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Kant's pragmatic reason in contemporary sociology:

A third way or a methodological impasse?

In the 20th century sociology, Kant had a big presence in many schools, be it critical rationalism, symbolic interactionism, or conflict theories. This, however, has changed with the gradual decline of sociological macro-level theories and with the overall shift in methodological trends. One of the currently dominant opinions, represented by the sociologist Ulrich Beck, is that Kant's key ideas, for instance his normative idea of cosmopolitanism, are largely incompatible with the mainstream empirical-analytical approaches. In my paper, I will present an alternative view on the problem, beyond the sociological opposition of normativity and empiricism. Using Kant's concept of pragmatic reason, a cornerstone of his pragmatic anthropology, I will discuss the question of whether we can see a pragmatic approach as a possible third way in modern sociology and whether this third way can help us in clearing some sociological issues with Kant's approach and in building a foundation for an anthropologically grounded sociology.

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I) Kant in the history of sociology: from Georg Simmel, Ferdinand Tönnies and George Herbert Mead to Hans Albert's Critical Rationalism, Helmut Schelsky's transcendental theory of society and Ralf Dahrendorf's conflict theory.

II) Internal and external factors contributing to the lack of explicit sociological interest in Kant's anthropology in the 20th century: 1) distinctive absence of philosophical discussion concerning the sociological relevance of Kant's anthropology (ex.: Foucault 2008); 2) the idea that Kant's anthropology is merely an aggregate of obsolete empirical data; 3) dominance of other philosophical traditions in sociology (ex.: Frankfurt School).

Example of implicit influences: Kant's pragmatic reason as a reference point for Charles C. Peirce (1934, p. 412; cf. Willaschek 2015).

III) Kant's notion of pragmatic reason (KrV A, 800; ApH, AA VII, 121 f.; V-Anth/Busolt, AA XXV, 1435 f. u.a.) as the core element of his anthropology (cf. Kaulbach 1966, Lenk 1979, Sturm 2009). Two sociologically relevant aspects: (1) achieving cultivation of social qualities and providing orientation in the social reality of the world (practical aspect); (2) providing means to explain mechanisms of using pragmatic reason in social life (theoretical aspect).

IV) Relevance of Kant's anthropology for contemporary sociology:

A. Conflict theories:

Context: the question of continuity between Dahrendorf's conflict theory and modern approaches (see Berr/Kühne 2019, p. 82)

Main topics and notions: Kant's 'unsocial sociability'

B. Sociology of cosmopolitanism:

Context: attempts of a radical methodological reformation of the field (Beck 2004 and beyond; Römer 2014)

Main topics and notions: philosophical (speculative) vs. social scientific (realistic) cosmopolitanism

C. Theoretical debates (anthropology as a blind spot of contemporary sociology):

Context: the issue of the relation between sociological theories and empirical data; anthropological deficits of communication-oriented theories.

Main topics and notions: human vs. non-human agents (Latour 1991, Schatzky 2010), historically oriented self-reflection of social theory (Lindemann 2002), Rohmensch vs. Subjekt (Moreno 2020).

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