The Social Sciences: An Intellectual Source of Western Moral Pessimism

Every era has its favourite ideologies. In the 19th century it was historicism. It was believed that there were ineluctable historical laws of progress. Karl Popper laid this particular ideology to rest. Only a few great thinkers, who included the sociologists Durkheim, Simmel and Max Weber, were able to separate the kernel of truth that lies within historicism from the exaggerations and doubtful systematisations to which it had given birth, in the work of Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer and Karl Marx. Historicist ideology was the background on which were drawn up the great secular religions of the 20th century. National Socialism borrowed from biological evolutionism, while communism relied on Marxist evolutionism.

Secular religions — ideologies — are more fragile than regular religions for one simple reason. Because they deny any possibility of transcendence, they are obliged to submit to the verdict of reality. Communism promised, in the words of the Front Populaire of 1936, a "joyous future" ("des lendemains qui chantent") but ended up recognising that it can only offer poverty and prisons. This fragility does not mean that once discredited such religions might disappear. The explanatory schemas offered by Marxism are still present in the work of numerous thinkers. Even the most superficial observation of political debate will show, for example, that many politicians, intellectuals and citizens still conceive of North–South relations in terms of the class struggle model: what is good for the North is bad for the South and vice-versa. Relations between North and South take the form of a zero-sum game, they insist, while in reality they are better

understood as a positive-sum game. The study of western societies is continually brought back to the opposition between a "dominant class" and a "dominated class" when what really characterises them is the existence of a vast middle class with above it a thin layer of the "privileged" and beneath a stratum of the "excluded". Others cling to an organicist vision of society and dream about the loss of cultural homogeneity.

The residues left by the great secular religions persist because they provide simple analytic frameworks that are easy to understand and provide meaning in one glance to a wide range of events. They make it possible to avoid cognitive dissonance on the part of the subject in relation to the world. Despite these advantages the explanatory schemas emanating from the great secular religions eventually weaken, particularly as a result of the effects of generational change : each generation is presented with a stock of explanatory schemas, but tends to reject some and accept others, while also inventing new ones. The inertia of the great secular religions is derived in part from the need for individual explanatory schemas to be integrated within one theory that synthesises them in a more or less convincing manner. The success of Marxism in the 20th century is due in great part to what it proposed doing with any social phenomenon perceived as being the negative consequence of a tacit conspiracy of the "dominant" against the "dominated" (Boudon, 2004).

It is very hard to say if a new secular religion is in process of replacing the old. One candidate, however, is emerging: relativism. It is a good candidate for several reasons. To begin with, because it is a response to the collapse of the great ideologies. And then because, as Tocqueville suggested, once everyone's opinions are adjudged to be as equally respectable as they are diverse, it will have to be accepted there can be neither truth nor objectivity. Relativism, argued Tocqueville, is the natural philosophy of "democratic" societies: liberal societies in our vocabulary. He saw that in the United States a cloud of opinions ("poussière d'opinions") forms around any subject, and his analytical instincts told him that this was linked to the "democratic" nature of American society: from the moment when all opinions count and that they diverge, it can be deduced that it is only by believing in an illusion that the actor can think that his convictions are objectively founded.

This argument is probably easier still to prove in a context of "globalisation", where the intense migratory movements unleashed by the

disappearance of the two blocs that characterised the period of the cold war, the installation of culturally diverse groups within the nation-states of the western world, have increased their heterogeneity.

I believe that these factors characterising modern western societies have created a demand for theories that have made relativism fashionable. More precisely, this situation has created conditions favourable to the positive reception accorded to any theory that nourishes relativism. This demand has generated a corresponding supply from the social sciences. As a result, much of their output has helped to validate relativism.

This is how we can explain the success of what are sometimes known as the "new" sociologies. The "new sociology of science" tells us that science offers images of reality that must be understood as a range of possible constructions, and that the ideas of truth and objectivity are illusions. The "new sociology of art" sets out to disqualify the aesthetic principles which considers art works as objectively either sublime or mediocre, successes or failures. The "new sociology of norms" tends to see all norms through "culturalist" spectacles : each "culture" has its own norms and values.

Relativism argues that values have no objectivity. More exactly, it proposes that when an individual or a group puts forward a statement of the form "this or that institution is acceptable, legitimate, illegitimate, etc.", "this or that work of art is beautiful, ugly, overwhelming, etc." or "this or that theory is true, false, doubtful, etc.", and since their conviction cannot be the result of objectively established reasons (such as those which mean that two plus two equals four), it explains them by the action of socio-cultural, biological, or psychological forces. It is the common denominator of these currents of thought that traverse the social sciences and nourish relativism. Some of these currents hold that these forces emanate from cultures and that they impose on the individual his beliefs in respect of morality, aesthetics, and understanding of the world: they hold that the subject believes that "X is true, legitimate, good, doubtful, illegitimate, bad, etc." because that is what *is* believed within the culture to which he belongs. Other currents develop neo-Darwinian models and hold that cultures are made up of themes analogous to *genes*. They give these cultural genes the name of "memes" and posit a basic hypothesis, that individuals are essentially motivated by an irrational instinct of imitation. They have no hesitation in showing that these *memes* have a tendency to reproduce and diffuse themselves. As a general rule, in a number

of models in use today within the social sciences, the individual is theorised as the point on which forces external to him are applied, and over which he has no control.

These explanatory models help, by their very nature, to validate relativism. If, indeed, values are the result of quasi-material forces whether these are social, cultural, biological or psychological, then they cannot be justified: they have, logically, the status of facts. It is possible to recognise their existence, but it is pointless to inquire about their causes. In the same way that a geologist determines that this particular patch of earth is clay and this other is chalk, an anthropologist observes that in one society circumcision is condemned, while it another it is approved. Such beliefs are facts for the anthropologist. No doubt the actors themselves have the impression that their beliefs are justified ; but this feeling is a cultural effect, argue the culturalists. This causalist concept of values, according to which the presence of value judgements in the mind of the social actor must be explained through the evocation of psychological, socio-cultural or biological forces, can only lead directly to relativism.

Two observations are pertinent here. The first is that if relativism is automatically produced by a causalist concept of human behaviour, this is not a concept that specialists in the social sciences employ because they are concerned to validate relativism. It is more like an unwanted consequence. If the causalist concept of behaviour tends to prevail in the social sciences, and is more general among the human sciences, it has more to do with the fact that researchers employ a narrow conception of science : they hold that all sciences, and more particularly the human sciences, since they have to prove their scientific nature, should have the objective of explaining all phenomena by material causes, or causes which can be considered as such. It is why the sociologist would prefer to explain a given behaviour by the environment of the subject, or the social structures or culture in which they live, rather than such impalpable "reasons". Indeed "reasons", that have no place in the explanation of physical phenomena, cannot, moreover, have any role to play in the explanation of human phenomena. This is why the social sciences so frequently tend to see the reasons that the actor gives for his behaviour as effects and not causes.

The second observation is that there are certainly some behaviours which can be explained in a causalist manner. The fact that I speak French better than English is of course the result of cultural forces. But it would be wrong to accept the strong if unlikely hypothesis that

I value democracy only because of my socialisation : simply because I have been taught at school and at home that democracy is a better system of government than any other. That is why I have difficulty in understanding why for example so much debate revolves around whether Dawkins' theory is preferable to sociobiology or any other "causalist" theory that seeks to account for cultural evolution. These theories might explain why the French speak French — hardly an enigmatic phenomenon — but not for instance why the death penalty has been abolished in the whole of Europe but not in the United States. I cannot see how causalist theories might explain a phenomenon of this type. They claim to be scientific theories of cultural evolution. One would expect of them that, as with any scientific theory, they would account in a convincing manner for phenomena which cannot be easily explained. Now it is easy to cite many examples of cultural data — such as the cultural differences I have just referred to — which it is difficult to believe that any causalist theory currently available in the market might be able to explain.

From relativism to nihilism and pessimism, there is only a single step. I believe that it is this relativism that explains the profound pessimism distilled in many theories put forward by the social sciences. Perhaps they also contribute to the general pessimism that seems to afflict all western nations. The secular religions of the 19th century were carriers of hope and proclaimers of progress. Today the word "progress" is filed away in the drawer marked "illusions". Even politicians avoid using it. Perhaps this is one of the causes of the "crisis of politics" that appears to afflict all of the western nations. For if the politician does not adopt progress as his objective, it is difficult to see how he can justify his actions. The word *progress* in particular is hardly ever used nowadays by sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists. This concept does not sit well with the notion that the ideas and behaviour of people might be the result of forces beyond their control. It is seen as incompatible with the generally accepted idea that a concept such as that of progress cannot be part of a theory claiming to be scientific. Perhaps not. But it is a fact that human behaviour is guided by the quest for progress: a fact that science cannot ignore. What is a science that decides to ignore certain facts? That Europeans consider the abolition of the death penalty as progress is a fact. The sociologist is obliged to take account of this and to explain it. He is also obliged to explain why such an abolition was hitherto considered to be undesirable, and why it still is today in other regions. Values are

not facts. But when it is observed that a value is held in one context but not in another, this is a *fact* that can be observed, which it would not be illegitimate to try to explain scientifically.

As a result of the principles that now frequently guide the social sciences, and notably the causalist concept of human behaviour, they are involuntarily but undoubtedly responsible in part for the sense of depression that afflicts western societies.

It is understandable that the "new sociologies" of science, of norms or of art, that all present themselves as legitimations of a relativist conception of values and knowledge, should have experienced a certain success and I have just referred to some plausible reasons for such success. However, I do not believe that these new sociologies allow us to explain what they claim to explain. It is not because they are subject to socio-cultural, biological or psychological forces that social actors believe that a theory is true or false, that a work of art is beautiful or not, or that a norm is justified or not. Hence the critique presented here of "causalist" explanations of collective beliefs, particularly concerning values, from which an alternative theory can be developed that I suggest should be called "cognitive".

The "causalist" way of seeing that characterises the "new" sociologies I refer to here represents a rupture with the great lessons of classical sociology. For Weber, social actors believe what they believe, not because they are impelled by cultural forces, but because they have reasons to believe what they believe. The Roman centurion preferred the Mithraic cult to traditional religion because it seemed to be a more accurate translation, in symbolic form, of the world as he perceived it (Weber, 1920–1921). Durkheim (1979[1912]) explains that the Australian magician believes in the efficacy of the raindance because of a cognitive process with analogies to those that would make a contemporary scientist believe in this or that scientific theory. He is not impelled by any force: he has reasons to believe what he believes, given the social context in which he finds himself.

If we follow this critique of causalism to its conclusions, it is possible to find not just a more convincing explanation of collective beliefs and more generally of behaviour, but also an avoidance of relativism. Escaping relativism is also an escape from pessimism. I place a strong reliance on Weber and Durkheim to try to show this.

These writers outlined a theory of moral evolution that is hardly evident today, so great is the tendency to read them only through the spectacles of contemporary relativism. This theory of moral evolution

is wholly different to the historicist theories that history itself has condemned. But the disqualification of historicism does not mean that the idea of evolution is invalid, and nor, moreover, is that of progress. This is a conclusion that I have also sought to emphasise.

If one simply returns to a point where the *homo sociologicus* of the liberal tradition, that of Adam Smith, de Tocqueville, Weber and also Durkheim, is placed at the heart of the social sciences, it is possible to provide a much more satisfying explanation of feelings, beliefs and collective behaviour. Not only is it possible to offer a coherent theory of collective feelings about a wide range of values, but also to use the data about them from a number of surveys. Many types of survey are currently carried out that attempt to explore the public's moral sentiments about a number of subjects. They are in general under-utilised and seen as purely descriptive, but sociology should, like any science, be as much concerned with explanation as observation. It should be important not only to determine how *many* persons think X or Y, but also to explain *why* they do so. Many examples of the efficacy of the cognitive theory of values will be cited here that explain the results of empirical observation.

The essential question for contemporary social science comes down, in one word, to that of the question of what method to use to explain collective behaviour, beliefs and feelings. "Causalist" explanations, those which place social, cultural or biological forces at the origin of behaviour, beliefs or feelings, are considered natural by contemporary sociology and anthropology. This causalist *a priori* may perhaps be one of the main causes of the sense of fragmentation surrounding the human sciences, and more particularly the social sciences, today. By contrast the scale of the analyses of de Tocqueville, of Weber, of Simmel, of Evans Pritchard and other great classics of the social sciences, the fact that their work indisputably increased our knowledge, is due in large part because they refused to accept that "causalism" was axiomatic. The importance and the implications of the Weberian idea of *understanding* (*Verstehen*) have not been given sufficient attention. To propose the idea that any action, attitude or behaviour is in principle understandable, is to propose that the *meaning for the actor* of his action, his attitude, or his behaviour is its *cause* : that the reasons he has to do what he does, to believe what he believes, to feel what he feels are the causes of his actions, beliefs or attitudes. All of the analyses of Weber himself, but also of Tocqueville, of Simmel or of Durkheim, if I confine myself only to the giants of

classical sociology, follow this principle. Weber and Simmel apply it directly, Tocqueville does so instinctively; Durkheim even applies it against his own preconceptions.

It must be said that the relativism so naturally secreted by the social sciences is not without consequences. The ideas about humanity and society of politicians and their media commentators don't just drop from the skies. The human sciences are the reservoir from which they are more usually drawn nowadays. They fulfil today what in the past was the role of religions. The extent to which the new religious idiosyncracies are often constituted through their borrowings from the religious universe can even be measured, as shown for example by all of those intellectual movements that owe their success to combining elements taken from Buddhism, Hinduism or Christianity, and to which are added those from other sources, drawn from psychoanalysis, Marxism or other intellectual movements, that have appeared within the social sciences.

To sum up in a phrase the argument of this book, it is this: the social sciences have undoubtedly made some major contributions, but have also, in recent decades in particular, contributed to the establishment of ill-founded and questionable ideas that have not been without social and political effects.

Amartya Sen has written somewhere that the human sciences have often made the mistake of representing the social subject as a *rational idiot*. He was thinking about the *homo oeconomicus* that figures so largely in economic theory and game theory. The social sciences owe the unsatisfactory state they are in today to the fact that the *homo sociologicus* to which they devote so much attention, without being truly conscious of the fact, might on his side be described as an *irrational idiot*. Clearly, it is not without reason that economic theorists and game theorists made *homo oeconomicus* a *rational idiot*. Sensing that the model of the *irrational idiot* was inadequate, some writers have sought salvation in the application of the model of the *rational idiot* to sociology. The result of these discussions has been general confusion (Boudon, 2003a).

When confusion arises, it is best to turn to methodical critique. Perhaps it is the moment to understand that the subject that is evoked by all the social sciences in their widest sense, economics as much as sociology, may avoid the dilemma : *rational idiot* vs *irrational idiot*.

This point is even more important because the confusion evident in the social sciences is, as a result of their influence, evident in social

and political life as well. It is not uncommon to see an opinion pollster use the results of a survey to see whether political corruption is an important public issue without taking proper account of its meaning. If the question is posed such as "What is most important for you? Policies for reducing unemployment, for reducing political corruption, etc." and the percentage of those choosing the former is greater than for those choosing the latter, the political scientist may deduce – scientifically, as he might think, but also somewhat naively in fact – that the public are not concerned about corruption. On the basis of this "scientific" result, and the advice of an "expert", politicians may feel encouraged to limit the legal controls on anti-corruption measures, at the same evincing surprise at the appearance of a persistent and serious "crisis of politics". In this case the citizen is, for the opinion-pollster and subsequently the politician, an *irrational idiot*. His opinions are the result, both believe, of the action of psychological or socio-cultural forces. They can only be seen as data that has been recorded but without any attempt at understanding.

The first chapter ("The Social Sciences and the Two Types of Relativism") develops the idea that the social sciences have contributed to the credibility of two types of relativism: cognitive and cultural relativism. They constitute basic ingredients of postmodernism. Why have they been seen as credible? Dubious ideas are often "hyperbolic", or exaggerated and distorted versions of true ideas. Cognitive relativism is based on the failure of the objectivity sought by the Vienna Circle and by Popper, by attempts at identifying the demarcation line between science and non-science, and on the work of post-Popperian philosophers of science, such as Kuhn. Cognitive relativism draws "hyperbolic" conclusions from these two sources. Cultural relativism has been legitimated by similarly "hyperbolic" conclusions drawn notably from certain basic concepts in the work of Montaigne, Hume and Max Weber. The influence of these hyperbolic conclusions is also due to the fact that they have been introduced to the intellectual "market" in a situation where they have been perceived by various audiences as "useful" in Pareto's sense. Once this deconstruction is made, the two forms of relativism appear as less solidly grounded than they look and as less credible than postmodernists in particular believe.

The second chapter ("The Polytheism of Values") begins with the idea according to which we live in a world characterised by what Max Weber termed a "polytheism of values". This concept is often read as supporting the relativist vision of the world, so influential nowadays. It

seems to me that it would be a complete misunderstanding of the celebrated metaphors on the "polytheism of values" and "wars of the gods" to make a relativist reading of them. What must however be emphasised is that the relativism thought to be present in these metaphors is contradicted by the evidence: the observers have on many subjects strong and convergent moral sentiments. The influence of the relativist vision of the world nowadays may, nevertheless, be understood, and on this matter Tocqueville put forward some interesting hypotheses. Relativism has also emerged because of the weakness of the philosophies that attempt to oppose it: they have difficulty accounting for temporal and spatial differences in values and moral sentiments. By following Tocqueville and Weber, it is possible to set out a theory that enables us to simultaneously both avoid the relativist view according to which values cannot be objectively based and the theories that give values an objective base but are unable to account for their spatial and temporal variability.

The third chapter ("Basic Mechanisms of Moral Evolution: In the Footsteps of Durkheim and Weber") stresses the point that the issue of the evolution of norms and values is a basic one in the history of the social sciences, from Durkheim to Parsons, Hayek or Shmuel Eisenstadt. The thesis I submit here is that it is possible, by developing a number of core intuitions of Durkheim and Weber, to identify a few basic mechanisms responsible for moral evolution. Both Weber and Durkheim laid the foundations of a theory of moral evolution that is resistant to the objections raised by Popper against historicism. Also, it provides an alternative to "postmodern" relativism. To "postmodern" sociologists and philosophers, the idea of progress is clearly unfounded; postmodern sociology shows that values cannot be objectively grounded; that the idea of the "objectivity" of values is a mere illusion. The theory I propose to extract from Durkheim and Weber also has the capacity to overcome the objections raised against important modern theories of moral evolution, such as Hayek's. Eisenstadt's concept of "program" appears as implicitly present in Durkheim and Weber's theories of moral evolution as I propose to reconstruct and develop it here.

The fourth chapter ("Explaining Axiological Feelings") starts from the observation that, while moral feelings are an essential topic of classical sociology, as the work of Weber and Durkheim illustrates, this topic has to a large extent disappeared from contemporary sociology. I propose here a "cognitive" theory of moral feelings. It can also

be called "judicatory": a qualification rightly given to Adam Smith's theory of moral sentiments by Max. Following Smith, moral sentiments are closely linked to moral statements that are the conclusions of systems of arguments more or less consciously present in the mind of individuals. Smith sketched a theory which is able to take into account the variability of moral sentiments: an insuperable difficulty for contractual, rational or intuitionist theories of moral feelings. The power of this theory for empirical social research is illustrated by several examples. The systems of arguments on which moral statements are grounded in the mind of individuals include empirical and decisional statements as well as principles. The question then is to identify the basis on which the credibility of these principles is grounded. Max Weber has sketched an answer to this question: these principles are fuzzy regulatory ideas, the content of which becomes more precise under the effect of a process of "diffuse rationalisation".

As the fifth chapter ("On the Objectivity of Artistic Values") shows, contemporary sociology of art is relativist. Two types of theory are dominant : the theory that holds that artistic values are explained by how they function as forms of distinction in the social class system; and the theory that the milieux known as "art worlds" have the ability to impose their artistic values on public taste. These two types of theory are relativist in character: artistic values are attitudinal phenomena created by social forces. These conceptions are put forward as alternatives to the Platonic theory of artistic values that characterises traditional esthetics. Against these conceptions, it is possible to propose a cognitive theory of artistic values. It is based on the notion that there are objectively based reasons for preferring one work of art to another, while accepting that such reasons may vary over time and space. In the second part of the chapter, a theory that explains certain particularities of contemporary art is put forward: why has Duchamp become the equal of Rembrandt in the painting hierarchy? Why are the White Squares of Malevitch considered to be significant works?

The sixth chapter ("The Devaluation of Common Sense") begins with the observation that common sense has acquired a very poor reputation in the social sciences. This devaluation of common sense can be explained to a great extent by the same causes that explain the establishment of relativism. Relativism and the devaluation of common sense are in this sense two sides of the same coin. Each derives more precisely from the attempt by a number of tendencies within the social sciences to naturalise the human being. Interpreting his

actions, beliefs, sentiments as in the first instance the effects of psychological, biological or socio-cultural forces, they can only ignore the reasons that he gives for his actions, beliefs or feelings. More precisely they tend to consider his reasons as effects rather than causes, and to see those reasons as fallacious. This concluding chapter thus allows a certain number of themes developed in the earlier chapters to be drawn together.

Finally, it may be helpful to enlighten the reader as to the source of these texts. As I have noted elsewhere (Boudon 2003b), I have never managed to write without being asked to do so. The starting points for these six chapters were requests, mainly for papers to scientific congresses and contributions and to special numbers of academic journals. The form of the original texts was fundamentally revised during the writing of the present volume, with the objective of clarifying the coherence of the ideas originally appearing in a number of different contributions. However, I also made sure not to eliminate certain repetitions, so that each of the chapters would stand independently from the others and would thus enable the reader to approach them in any order.

The original version of chapter 1 was published as "The social sciences and the two types of relativism", in E. Ben-Rafael (ed.), *Sociology and ideology*, Leiden–Boston, Brill, 2003; of chapter 2 as "Les valeurs dans un monde polythéiste", in M. de Sève and S. Langlois (eds), *Savoir et responsabilité*, Quebec, Canada, Nota bene, 1999. The first version of chapter 3 was a communication given at the occasion of a conference in homage to Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, held at Jerusalem, 2–4 November 2003. That of chapter 4 was published with the collaboration of Emmanuelle Betton as "Explaining the feelings of justice", *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice. An International Forum*, 1999. A first version of the first part of chapter 5 was published as "De l'objectivité des valeurs artistiques" in *Archives de Philosophie du Droit*, 40, 1995; of the second part in *Pourquoi les intellectuels n'aiment pas le libéralisme*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2004. The initial version of chapter 6 was given as a communication at the occasion of a colloquium on "Le sens commun" organised by the University of Burgundy, Dijon, May 2–3, 2002.

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