, tracing the field's very emergence to the warring cacophony of Weimar Germany's intellectual and political culture. All knowledge (or nearly all), for Mannheim, is socially grounded by experience, class, and location. Conservative thought, for example, emerged from the experience of a generation facing decline in the status-shuffling maelstrom of industrial capitalism. Mannheim's approach is plainly indebted to Marxism, which, however, he broadens in two crucial respects. For Mannheim, the relevant social conditions are not reducible to economic class, but instead encompass the full range of group experience over time. And, perhaps more crucially, he generalizes the Marxist notion of *ideology*, stripping the concept of its negative, truth-concealing connotations. Each and every group generates an ideology (and, less frequently, a future-oriented *utopia*) out of its experience; there is no recourse to an epistemologically privileged proletariat or to the science of socialism. This sounds like relativism, of course, a conclusion that Mannheim vigorously, if also unconvincingly, denied. He proposed that analyzing as many socially grounded beliefs as possible would result in better knowledge, which he took to be the sociology of knowledge's core mission. Mannheim suggested that "free-floating intellectuals" (*freischwebende Intelligenz*), relatively untethered to the social, would be best positioned to achieve this "dynamic synthesis." The claim, along with Mannheim's exemption of mathematics and the exact sciences from social conditioning, has attracted criticism for its apparent explanatory convenience. Faced with the full, self-reflexive implications of his program, Mannheim flinched.

The sociology of knowledge existed long before Scheler coined the term, of course. Even sociology's nominal founder, Auguste Comte (1798–1857), was a sociologist of knowledge *avant la lettre*, with his theory linking major thought-styles to stages of social evolution. Decades before Mannheim, Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) and Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) were doing systematic sociology of knowledge without using the label. In *Primitive Classification*, Durkheim and his nephew Mauss (1903/1963) made the startling claim that logic and core concepts (including space and time) are expressions of a society's social organization. "It is because men were grouped ... that in their ideas they grouped other things" (p. 82), they wrote; an argument Durkheim expanded in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

Mannheim himself pointed to Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) as the crucial progenitors. The debts to Marx, starting with the base–superstructure metaphor, are straightforward. The case for Nietzsche may be less obvious, but consider the German philosopher's genealogy of morals. The West's Judeo-Christian moral framework, Nietzsche famously argued, is really the alluvial resentment of the weak dressed up as religion. In this respect, and with Nietzsche as an influence, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) can be counted among the subfield's important early figures. For Freud, ideas and beliefs, notably including religion, may reflect neuroses and repressed instinct, which, by definition, escape conscious recognition.

Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud were all, in Paul Ricoeur's phrase, "masters of suspicion." They shared a debunking zeal that, claimed sociologist Robert K. Merton (1910–2003), came to characterize the broader sociology of knowledge tradition. Beginning in the 1930s as a precocious Harvard graduate student, Merton helped to introduce the European approach (and Mannheim in particular) to American academics, even as he criticized the tradition's carping and airy disregard for empirical evidence. The Europeans' analyses, he wrote, "tend to have an acrid quality; they tend to indict, secularize, ironicize, satirize, alienate, devalue the intrinsic content of the avowed belief or point of view" (1949/1968, p. 512). In reaction, Merton emphasized the distinctive and self-organizing culture of *science*, whose 17th-century roots he had traced in his doctoral dissertation. In a series of papers and talks in the 1940s and 1950s, Merton described science as a social institution that had evolved its own reward system (peer recognition) and norms (universalism, communism, disinterestedness, and organized skepticism). For decades he and his Columbia students studied the social system of science from a number of related angles: priority disputes, stratification, collaborative networks, the diffusion of concepts, and the communication of findings. This Mertonian tradition in effect dropped "knowledge" in favor of "science," treating the latter as a more-or-less functional and self-certifying community of truth-seekers.

Emerging at the University of Edinburgh in the 1970s, the self-styled "strong programme in the sociology of scientific knowledge" defined itself against the Mertonian tradition. The sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK) took the position that the *substance* of science—the actual research—was thoroughly bound up in the social. While SSK's claims to novelty were overwrought, the approach's advocates were right to identify a recuperative current, from Scheler to Mannheim to Merton, that imagined the sociology of knowledge or science as a talisman to ward off the specter of relativism; at the very least, the *content* of the natural and physical sciences had been declared more-or-less off limits. As stated by SSK's main theorist, David Bloor (1942–), the new approach assumed a *principle of symmetry*: that both successful ("true") and unsuccessful ("false") scientific theories deserve the same kind of sociological explanation. It is a mistake, in other words, to subject the latter alone to scrutiny; to dredge up the social contaminations of "false" theories while fencing off the "true" from study. With debts to the later Ludwig Wittgenstein, Peter Winch, and Thomas Kuhn's work on the social structure of scientific life, SSK proposed that the successful achievement of "truth" status was itself in need of social and cultural explanation.

Though SSK's unapologetic methodological relativism proved controversial among some scientists, philosophers, and sociologists of science in the Mertonian mold, by the early 1980s the approach had been taken up on both sides of the Atlantic by a growing community of sociologists, historians, and anthropologists. Figures like Steven Shapin, Harry Collins, and even Merton's student Thomas Gieryn, while not adhering to the "strong programme's" particular tenets, nevertheless adopted its thoroughgoing commitment to study scientific truth as shot through with rhetorical strategy, research-team rivalry, and science/public boundary work. By the 1990s, a sprawling field, "science and technology studies" (STS), had taken hold in many Anglophone universities, with humanists prominently included. The field's best-known figure, Bruno Latour (1947–),

made his reputation within the SSK milieu but had, in the late 1980s, developed with others *actor-network theory*, which describes networks (often scientific or technological) of both human and nonhuman “actors.”

In this same period, feminist scholars like Sandra Harding (1935–), Evelyn Fox Keller (1936–), and Dorothy E. Smith (1926–) questioned the submerged anthropocentrism of science and Enlightenment rationality more broadly. Smith (1990), for example, called out the putative objectivity—the Archimedean detachment—of sociology itself, which has, she claimed, masked a particularity rooted in men’s experiences. Sociology’s bogus universalism conceals, and thereby helps to reproduce, male domination. Smith and others proposed to openly ground feminist thought in women’s experiences (including the experience of oppression), as a situated *standpoint* from which to generate and justify knowledge.

These currents merged, in one big estuary, with broader expressions of skepticism in the intellectual culture, often grouped under the nebulous “postmodernism” label. Michel Foucault’s (1926–1984) genealogies of modern discourses (around disease, madness, or even “humanity”) trace their emergence and development immanently, but very often smuggle in social and economic context. For Foucault, the discourses in turn have structured modern institutions, legal “reform,” and indeed science itself. More fundamentally, he argued that power and knowledge are mutually imbricated, perhaps even coterminous; power is discursive, capillary-like, and exercised in and through knowledge. A modern discipline like psychology, for Foucault, is suffused with normative claims that organize (and thereby produce) healthy and unhealthy subjects. Another French figure, Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007), can be treated as a sociologist of knowledge by ascription, though of a very different kind. He notoriously argued that belief and knowledge in Western societies are no longer tethered to experience or represented objects, but instead float free in a self-referential and endlessly mutating ecstasy of “hyperreality.” His is a sociology of knowledge that ultimately denies itself: The volcanic effusion of media images produced in market-driven consumer culture—eminently social conditions—detaches the realm of meanings from the hard stuff of social life.

Without the Las Vegas excess, another self-identified postmodernist, the American neopragmatist Richard Rorty (1931–2007), made a high-profile case that truth is happily contingent and socially rooted, though not determined in the strong sense. Knowledge for Rorty does not mirror nature, but is instead an instrument that we use for our own ends. He takes the sociology of knowledge as a normative warrant: We are indelibly shaped by our own shared past and ongoing group solidarity, and should cheerfully embrace the resulting ethnocentrism.

## Major developments

Over the past few decades, a number of bold, single-factor theories of intellectual and academic life have come to prominence. Richard Whitley (1984), for example, has developed an elaborate typology of academic fields based on comparative *mutual dependence* (the extent to which scholars in a field depend on colleagues for resources

and reputation) and *task uncertainty* (the extent to which research has predictable outcomes). Whitley divides both terms, distinguishing, for example, *strategic* dependence (reputation) from *functional* dependence (equipment and other “inputs”), laid out in every combination as a 16-part table. In this scheme communication research, for example, gets classified as a “fragmented adhocracy,” with its high uncertainty and low dependence, producing research that is “rather personal, idiosyncratic, and only weakly co-ordinated across research sites” (p. 159). For all of the esoteric language and classificatory mania, Whitley’s approach leans heavily on a single assumption: that academics are reputation-seeking maximalists.

This same assumption supports the old Mertonian picture (Merton, 1957) of the “reward system in science,” in which prestige-hungry scholars, earning recognition for their novel contributions, advance the overall stock of knowledge. Though stripped of Merton’s Whiggishness, a similar logic of distinction-hoarding drives the analyses of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In *Homo Academicus* (1988) and many other writings, Bourdieu situates intellectual life (including scholarship) in terms of *capital* and *field*. There are, in his scheme, many moving parts, including the relative status and power of universities, disciplines, and departments. Academics, differently positioned within these institutions (themselves more, or less, autonomous from nonacademic “fields” like the economy or the state), pursue “strategies” to accumulate prestige or “scientific capital.” Though the strategies that intellectuals employ are often unconscious (since they have thoroughly internalized the “rules of the game”), the engine that drives the apparently ethereal world of ideas is instead, as it is for Whitley and Merton, the struggle for renown. Randall Collins (2000), in similar fashion, explains thinkers’ scholarly commitments in terms of what he calls the *intellectual attention space*. In his sweeping, globe-spanning theory, Collins points to a stable pattern across recorded human history: Any given intellectual field, owing to the structural limits of attention, has room for just three to six “factions” or positions. Intellectual life, in his view, is always and everywhere governed by rivalry—by a field of oppositions. The winner-take-all dynamic, by which only first movers and a few anointed spokespersons ever get recognized or remembered, generates a “good deal of the emotional drama, and not infrequent bitterness,” of the intellectual world (Collins, 2009, p. 38).

Common to all these theories is the view that antler-locking rivalry and prestige-hoarding are the hidden substrate of scholarship. The portrait of intellectuals implicitly drawn is of strategic, self-interested recognition-maximizers; this resembles in kind the rationality assumptions of neoclassical economics. The intellectual, in this account, is a character whose motivations are narrowly drawn around personal gain—if not dollars, then renown. In reaction to this arguably partial depiction, a few sociologists of knowledge have tried to reassert the explanatory importance of ideas themselves, with *ideas* still cast in social terms.

Neil Gross, for example, has developed the idea of the *intellectual self-concept*: an individual’s sense of what kind of intellectual she is. Intellectual identity may be rooted in childhood biography, political commitments, graduate-school training, or any number of other social milieus. Scholars are more likely to adopt positions or signal allegiances to schools or thinkers that *resonate* with their preexisting intellectual self-concepts. Gross (2008) applied the idea to the philosopher Richard Rorty, who embraced John

Dewey (over Heidegger and Wittgenstein) owing to Dewey's American reformist politics, which, Gross explains, resonated with Rorty's own "leftist American patriot" self-concept.

## Communication theory and the sociology of knowledge

If the category "knowledge" is granted its full, capacious due, then its sociology becomes hard to distinguish from the study of communication itself. On this view, the stuff of everyday conversation—stories recounted at the bar or posts to a Facebook news feed—should count as knowledge. Government white papers and scientific lectures have a different status, of course, but their validation as expert knowledge is contingent on complex cultural and institutional histories. The authority of once-certified knowledge-makers (scientists, journalists, politicians) can quickly erode, after all, as the post-Watergate US culture of left-right skepticism shows. Even if some kinds of knowledge are privileged over others, then, it is all fair game.

In the 1940s, Merton made a similar point. In his (1949/1968) magisterial *Social Theory and Social Structure*, he grouped together the mass communication and sociology of knowledge chapters; a juxtaposition "anything but casual." The two fields, he insisted, are really "species" of the same "genus": the sociological study of "communications." Both concern the interplay between social structure and communications, even if one (the sociology of knowledge) is more theoretical and European, and the other (mass communication research) staffed by American empiricists. To bring the point full circle, his own perch at Columbia (as a mandarin theorist in the European tradition and associate director of Paul Lazarsfeld's mediacentric Bureau of Applied Social Research) conditioned his view that the two fields should be merged (pp. 493–509).

The program to bring the sociology of knowledge to the masses was outlined most persuasively by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their 1967 classic, *The Social Construction of Reality*, tellingly subtitled *A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. They complained that the subfield has been seen as a "sort of sociological gloss on the history of ideas" (p. 16). The task, instead, is to study "everything that passes for 'knowledge' in society." Building on the phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schütz, they redefine the field's scope to encompass whatever people "know" as "reality" in their everyday, nonreflective lives. The authors' focus, in other words, is on commonsense knowledge: the "typifications" that we all take for granted as "real," though collectively endowed (and maintained) as such by our thoughts and actions. The field's purpose, for Berger and Luckmann, is to reconstruct how "subjective meanings become objective facticities" (p. 30).

Conceived in this broader sense, traditions from within communication research have made important, if not often recognized, contributions to the sociology of knowledge. With roots in Lazarsfeld and Merton's Columbia Bureau as well as rural sociology, *diffusion research* has studied the networked spread of a variety of "objects," including agricultural technology, pharmaceuticals, and consumer preferences. In the early 1940s, sociologists at Iowa State studied the uneven curve of hybrid corn adoption by Midwestern farmers. In the late 1950s, Columbia researchers, ignorant of the rural sociologists'

work, traced the spread of a medical drug among doctors, and found that opinion leaders and interpersonal networks (both longstanding themes at Columbia's Bureau) were the crucial factors. In his 1962 *The Diffusion of Innovation*, rural sociologist Everett Rogers drew on the corn and drug studies to develop a general theory of diffusion, applicable in principle to the propagation over time of any "innovation." At its core, the diffusion approach offers a sociometry of ideas that can be used to dye the capillary-like social networks (some of them mediated) along which knowledge travels: political rumor, job tips, or even Internet memes. Related work on the structural features of social networks (e.g., Burt, 2004), and on institutional conditions that aid or impede diffusion (Strang & Meyer, 1993), hold great promise for the more traditional sociology of knowledge domain of intellectual life.

Another tradition contributing to the sociology of knowledge is the *political economy of communication*, associated with North Americans like Dallas Smythe and Janet Wasko, and UK scholars like Graham Murdock and Nicholas Garnham. The subfield's key figures, typically linked to one or another variety of Marxism, have traced the determining influence of ownership, the profit motive, and commodification on the content produced and distributed by mass media. A related but distinct *sociology of news* literature—flourishing in the late 1970s and early 1980s with key contributions from Todd Gitlin, Herbert Gans, and Gaye Tuchman—has focused on organizational routines and journalistic norms that help shape what gets published.

None of these communication research traditions has doubled back onto the sociology of knowledge proper, nor has the sociology of knowledge informed much communication scholarship. Enriched by cognate fields like the history and sociology of science, the philosophy of science, the sociology of translation, intellectual history, information science, and the (German) history of concepts, the sociology of knowledge has accumulated a robust conceptual toolkit. The promise, as yet unrealized some 65 years after Merton's proposal, is that media and communication research will join that conversation.

SEE ALSO: Actor-Network Theory; Diffusion; Epistemology; Media Sociology; Merton, Robert K.; Political Economy; Science, Technology, and Society Studies; Sociology of Culture

## References and further readings

---

- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1967). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Bourdieu, P. (1988). *Homo academicus*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Burt, R. S. (2004). Structural holes and good ideas. *American Journal of Sociology*, 110(2), 349–399.
- Collins, R. (2009). Social movements and the focus of emotional attention. In J. Goodwin, J. M. Jasper, & F. Polletta (Eds.), *Passionate politics: Emotions and social movements* (pp. 27–44). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Durkheim, E., & Mauss, M. (1903/1963). *Primitive classification*. Trans. R. Needham. New York, NY: Cohen & West.

- Gross, N. (2008). *Richard Rorty: The making of an American philosopher*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Mannheim, K. (1968). *Essays on the sociology of knowledge*. London, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Merton, R. K. (1949/1968). *Social theory and social structure*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Merton, R. K. (1957). Priorities in scientific discovery: A chapter in the sociology of science. *American Sociological Review*, 22(6), 635–659.
- Rogers, E. M. (1962). *Diffusion of innovations*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Shapin, S. (1992). Discipline and bounding: The history and sociology of science as seen through the externalism–internalism debate. *History of Science*, 30, 333–368.
- Smith, D. E. (1990). *The conceptual practices of power: A feminist sociology of knowledge*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Strang, D., & Meyer, J. W. (1993). Institutional conditions for diffusion. *Theory and Society*, 22(4), 487–511.
- Whitley, R. (1984). *The intellectual and social organization of the sciences*. New York, NY: Clarendon.

**Jefferson D. Pooley** is associate professor of media and communication at Muhlenberg College, USA. He is coeditor of *The History of Media and Communication Research* (2009) and *Media and Social Justice* (2011). His research interests include the history of media research, the history of social science, scholarly communications, and consumer culture and social media.