Collective Beliefs: Sociological Explanation

The sociological tradition considers the explanation of collective beliefs as an essential task. In his famous *Elementary forms of religious life* (1912, 1995), Durkheim presents this exploratory project as the center of gravity of the sociological discipline. Although of decisive importance, this project remains confronted with certain difficulties. First, the extreme diversity of the collective beliefs. The members of modern and traditional collectivities develop many and varied forms of thought: ideological, religious, magic, scientific, etc. Impressed by this diversity, sociologists have sometimes multiplied the explanatory categories and by doing so have forgotten that the vocation of any explanatory theory is to establish the simplicity behind the apparent complexity.

Another difficulty is the permanent and undeniably irreducible tension on which the sociological explanation of collective beliefs rests. The sociologist must maintain a sufficient proximity to the observed beliefs as to be able to identify their specific qualities, while remaining sufficiently distant to preserve the autonomy of the sociological interrogation. The history of the various ideological drifts of the sociological analysis shows that this balance is not always easily accessible.

A short detour by sociological tradition will initially remind us of the diversity of the sociological explanations of the collective beliefs. On a second occasion, we will identify some of the general criteria used by sociologists to evaluate the respective merits of these various explanations. Finally, we will be interested in the reasons why many contemporary sociologists consider the generalization of the principle of ‘symmetry’ as significant progress for the sociological explanation of collective beliefs.

1. The Diversity of Sociological Explanations

In a classical article intended to provide a general theoretical framework for the sociology of knowledge, R. K. Merton (1945) summarizes the nature of the sociological explanation in the following way: to establish the correlations between collective beliefs, conceived as dependent variables, and ‘the other existential factors of society and culture’ conceived as independent variables. If such a formula makes it possible to unify many sociological studies devoted to the explanation of collective beliefs, this unity remains however purely ‘formal.’ The diversity of the sociological explanatory modes must be considered on at least two levels: on the one hand the nature of these ‘existential factors’ mentioned by Merton, on the other the nature of the ‘relation’ which links these factors to the collective beliefs.

Some examples may be useful. Ideology constitutes a traditional object of the sociology of collective beliefs. These sociopolitical belief systems play a central role in the legitimization of the social order of modern societies. The sociological explanation of ideologies generally consists of replacing them in the singular interaction system in which they appear. There is not, however, a single way to conceive the nature of this system. The Marxist tradition, for example, identifies this system with a complex set of social interests. This explanatory scheme initially suggested by Marx (1852) is primarily of a ‘utilitarian’ nature. If a social group believes in the value of such or such a politico-social organization, it is not because of its intrinsic value, but because this precise type of organization reinforces directly or indirectly its social domination, and consequently its material interests.

The social utility of the ideological belief overrides its truth or falseness. If this utilitarian approach of collective beliefs has been presented by K. Mannheim (1929, 1991) as a fundamental stage for the emergence of the sociology of knowledge, it is not the only possible one. The paretian study of religious beliefs, for example, rests on a very different conception of the existential factors mentioned by Merton. In his famous *Traité de sociologie générale*, Pareto (1916, 1968) analyzes the social diffusion of the religions as the consequence of social ‘feelings.’ He affirms the importance to clearly separate the respective influence of ‘derivations’—ideas, theories, theologies, etc.—and ‘residues’—deep-rooted feelings: ‘the social value of the religions,’ Pareto writes, ‘depends very little on derivations, enormously on the residues. In several religions, there is a significant group of residues (…) which correspond to feelings of discipline, submission, hierarchy’ (§1854).

In a way, this explanatory scheme developed by Pareto is very different from the one proposed by Marx for the ideologies: if a social group massively adopts a religion, it is not because of its direct or indirect social ‘utility’ but because it somehow manages to satisfy the dominant ‘passions’ of this group. In another way, however, these two explanatory schemes are quite similar. Marx for the ideologies and Pareto for the religions both explicitly consider that the link between the dependent and independent variables has to be conceived as a ‘causal’ relation. The adoption of a belief by a social group appears in both cases as the mechanical consequence of ‘forces’—interest or passions—which dominate the conscience of its members. These forces remain out of the control of the social actors.

This causal approach has sometimes been used to explain the existence of magic beliefs. Lévy-Bruhl (1922, 1960) sees the persistence of magic beliefs in traditional societies as the mechanical consequence of a specific mental structure: the ‘primitive mentality.’ This mentality, Lévy-Bruhl suggests, prevents the members of these communities from perceiving the
objective difference between verbal similarity and real similarity and, in a more general way, the difference between the relations between the words and the relations between the things. However, works of Durkheim and Weber show that this approach of magic beliefs is far from being the most fruitful. In their respective analyses of the magic beliefs, they both identify the 'existential' factor to the immediate environment of the social actors. They both also conceptualize the relation between this environment and the collective belief as 'rational' or more precisely as subjectively rational. 'The acts motivated by magic,' Weber writes (1922, 1979), 'are acts at least relatively rational (...); they follow the rules of the experience even if they are not necessarily acts according to the means and ends.' The same point is emphasized by Durkheim (1912, 1995), in particular, when he compares the rationality of traditional 'rites' and the rationality of modern 'techniques': 'the rites which [the primitive] use to ensure the fertility of the ground (...) are not, to him, more irrational than are, to us, the technical processes used by our agronomists (...). The powers linked to these rites do not appear particularly mysterious. For those who believe in them, those forces are not more unintelligible than are gravity or electricity to a contemporary physicist.’ The explanatory strategy proposed by Weber and Durkheim thus exists mainly to identify the role of the collective belief in the adaptation process of the social actor to his immediate environment, and thus to reconstruct the 'meaning' of the belief for this actor.

The sociologists have also paid great attention to scientific beliefs. Sorokin (1937), for example, attempts to demonstrate 'that what a given society regards as true or false, scientific or unscientific (...) is fundamentally conditioned by the nature of the dominant culture.' He analyzes the relation between the social 'credibility' of scientific representations of reality and the evolution of cultural values. The Sorokinian 'existential' factor is different from the factors previously observed in Marx, Pareto, Weber, or Durkheim’s works: it consists mainly of a 'cultural framework' evolving in a cyclic way. The 'relation' between dependent and independent variables remains however similar to the relation theorized by Durkheim and Weber. The social groups, Sorokin says, select their scientific beliefs according to a general principle of 'logical dependence' or 'logical consistency.' Merton (1938, 1970) shares with Sorokin the will to establish the social conditions of the scientific development. However, he emphasizes, the 'functional' nature of the relation which linked the natural sciences of the seventeenth century to their socio-historical contexts. Scientific knowledge, Merton observes, is obviously developed on the basis of cognitive constraints but this development also integrates, in variable proportions, the influence of social factors. The statistical analysis applied to technological inventions shows in particular that a great number of these inventions are intended to bring a solution to maritime transport, mining industry, or military technology problems. The production of the scientific beliefs may be partially interpreted as an attempt of the scientific community to satisfy an explicit or diffuse social demand.

2. Three Elementary Conditions of Sociological Explanations

As shown by these classical examples, sociologists refer in the course of their studies to multiple existential factors: interest (Marx), passion (Pareto), structure of interaction (Durkheim, Weber), cultural framework (Sorokin), socioeconomic development (Merton). They diverge moreover in their way of representing the nature of the relation between these factors and the studied collective beliefs. Three general approaches of this relation are regularly observable: causal (Marx, Pareto), functional (Merton), and rational (Durkheim, Weber, Sorokin). It also happens sometimes that sociologists try to evaluate the objective range of their own explanations. The question they then have to face can be summarized in the following way: which conditions do sociologist need to respect in order to produce a solid explanation of collective beliefs? Three elementary conditions deserve to be briefly underlined.

First condition: the sociological explanation of collective belief must be more than the translation of the phenomenon to explain a new idiom.

The sociologists of beliefs generally start from the identification of an enigmatic phenomenon. Why does the industrial bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century believe in the virtues of parliamentary monarchy (Marx)? Why do Zunis Indians adopt a representation of the world in seven categories (Durkheim)? Why are corpuscular and ondulatory theories of light widely accepted during the nineteenth century (Sorokin)? etc. But it sometimes happens that their answers are only apparent. The methodological analysis of the theory of 'primitive mentality' shows thus that if the theory of Lévy-Bruhl does not convince anymore it is essentially because it does not explain anything. The key concepts of this theory, Boudon underlines (1990, 1994), 'only paraphrase the beliefs. They explain the confusion of the primitives between verbal associations and causal relations by the primitive’s tendency to make this confusion, tendency whose reality is guaranteed by the fact that they do make it indeed.' A similar point is made by Merton (1945) concerning Sorokin’s theory. ‘It seems tautological,’ Merton writes, 'to say, as Sorokin does, that in a sensualist society and culture, the sensualist system of the truth based on the testimony of the sensory organs must prevail. Because he had already defined the sensualist mentality as one
which conceives reality as being only what is perceived with the sensory organs. More recently, S. Cole (1996) pointed out that the analysis of the production of scientific beliefs by certain constructivist sociologists of sciences is primarily of circular nature. These sociologists generally claim 'that it is impossible to separate the technical from the social; that all science is inherently social. This turns their entire argument into a tautology. If science is inherently social, this means that the technical aspects of scientific discoveries by necessity must be determined socially. This is indeed the question we are examining.'

Second condition: the sociological explanation of collective beliefs must avoid ambiguous and/or occult concepts

Sociologists use a great number of conceptual categories. Many proposals produced on the basis of the combination of these categories make clear and univocal sense, some however remain more ambiguous. For example, certain sociological explanations rest on an ambiguous concept of 'social,' or more precisely a confusion between the 'social' and 'historical' dimensions of a collective belief. To show, however, that a belief appears in a particular historical context is not the same as to demonstrate its social character. L. Laudan (1977) is right to observe that 'the fact that certain assertions are contextual, that one adhered to it only to a certain time and in a certain place establishes neither that they are necessarily of social origin, nor even that they are opened to the sociological analysis.' The sociological use of the concept of 'interest' constitutes another well-known example of ambiguity. This concept is sometimes used by sociologists of science in order to describe the origin of the prestige or credibility of scientific beliefs. In an underdetermined situation, contemporary sociologists of science say, the scientists choose between two concurrent theories the one which appears conform to their 'interests.' However, how do we have to conceive the exact nature of these interests? Are they material interests, symbolic interests, technical, or cognitive interests, etc.? As long as the concept of interest remains ambiguous, the sociologist cannot legitimately claim to explain the observed beliefs. In addition, following a Weberian principle, many sociologists closely associate the solidity of an explanation to the manner in which these explanations avoid using occult categories, i.e. invisible 'forces'—as the Paretian concept of 'residue' or the 'primitive mentality' of Lévy-Bruhl—which determines the behaviors of the social actors. The methodological principle is simple and easily acceptable: the sociologist seeking to account for the origin of a collective belief may refer to the existence of an occult cause only insofar as he cannot explain this belief more easily, in particular by identifying its meaning. The obvious difference between the explanations of magic beliefs proposed on the one hand by Lévy-Bruhl and on the other by Durkheim and Weber seems to be directly linked to the application of this general principle by the latter.

Third condition: the sociological explanation of collective belief must be compatible with observable facts

This third condition can be interpreted in various ways. The first and simplest one consists of assuming that explanatory theories of scientific beliefs are not different from other scientific theories. They must not only dispose of various internal qualities (absence of circularity, precision, etc.) but also be able to be confronted with precise facts, and further still to resist this empirical test. These facts might be elementary observations. The observation, for example, of the persistence of the magic beliefs in Western societies seems hardly compatible with the assumption of a causal link between the magic beliefs and a 'primitive mentality' (Lévy-Bruhl). In the same way the observation of the developments of new religious movements in large cities enters openly in contradiction with the hypothesis that the contemporary process of urbanization is essentially a vector of disintegration of collective belief (Borhek and Curtis 1975). These facts can also be more complex products of the interpretative reconstruction work done by the sociologist or anthropologist. When R. Horton (1993) argues for example against the tenants of symbolist theory of magic, he points out that this theory, for which magic beliefs are mainly the expression of a symbolic 'desire,' enters into flagrant contradiction with what the members of the traditional societies say about their own rituals: '(…) in denying the paramount importance of explanation, prediction and control as guiding aims of traditional African religious life, "symbolists" (…) are committing the cardinal interpretative sin of flouting the actor's point of view.' Another way to interpret this third condition consists of associating the solidity of an explanatory theory with its capacity to give an account of other beliefs than the one for which it was initially elaborated. Is it for example possible to apply the explanatory scheme imagined by Durkheim and Weber for magic beliefs to other types of beliefs, such as the ideological ones? The fact that this transposition is not only possible but brings an objective gain of intelligibility for the comprehension of the ideological phenomenon (Boudon 1986, 1989) demonstrates the real value of their general conception of the sociological explanation.

3. The Symmetry Principle

Sociologists frequently add to these three general conditions a final one: a condition known as the 'principle of symmetry.' This principle implies that the explanation of the collective beliefs should be equally applied to phenomena of various natures. This last condition is not reducible to the conditions previously mentioned (the third one in particular) insofar as, to identify the nature of this plurality, it introduces a
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criterion of truth and falseness, rationality and irrationality. A sociological theory of collective beliefs is said to be symmetrical if it explains in the same terms true beliefs and false beliefs, rational beliefs and irrational beliefs. This principle, implicitly used by Sorokin (1937), is directly opposed to the 'a-rationality principle' according to which the sociological explanation of the collective beliefs cannot be indifferent to the content of these beliefs.

The interest of the principle of symmetry is double. From a methodological point of view, it requires the suspension of all evaluation related to the potential validity or invalidity of the analyzed collective belief. It thus represents a guarantee of neutrality. From the point of view of the empirical research, it makes it possible to follow in unified and thus simplified terms the manner in which the collective beliefs obtain a social recognition, or inversely an absence of social recognition.

The sociological use of this principle followed, however, two paths of unequal importance. The first, chosen by some sociologists of science, exists mainly to explain the scientific beliefs in terms of explanatory categories previously devoted to false beliefs. Linked to an exclusively causal approach of scientific belief production, this first use of the principle of symmetry has greatly contributed to the diffusion of a relativistic representation of science (Dubois 2001). There is, however, another way to apply this principle. It consists of following the major intuition of the theory proposed by Weber and Durkheim: to seek behind all collective beliefs, true or false, socially validated or socially marginal, the influence of 'reasons,' objective and/or subjective. Thus as R. Horton (1993) is reconstructing the limited rationality of certain African rituals, he defines the major nature of its explanatory project as follows: elaborating 'an explanatory framework which would deal “symmetrically” with the traditional and the modern, the prescientific and the scientific.'

See also: Action, Theories of Social; Belief, Anthropology of; Cognitive Dissonance; Collective Memory, Anthropology of; Culture, Sociology of; Durkheim, Emile (1858–1917); Ideology, Sociology of; Knowledge, Sociology of; Mannheim, Karl (1893–1947); Rational Choice Theory in Sociology; Social Movements, Sociology of; Theory: Sociological; Tocqueville, Alexis de (1805–59); Weber, Max (1864–1920)

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Collective Identity and Expressive Forms

If key concepts or expressions can be identified that function to capture the animating spirit of different epochs, then certainly one candidate concept for the latter quarter of the twentieth century is the concept of collective identity. Indeed, it is a concept that came of age in the latter part of the past century, as reflected in the outpouring of scholarly work invoking the concept directly or referring to it indirectly through the linkage of various collectivities and their identity interests via such concepts as identity politics, identity projects, contested identities, insurgent identities, and identity movements. This article provides an analytic overview of scholarly work on the concept by considering, in order, its conceptualization, its various empirical manifestations, the analytic approaches informing its discussion and analysis, and several unresolved theoretical and empirical issues.

1. Conceptualization

The concept of collective identity, just as the base concept of identity, is rooted in the observation that interaction between two or more sets of actors mini-