

Sociology of Knowledge

The Sociology of Knowledge edited by Volker Meja and Nico Stehr (The International Library of Critical Writings in Sociology, 12: Edward Elgar) These two hefty volumes manages to collect together a full critical outline of the central questions and methods of the sociology of knowledge, including prospects for its revival in sociological discourse.

Excerpt: from introduction

Development, Status and Prospects of the Sociology of Knowledge

The sociology of knowledge, although a recognized sociological specialty since the late 1920s, is often regarded as a unique field of study, which, to a greater degree than other areas of sociology, has fascinated scholars throughout the social and human sciences.' Because of its claim that the discovery of truth is socially and historically conditioned, the sociology of knowledge has at times been regarded as a kind of Copernican revolution in the analysis of cultural products.' While the older sociology of knowledge epitomized by Karl Mannheim, asked how the social location of individuals and groups shapes their knowledge', more recent sociologies of knowledge examine 'how kinds of social organization make whole orderings of knowledge possible, rather than focusing on the differing social locations and interests of individuals or groups'.

The Classical Sociology of Knowledge

The nature of knowledge has been a central problem of philosophy at least since GraecoRoman times. Plato, for example, in *The Republic* adopts a scientific approach to knowledge and cognition. The recognition, however, that knowledge in the broadest senses is contextdependent and somehow constrained by social factors is of more recent origin, as is sociology itself. Sociology could only arise after the dogma of a congruence between natural and social inequality had fallen into disrepute. The philosophers of the French and Scottish Enlightenment recognized that all social differences have social origins and are thus the result of factors subject to human control. They were aware that a wide range of social, economic and political factors share the genesis, structure and content of human thought, thereby anticipating one of the major propositions of the sociology of knowledge proper.

In general, however, philosophers have attempted to demonstrate that a sociology of knowledge is neither possible nor desirable. Immanuel Kant thus argued that while there cannot be perception without conception, the constitutive components of cognition are a priori. Similarly, empiricists of various persuasions have maintained that scientific knowledge in particular is warranted by direct experience unaffected by social conditions. At most, these philosophies concede that extratheoretical factors influence the genesis of ideas but neither the structure nor the validity of thought. Otherwise quite different philosophies of thought have shared an often explicit rejection of the sociological relativism that is associated with the modern sociology of knowledge and have attempted to overcome doubts and skepticism by placing

knowledge on a firm, uncontested foundation, even outside the realm of socio-historical experience.

The modern sociology of knowledge, by contrast, investigates the interconnections between categories of thought, knowledge claims and social reality - the *Seinsverbundenheit* (existential connectedness) of thought (Karl Mannheim). Karl Marx was a significant precursor of the field, with his theory that under certain historical conditions economic realities ultimately determine the ideological 'superstructure' by way of various socioeconomic processes. This conception remains a central issue in the sociology of knowledge, and it has directly inspired some exemplary analyses of problems of cultural production, for example in the work of Georg Lukacs.

Emile Durkheim, too, is an important pioneer of the sociology of knowledge, even though he failed to develop a general model of the classificatory process. Durkheim argued, especially in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912) and in *Primitive Classification* (1903, with Marcel Mauss), that the basic categories that order perception and experience (space, time, causality, direction) derive from the social structure, at least in less complex societies. Durkheim, Mauss and also Lucien Levy-Bruhl examined the forms of logical classification of 'primitive' societies and concluded that the basic categories of cognition have social origins. But they were not prepared to extend this kind of analysis to more complex societies. Their basic assumptions have been heavily criticized, but much sociological work continues to take as its starting point the Durkheimian proposition that the classification of things reproduces the classification of people.

The classical sociology of knowledge owes its decisive development to the work of Max Scheler and especially to Karl Mannheim in the 1920s. It may be seen as the symptomatic intellectual expression of an age of crisis, and the recognition of its own rootedness in social structure and determination by social factors is perhaps its most characteristic trait. The mood of the German historical and social sciences during the period in which the sociology of knowledge developed in Germany may be described as one of 'tragic consciousness'. Georg Simmel's view of the 'tragedy of culture' as well as Max Weber's assertion that an inescapable process of rationalization leads to the disenchantment of the world and to new forms of bondage are symptomatic expressions of a period in which historians, philosophers and especially social scientists argued intensely about the issues raised by historicism, relativism, philosophical skepticism and the pervasive distrust in Geist.

It is in this period that the sociology of knowledge emerges as analysis of the regularities of those social processes and structures that pertain to intellectual life and to modes of knowing (Scheler), and as a theory of the existential connectedness of thought (Mannheim). Both orientations distance themselves from the Marxist critique of ideology which sees ideologies as mystifying representations of social reality and as disguises of the interests of powerful groups in society. The sociology of knowledge, by contrast, is concerned with intellectual and spiritual structures as inevitably differently formed in different social and historical settings (Mannheim).

It was Max Scheler who first used the term *Wissenssoziologie* (sociology of knowledge) in the early 1920s and who, in *Problems of a Sociology of Knowledge*

([1926] 1990) provided a first systematic introduction. Scheler extended the Marxist notion of substructure by identifying different 'real factors' (*Realfaktoren*) which condition thought in different historical periods and in various social and cultural systems in specific ways. These 'real factors' have sometimes been regarded as institutionalized instinctual forces, and as representing an ahistorical concept of superstructure. Scheler's insistence on a realm of eternal values and ideas, however, limits the usefulness of his notion of 'real factors' for the explanation of social and cultural change.

Karl Mannheim provided the most elaborate and ambitious programmatic foundation for a sociological analysis of cognition. Like Scheler he extended the concept of substructure, suggesting that biological factors, psychological elements and spiritual phenomena might take the place of primary economic relations in the substructure, but (just like the dominant theory of science) he did not think that scientific and technical knowledge could be subjected to sociological analysis. He investigated the social conditions associated with different forms of knowledge, and some of his studies are still considered first-rate examples of the kind of analysis of which the sociology of knowledge is capable. In addition to *Ideology and Utopia* ([1931] 1936) these include his analyses of competition as a cultural form, of conservative thought, of the problem of generations, and of economic ambition.

Mannheim thought that the sociology of knowledge' was destined to play a major role in intellectual and political life, particularly in an age of crisis, dissolution and conflict, by examining sociologically the conditions that give rise to competing ideas, political philosophies, ideologies and diverse cultural products. Mannheim persistently pursued the idea that sociology of knowledge is somehow central to any strategy for creating a rapprochement between politics and reason, and this pursuit connects his various essays in the sociology of knowledge. Throughout, he believed that such a sociology has an important transformative effect on its practitioners: sociology of knowledge calls intellectuals to their vocation of striving for synthesis. It changes their relationship to the parties contending in society, giving them distance and overview. But Mannheim's conception of the specific ways in which such a sociology might affect the state of political knowledge fluctuated and changed. There are three main versions:

1. sociology of knowledge as a pedagogical but also political mode of encountering and acting on the forces making up the political world;
2. sociology of knowledge as an instrument of enlightenment, related to the dual process of rationalization and individuation identified by Max Weber, and comparable to psychoanalysis, acting to set men and women free for rational and responsible choices by liberating them from subservience to hidden forces they cannot control; and
3. sociology of knowledge as a weapon against prevalent myths and as a method for eliminating bias from social science, so that it can master the fundamental public problems of the time and guide appropriate political conduct.

The sociology of knowledge has in recent decades experienced a reorientation in the direction of an analysis of everyday life and of natural scientific and technical knowledge (both neglected by the classical sociology of knowledge). Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), written in the tradition of Alfred Schutz's phenomenology and Arnold Gehlen's philosophical

anthropology, represents a distinct departure from the preoccupation of the classical sociology of knowledge with issues of epistemology and methodology. Everything that is regarded as knowledge in society is now accepted as a legitimate subject matter for sociological investigations.

Inspired by developments in the history of science, the sociology of knowledge also turned in the direction of empirical analyses of the social construction of scientific facts, frequently by way of ethnographic studies of laboratory life. Such research on the 'manufacture' of natural-scientific knowledge has led to a reassessment of traditional assumptions about the unique rationality of scientific knowledge. Seen through the lens of the 'strong program' of the sociology of knowledge, scientific knowledge and everyday knowledge are in fact extraordinarily similar in certain respects.

The Status of the Sociology of Knowledge in Sociology

The widespread and controversial appeal of the sociology of knowledge at the time of its inception owes much to the ambitious formulation of its aims, which go far beyond anything any other sociological specialty has ever claimed for itself. But Mannheim's project, while achieving considerable critical acclaim, nevertheless also foreshadowed the subsequent reception and transformation of the sociology of knowledge into a much narrower sociological specialty, as sociology itself evolved increasingly into a professional activity clearly differentiated from philosophy, history, anthropology, economics and linguistics," and as it became transplanted into other societies and increasingly reflected the commitments of disciplinary traditions considerably different from those found in Germany, where the sociology of knowledge had first articulated its intellectual and political mission.

Even now, long after the ambitious program of the early sociology of knowledge has been moderated or even abandoned, and in spite of its recognition as a legitimate sociological discipline, this recognition itself remains impeded by the pervasive perception of the sociology of knowledge as a relatively marginal and often 'overly philosophical' and even 'speculative' sociological specialty.

This observation can be corroborated, for instance, by the fact that the percentage of sociologists with interests in the sociology of knowledge had actually declined by the early 1980s, reflecting a perception that it had somehow exhausted its intellectual resources long before its ambitious program was realized. This situation has recently changed, however. We are now witnessing a renewal of interest in sociology of knowledge issues. The contributions in the second volume of this book document this renewal and the transformation of the sociology of knowledge, its established boundaries, issues and solutions.

In the remaining sections of this introduction, we discuss some of the reasons for this renewal and change of direction, focusing on some of the significant issues associated with the unusual history and status of the sociology of knowledge. Rather than limiting ourselves strictly to one of the contending models of the development of science, scientific disciplines or scientific specialties," we take up five themes that are particularly useful for illuminating the development and the intellectual status of the sociology of knowledge: (1) the origin of the sociology of knowledge and its

intellectual development and institutional establishment within sociology; (2) its dogmatic history as presented, for instance, in textbooks, articles and essays reviewing its development and status; (3) the paradigm of the sociology of knowledge;" (4) its limits; and (5) its possibilities." Our primary concern is to critically review the representative attitudes of social scientists with sociology of knowledge interests, since these views have until recently largely determined the evolution and status of the sociology of knowledge.

Reconstructions of the Development of the Sociology of Knowledge

Karl Mannheim has provided us with a detailed analysis of the social conditions and processes that contributed to the emergence and differentiation of the sociology of knowledge. A comparable reflexive examination is absent from virtually all-subsequent efforts in the sociology of knowledge, although there is an occasional acknowledgment that this may indeed be an important problem. Robert K. Merton, for instance, raises the question how such a unique specialty as the sociology of knowledge, with its deep roots in German society and culture, was able to establish itself in North America in the first place, particularly since the receptiveness of North American social scientists and philosophers to the sociology of knowledge cannot be explained merely in terms of the immigration of German sociologists to the United States. Merton argues that American thought proved receptive to the sociology of knowledge largely because it dealt with problems, concepts, and theories which are increasingly pertinent to our contemporary social situation, because our society has come to have certain characteristics of those European societies in which the discipline was initially developed'. However, Merton does not analyze in any detail the social crisis of the American society to which he refers, and one might argue that the immediate postwar period in North America, far from being characterized by conditions of social, economic and political crisis, was rather a period of continuous economic growth without major societal upheavals. It should also be pointed out that the process of dissemination and acceptance of the sociology of knowledge in North America involved its transformation. While it is known and even self-evident that the Nazi era in Germany represents a decisive turning point for the sociology of knowledge, the precise nature of its transformation has received far less attention in Anglo-Saxon countries, in particular in the United States.

The North American transformation of the sociology of knowledge during the process of acceptance mentioned here begins in the mid-1930s with influential reviews of the English adaptation of Karl Mannheim's *Ideologie and Utopie*. These include reviews by Hans Speier in the *American Journal of Sociology*, by Alexander von Schelting in the *American Sociological Review*, as well as Talcott Parsons' review in the *American Sociological Review* of von Schelting's *Max Webers Wissenschaftslehre* (Max Weber's Theory of Science) that deals at length with Mannheim's sociology of knowledge. These reviews are an initial (and, in retrospect, successful) attempt to 'normalize' the sociology of knowledge. A genuine sociology of knowledge must be what Parsons called a positive sociology of knowledge by restricting itself to sociological inquiries into the formation of knowledge.

While standard histories of sociology generally lack consensus about such issues as the origins of sociology, its major theorists and most significant achievements, and even about the issues warranting sociological investigation, accounts of the

development of the sociology of knowledge are by and large fairly uncontested. The sociology of knowledge may be described as having gone through three different phases of development.

The first phase includes the theoretical approaches of the forerunners of the sociology of knowledge proper. Francis Bacon, Auguste Comte, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, but also Friedrich Nietzsche, Vilfredo Pareto and Sigmund Freud are commonly counted among these intellectual precursors or pioneers of the sociology of knowledge.

In the second phase the sociology of knowledge was established as an independent sociological specialty. Max Scheler and Karl Mannheim in Germany and, even earlier, Emile Durkheim, Lucien Levy-Bruhl, Marcel Mauss and Maurice Halbwachs in France, are the most significant figures here. And while infrequently identified as indirect contributors to the sociology of knowledge, the work of Max Weber, Georg Lukacs, John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, among others, should also be regarded as part of the history of the sociology of knowledge.

This second phase is followed by a third that is recognizable in several contributions reprinted in this book. It might be called the phase of normalization, since during this period the cognitive domain of the sociology of knowledge is defined much more narrowly, the external relations of the sociology of knowledge are now mediated by disciplinary traditions, issues initially considered relevant are no longer considered sociologically significant, and, last but not least, 'solutions' to a number of initially unresolved questions are proposed.

Such a normalization of the sociology of knowledge was achieved to a considerable extent by assimilating the sociology of knowledge to the then predominant conception of science in sociology, which interpreted the cognitive processes of science primarily in terms of a logical rather than sociohistorical point of view. The special epistemological status attributed to scientific knowledge contributed, of course, to sociologists refraining for the longest time from examining scientific knowledge sociologically." Only in the past three decades has a radical reorientation in the sociology of knowledge taken place in this regard, once again on the basis of philosophical reflections. Foremost is a revision of the traditional concept of scientific knowledge and of the theory of scientific progress. As a result, the epistemological vocabulary has become increasingly sociological. The effect of these developments in the philosophy of science, the history of science, and in a variety of substantive social science disciplines and specialties (for example, anthropology and linguistics) on the sociology of knowledge has led to a reevaluation of its history and of the whole program of the classical sociology of knowledge.

The Paradigm of the Sociology of Knowledge

Nearly all reconstructions of its paradigm agree that the sociology of knowledge is concerned with 'existentially connected thinking' (*seinsverbundenes Denken*) or, even more generally, with an investigation of the relations between knowledge and society. In view of this comprehensive characterization of the scope of the sociology of knowledge, it is surprising that it should ever have been regarded as a mere 'specialty' among other sociological specialties. Downplaying the significance as well

as the implications of the sociology of knowledge has been one of the strategies in the attempt to legitimize the sociology of knowledge as sociology. If, just like other sociological specialties, the sociology of knowledge is legitimated by its specialized topic of inquiry, any far-reaching claims are precluded from the outset. Mannheim's attempt to transcend specialized sociology in the direction of a philosophically oriented sociology is, by contrast, an example of a more comprehensive understanding of both sociology and the sociology of knowledge. Mannheim writes:

But what is decisive is that in Germany this possibility, which exists for almost all men now living - namely, to enlarge one's view of the world and to this end avail oneself of the method of sociology - eventually exceeds the problem area of this special discipline. The sociological problem constellation in the narrower sense transcends itself in two directions - in the direction of philosophy and in the direction of a politically active world orientation.

And in regard to the epistemological relevance of the sociology of knowledge Mannheim claims: 'The sociology of knowledge, however, is in a position to provide a peculiar kind of factual information concerning the various truth concepts and epistemologies - factual information which itself has epistemological implications that no future epistemology may overlook'.

The sociology of knowledge in the post-Mannheim period, by contrast, is characterized by an increasing renunciation of the general claims of the sociology of knowledge. This has led to difficulties. It is, for instance, problematic to claim that the sociology of knowledge is a mere sociological specialty among others, yet also to insist that its general objective is the analysis of the relations between knowledge and society, and that the relationship between thinking (or culture) and social processes in the broadest sense is constitutive of human thought and action. Issues such as the social causes of deviant behavior or the evolution of bureaucratic organizations can hardly be granted similar status and have comparable implications for general sociological theory and research. Mannheim himself argues pointedly: 'It is out of the question that a certain analysis should be stopped short once and for all at the most crucial point merely because the recognized domain of a different scientific department allegedly begins there (a mode of procedure typical of the bureaucratized organization of science)'." The stagnation of the sociology of knowledge in recent decades has no doubt in part resulted from the assimilation of its original concerns by general sociological theory, which no longer regards these issues as belonging to the sociology of knowledge. Lewis Coser observes:

As the sociology of knowledge has been incorporated into general sociological theory both in America and in Europe, it has often merged with other areas of research and is frequently no longer explicitly referred to as sociology of knowledge. Its diffusion through partial incorporation has tended to make it lose some of its distinctive characteristics. Thus, the works of Robert K. Merton and Bernard Barber in the sociology of science, the works of Everett C. Hughes, T.H. Marshall, Theodore Caplow, Oswald Hall, Talcott Parsons, and others in the sociology of the professions and occupations, and - even more generally - much of the research concerned with social roles, may be related to, and in part derived from, the orientation of the sociology of knowledge. Many practitioners of what is in fact sociology of knowledge may at times be rather surprised when it is pointed out that, like Monsieur Jourdain, they have been 'talking prose' all along"

The incorporation and integration of the issues of the sociology of knowledge into other sociological specialties," as assessed by Coser, also indicates that the sociology of knowledge cannot easily be seen as merely one sociological specialty among many others. The partial incorporation of sociology of knowledge issues by other areas, in particular by specialties with a history of extensive empirical research, is associated with a neglect of the foundational issues, in particular epistemological ones, that were considered extremely important initially.

The central issues of the sociology of knowledge, according to Merton, include:

1. Where is the existential basis of cognitive products located?
 2. Which cognitive products are subjected to sociological analysis?
 3. What is the correlation between cognitive products and existential basis?
 4. What are the manifest and latent implications of such correlations?
 5. Under what conditions or at what point in time can these assumed correlations be observed?
- It is hardly surprising that the attempts to define existentially connected knowledge in concrete terms are characterized by a lack of consensus. The sociology of knowledge is, at least in this respect, self-exemplifying. To the comprehensiveness of its domain corresponds an abundance of proposed solutions to the central issues identified by Merton.

Sociology of Knowledge and Its Limits

We have referred to the general research proposition of the sociology of knowledge, the thesis of the existential connectedness of knowledge. Most reconstructions of the sociology of knowledge are solidly agreed about the assumption that its analysis of human thought and ideas has to be limited to knowledge that does not qualify as 'scientific knowledge'. As HansJoachim Lieber argues: in the sociology of knowledge the only subject of inquiry ought to be 'ideological knowledge'. Furthermore, the investigation of the relationship between specific ideas about reality and the existential connectedness of all knowledge, 'does not question the validity of these ideas, although the beginnings of the sociology of knowledge may indicate otherwise, since its interest was focused on the study of the social conditions of distorted and false knowledge and on a critique of ideology'. Coser refers to a third basic limitation of the sociology of knowledge: the issue of relativism and the logical contradiction in which a 'radical general' sociology of knowledge inevitably becomes entangled. Referring explicitly to the Mannheim program for the sociology of knowledge, Coser explains that to him all knowledge and ideas, although to different degrees, are 'bound to a location' with the social structure and the historical process. ... From its inception, Mannheim's thesis encountered a great deal of criticism, especially on the grounds that it led to universal relativism. ... If it is assumed that all thought is existentially determined and hence all truth but relative, Mannheim's own thought cannot claim privileged exemption.

In spite of Mannheim's determined attempts to safeguard his own program from the charge of relativism, this charge has indeed been leveled against Mannheim himself: 'Even where a dissociation from the Marxist suspicion of ideology is attempted', observes Lieber, a radical sociologizing of thought can easily succumb to relativism'. Most authors, however, have attempted to avoid the problem of epistemology altogether. This is of particular significance in view of the emphasis placed by the founders of the sociology of knowledge, Karl Mannheim in particular, on this and

related issues. Furthermore, it is precisely because of its epistemological claims that the sociology of knowledge initially encountered a frequently negative response." Part of the phase of normalization as a characteristic of the development of the sociology of knowledge in recent decades has therefore been its intentional rejection of such issues. However, the traditional division of labor in science - epistemology here, substantive scientific disciplines and specialties there-thus sanctioned, and at the same time implied, the view that the majority of sociologists of knowledge fully agree with the critique against it by philosophers, epistemologists and others. The critique is thereby taken for granted, as not requiring closer scrutiny, for the sole reason that it deals primarily with issues of no direct importance to the sociology of knowledge as a sociological specialty. Niklas Luhmann has emphasized the sterility that can result from such a turning away from philosophical reflections. Screening out philosophical considerations [becomes], in turn, too confining. Introduced as a way of safeguarding research against an overwhelming tradition, the impermeable boundary between science and philosophy creates, now that the power of tradition is abating, thought barriers and provincialism, and frequently a too narrow interpretation of that which, indeed, is already being thought .

The presumably neutral reconstructions of the sociology of knowledge are, of course, not the result of an unbiased attitude, but rather an acknowledgment of widespread criticism of the sociology of knowledge as conceived by its founders. It is becoming increasingly evident, however, that the separation of philosophical and epistemological issues from the sociology of knowledge creates an unreceptive attitude toward significant intellectual developments in other disciplines. To screen the sociology of knowledge from philosophy is quite compatible with the status of a sociological specialty. New developments in the sociology of knowledge, many of which are represented in the second volume of this book, indicate the beginning of a new phase which is characterized, in particular, by a gradual lifting of certain taboos which had been part of the phase of normalization. Developments in epistemology, which questioned the traditional concept of science and of the development of scientific knowledge, have been a crucial factor in this phenomenon. One of the results of the emerging concept of scientific knowledge is that in the sociology of knowledge the analysis of knowledge is no longer restricted to one particular area of human thinking. A sociology of scientific and formal knowledge, still questioned by the founders, is now considered a real possibility. Similarly, the critique of the sociology of knowledge that for a long time had remained unchallenged, has itself become an issue for the sociology of knowledge. The problems of relativism, of self-refutation and of the necessity for a distinct separation of the context of discovery from the context of the justification of human knowledge is once again being seriously discussed. While there is even now bewilderment at hearing the term absolute, which also continues to fascinate, it is beginning to lose, once again, its status as an unassailable conception in the philosophy of science.

The renewed interest in the sociology of knowledge transcends the classical sociology of knowledge program in other respects as well. Importantly among these new interests figures a concern with what had been a shortcoming of the classical sociology of knowledge, namely the absence of a satisfactory theoretical solution to the question of how the relation between the structure of human groups and consciousness arises, is maintained or evolves, and therefore changes in the course of social evolution." One of the significant areas of inquiry within the contemporary

sociology of knowledge is therefore concerned with this very issue. Barry Schwartz, for example, has proposed an ingenious solution to the 'missing link' in the Durkheimian sociology of knowledge by advancing a theory that accounts for the linkage between social conditions and classificatory systems. These developments in turn coincide with analogous attempts in other disciplines or related intellectual traditions, for example with the attempts by Mary Douglas^{o1} in anthropology and by Mary Hesse in the philosophy of science, to specify, often on the basis of empirical research in a variety of social science disciplines, what exactly is the nature of the relation between perception and social structure.

But apart from such efforts, which often occur at the level of a microsociology of knowledge, another important set of new themes and issues has emerged in the sociology of knowledge in recent decades. Especially significant are the assertions about the growing power of knowledge in industrial or postindustrial society (Daniel Bell, Norbert Elias), about the emergence of a new class (Alvin Gouldner), and about the increasing influence of a new caste of priests (Helmut Schelsky). These writings share a common emphasis on the growing importance of specialized forms of knowledge in modern society and on the power that the carriers of knowledge may exercise.

Prospects of the Sociology of Knowledge

Lewis Coser is one of the few commentators on the sociology of knowledge who considers the ambitious original claims of its founders a challenge rather than an obsolete burden. In his survey of the history of the sociology of knowledge he comes to the following pertinent conclusions:

The sociology of knowledge was marked in its early history by a tendency to set up grandiose hypothetical schemes. These contributed a number of extremely suggestive leads. Recently its practitioners have tended to withdraw from such ambitious undertakings and to restrict themselves to somewhat more manageable investigations. Although this tendency has been an antidote to earlier types of premature generalizations, it also carries with it the danger of trivializations. Perhaps the sociology of knowledge of the future will return to the more daring concerns of its founders, thus building upon the accumulation of careful and detailed investigations by preceding generations of researchers.

The very question, however, whether such a return to issues that may have already been raised by the founders of the sociology of knowledge, and the related question of whether a transformation of the sociology of knowledge is in fact possible or fruitful, is not only the result of purely intellectual efforts but also, according to the theory of the sociology of knowledge, itself a development influenced by societal conditions. Merton, for example, emphasizes that an interest in the sociology of knowledge is determined by certain cultural and social conditions of society. One factor among these conditions is that with increasing social conflict, differences in the values, attitudes and modes of thought of groups develop to the point where the orientation which these groups previously had in common is overshadowed by incompatible differences. Not only do there develop distinct universes of discourse, but the existence of any one universe challenges the validity and legitimacy of the others. ... Thought becomes functionalized.

It must therefore at least be indicated that the reconstruction of the sociology of knowledge by the generation of sociologists succeeding the generation of the founders discussed here coincided with economic, political and social conditions as well as academic and disciplinary circumstances which in their relative tranquility stood in marked contrast to the crisis conditions of the 1920s. The present renewal of interest in certain issues first articulated by the classical sociology of knowledge, in contrast, 'reflects', as in the earlier period when it was first developed, the experience of a crisis in present-day society. In the concluding section of this book, Dick Pets, Volker Meja and Nico Stehr, Harvey Goldman, and Ann Swidler and Jorge Ardití analyze - from quite different positions - the 'prospects' of the sociology of knowledge.

Knowledge has of course always played a significant role in human life. Human action has to a greater or lesser extent always been steered by knowledge. Power, for example, has never been based exclusively on brute physical force, but almost always also on a knowledge advantage. At present, however, knowledge is assuming a greater significance than ever before. Advanced industrial societies are therefore regarded increasingly as 'knowledge societies'. A thoroughgoing scientization of all spheres of human life and action, the transformation both of traditional structures of domination and of the economy, as well as the growing impact and influence of experts are all indications of the rapidly increasing role of knowledge in the organization of modern societies.