CAN NORMATIVE DISPUTES BE SETTLED RATIONALLY?
ON SOCIOLOGY AS A NORMATIVE DISCIPLINE

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T here is a widespread, mainly implicit, assumption among many sociologists that normative claims such as criticism of social discrimination, cannot be defended, modified or rejected with reasons, neither in science, nor (by implication) in society. Descriptive claims such as documentation of actual discrimination are treated in an essentially different way; they can be decided by cognitive means. This implies that many sociologists are cognitivists with regard to descriptive claims, but noncognitivists with regard to normative ones. The assumption is that because sociology is a science, it is an empirical and not an evaluative endeavor. Descriptive and explanatory tasks can be mastered with cognitive means: evaluative and prescriptive tasks cannot. Obviously, according to this perspective operative norms in a society can be documented and explained, but social scientists as such are not allowed to approve (or disapprove) of normative practices in the field studied. He or she may do that as a citizen but not as a scientist.

This widespread noncognitivism in sociology and other social sciences is untenable, both as an understanding of people in society and of scientific tasks. I shall argue for a cognitivist position based on a wide concept of rationality. Both descriptive and normative opinions can be discussed with reasons in everyday communication, be it in families, schools, firms or universities. To be a rational person in this cognitivist perspective refers to being able to defend and criticize claims with

intersubjectively binding reasons, including the ability to transform one's own opinions by learning from criticism.

In the first section of the article the focus is on a normative turn in ethics and theory of science. Whereas the first part of the 20th century was characterized by noncognitivism in normative issues, the second part became characterized by cognitivism. In the second section some problems with noncognitivism in research practice are discussed, focusing on how the position leads even the best sociologists to incomplete and inadequate descriptions and explanations, and to self-contradictory positions. In the third section two seemingly paradoxical elements in cognitivistic analysis of moral behavior are discussed, namely the fact that a non-correspondence between a norm and what actually takes place may validate the norm, and the cognitive importance of emotions. In the last part some themes having to do with sociology and other social sciences as normative disciplines are discussed.[1]

1. A NORMATIVE TURN IN SOCIAL THEORY: FROM NONCOGNITIVISM TO COGNITIVISM

A cognitivist, normative turn has taken place in contemporary social theory. Well-known contributors, including Raymond Boudon, Robert Dahl, Ronald Dworkin, Jürgen Habermas, John Rawls, and Amartya Sen have developed a general cognitivist platform. The noncognitivist position that was left is mostly unexplicated in today's social science, but if we go half a century back in time it is not difficult to find explicit endorsements of this in texts from influential social scientists. Frequent reference was made to logical empiricists such as the scientistic[2] philosopher Alfred Ayer. In an influential book, Ayer once imagined a conflict about the normative claim that it is wrong to steal, and comments:

> But /the other/ cannot, strictly speaking, contradict me. For in saying that a certain type of action is right or wrong, I am not making any factual statement.… I am merely expressing certain moral sentiments … and so is the other man.… there is … no sense in asking which of us is in the right. For neither of us is asserting a genuine proposition (1946: 111).

According to this view, we can only contradict each other when discussing claims that can be true or untrue. Claims surviving such discussions are "objective", or better, intersubjectively binding for (potentially) all rational participants. Values and norms are subjective, only socially binding as customs and conventions. Dahl describes this noncognitivist position as follows: "In this perspective your saying that you believe freedom is better than slavery is no more objective than your saying that you like coffee better than tea" (1991: 120).

Genuine propositions about social reality, including the description of norms actually sanctioned and the emotions of persons, can be true or false. But moral claims such as the norm prohibiting lying, cannot be true or false because we lack an external referent in order to decide if the claim corresponds with social reality or not. According to the non-cognitivist view, norms have only a subjective basis, be they grounded in emotions, tastes, habits (having become our second nature) or religious beliefs.[3]

A shift from a noncognitivist to a cognitivist position has long since taken place among leading contributors to the interdisciplinary field of ethics. The Oslo and Stanford philosopher Føllesdal, known for his integration of insights from Quine and Husserl, argues that it was common during the first half of the 20th century, both among logical empiricists and existentialists, "to regard ethics as beyond rational justification" (2005: 170; also Føllesdal 1982). That has changed, and he sees the start of a cognitivist turn with an article published by the young Rawls in 1951 where, for the first time, Rawls specified the procedure of reflective equilibrium. During the following decades it was demonstrated that the procedure was appropriate for both descriptive and normative argumentation. Føllesdal notes that noncognitivism is also found today, but "mostly among scientists who have not followed the developments in philosophy …" (p. 169).[4]

Such a shift can also be found in sociology and general social theory. There are several approaches and many differences between cognitivist positions, for instance in the work of Boudon and Habermas. But a common element is a broadening of the conception of rationality. Rationality essentially refers to the capability of actors to criticize or defend claims with reasons. Both descriptive and prescriptive claims can be accepted or rejected on the basis of the intersubjective influence of the better reasons.

In several contributions during the last quarter of a century, Boudon has argued a cognitivist position, steering a course "to avoid the Charybdis of the irrational models and the Scylla of the narrow version of rationality the Rational Choice Model endorses" (2001: 120). The irrational models refer to several approaches in mainstream sociology, to "causes that have not the status of reasons" (p. 122), be it Marxian or Durkheimian processes of socialization, Freudian emotions or Neo-Darwinian evolutionary mechanisms. Boudon generalizes the influential Rational Choice model into a much broader cognitivist model, insisting on the rationality of both descriptive and normative claims. As social beings we are constantly engaged in rational (inter)action, be it of the instrumental or axiological type (Boudon 2001: 93–117). In his book against relativism Boudon articulates his position like this: "cognitive rationality can be applied, not only to descriptive, but to prescriptive questions" (2004: 106). He reconstructs an example from Adam Smith, explaining the collective moral feelings that miners should be paid more than soldiers. Boudon argues that the feelings are based on "solid reasons" of a "trans-subjective" character "since they would probably be considered strong by most people" (p. 110).

Since his *Gauss Lectures* at Princeton University in 1971, focused on the linguistic foundation of sociology, Habermas has developed a general theory of communicative action. Central in his understanding of speech acts has been the clarification of "normatively regulated action", so essential in sociological role theory (1984: 85, 75–102). He argues that "normative statements can be valid or invalid" (1990: 52) and that "moral conflicts of interaction can be settled with reasons in light of intersubjectively recognized normative behavioral expectations" (2003: 241). One of his achievements has been to argue in detail how it is possible to break out of our scientistic "cognitive misbehavior" (Merton 1968: 146) in this field by introducing a more abstract conception of validity claims, making it possible not only to see the rationality of descriptive truth claims but also the rationality of normative rightness claims. This provides the possibility for a more adequate description and analysis of "regulative speech acts such as recommendations, requests and commands" (2003: 102) in everyday communication.

The noncognitivist position in social science has been embedded in a scientistic interpretation of the tasks of these disciplines. This has

confirmed the legitimacy of the position and made this element much stronger here than in the humanities. According to the scientistic interpretation, the successful natural sciences — like astronomy, physics and biology — should be the model for the social sciences. Two basic elements in the position are its objectivism — a social science "without a subject" (Boudon 1982: 153; 2004: 4–9) — and noncognitivism. The primary task of any science is to "explain" phenomena. Good explanations are "causal" ones. Popular illustrations of such explanations in many social scientific books on methods have been the Newtonian laws of motion and Boyle-Marriott's law about volume and pressure of gases. Social scientists defending this conception of explanation presuppose that the phenomena studied — actors, institutions or historical developments — are essentially like natural objects (objectivism), possible to observe and explain in the same way as chemical processes or bodies in motion. According to such scientistic interpretations "'reasons', that have no place in the explanation of physical phenomena, cannot, moreover, have any role to play in the explanation of human phenomena" (Boudon 2004: 4). And with regard to values, it is no more meaningful to criticize objective social processes than natural ones. Scientistic social scientists insist therefore that also the social sciences have to be free of value claims.

The second half of the last century witnessed a widespread critique of the scientistic conception of scientific disciplines, also demonstrating that the scientistic interpretation of the natural and biological sciences had serious shortcomings. These critical and constructive contributions came from researchers located in the interdisciplinary field of theory of science and science studies, not at least from philosophers, sociologists and historians of science. A broad post-scientistic platform emerged. With regard to the social sciences, it was demonstrated that actors and institutions could not be treated like natural objects. Intentionality, speech-acts and moral responsibility were social and cultural realities not found in the object realm of the natural sciences. Such phenomena are, however, fully compatible with a general Darwinian perspective on natural evolution, but require a methodological dualism distinguishing between natural and cultural phenomena.[5]

2. NONCOGNITIVISM, EMPIRICAL INADEQUACY AND SELF-CONTRADICTIONS

Noncognitivism today mostly influences social scientists as implicit pre-suppositions, as a shadow theory, and has to be explicated as implicit presuppositions in a close reading of existing contributions.[6] But independent of the level of explication, it tends to distort studies of normative phenomena. This can be illustrated with examples from the works of two outstanding sociologists, Robert K. Merton and the Norwegian sociologist Vilhelm Aubert. They both undertook studies requiring documentation and analysis of normative phenomena. Merton, for instance, discussed the ethos of modern science throughout his whole career. Aubert was a leading sociologist of law. Both insisted on the importance of norms in their documentation and explanation of interaction, institutions and social change.

When explaining how and why norms — "expressed in the form of prescriptions, proscriptions, preferences and permissions" (1968: 605) — influence actors, Merton underlines the importance of emotions. He does not discuss moral reasons or rational moral insights as elements in the interactive processes of reasoning in scientific communities (Kalleberg 2007). Merton presupposes that descriptive claims can be confirmed with reasons; normative claims can only be confirmed with sanctions, and stabilized with the help of emotions. When discussing the incompatibility between the ethos of science and totalitarianism, he argues that the ethos is sustained by "sentiments" and curbed by "disapproving emotional reactions … mobilized by the supporters of the ethos.… resentment, scorn, and other attitudes of antipathy operate almost automatically to stabilize the existing structure. This may be seen in the current /1937/ resistance of scientists in Germany …" (1968: 595). Asking about the authority of norms, including the ethos of science, Merton gives a non-cognitive answer, referring to emotions and traditions "which deserve uncritical respect" (p. 601). He would have to analyze the ethos of other social institutions in the same way, including the mores of a totalitarian state. His position on value claims is then a kind of moral relativism. He argues in a different way about truth-claims, noting the self-refuting character of such relativism (1968: 557).

Merton tried to interpret the norms of science identified only as mores, conventions and customs, internalized by actors and externally

sanctioned by other actors. He could not succeed. Norms regulating truth-finding, plagiarism and the free and informed consent of people participating in medical studies, are more than arbitrary conventions and customs, they are categorical norms based on insights in their moral legitimacy. Jewish German physicists in the 1920s and 1930s — and several "Aryans" — reacted with sorrow, scorn and contempt when contributions were not taken into consideration because they were produced by Jews (Walker 1995). People within and outside of German medicine reacted vehemently to the treatment of prisoners being forced to participate in inhuman experiments (Schmidt 2004). These reactions were not primarily emotions based on violation of conventions; they were based on compelling normative reasons proscribing such behavior. That is also part of the empirical material to be discussed by a sociologist of science. When Merton fails to make such a distinction, he not only makes real phenomena (moral norms) invisible and his own analysis incomplete, he is also distorting the phenomena to be described and explained.

Aubert was the *doyen* of Norwegian sociology (Kalleberg 2000a). In 1979 he published the second edition of his influential introduction to sociology, written not only for students but also for interested citizens in the broader society (1979: 3). Norms and roles are essential in his analysis of social interaction. He underlines that norms are bundles of expectations, enduring social pressure between persons (p. 85). Aubert discusses the influence of norms in terms of the power of norm-senders, be it norms in families, local communities or in formal organizations (pp. 90–92). The relative power of norms is discussed, where he underlines the importance of four factors: 1) the emotional dependence on or emotional attraction of the normsender for the actual receiver of norms, 2) the norm sender's chance to influence others with positive and negative sanctions, 3) the competence of a sender in a specific context, for example a spouse in a family or a medical doctor in a hospital, and 4) an individual's chance of leaving a group if not living up to its expectations.

Aubert describes norm-regulated interaction as based on emotional ties, and also underlines the instrumental calculation of positive and negative sanctions. These are real factors. But according to a cognitivist perspective, there are also normative reasons operating in such webs of interaction. His analysis is therefore incomplete. He does not mention normative reasons, for instance related to moral obligations. Neither

does he distinguish between universalistic moral obligations, such as not harming other people, and social conventions, for instance norms of etiquette. In discussing norms in the system of law, he does not argue that some norms may deserve recognition because they are based on strong normative reasons. This means that his descriptions and analyses are also incomplete and sometimes distort central phenomena, such as by misidentifying moral obligations as conventions. Aubert was strongly influenced by noncognitivist traditions from logical empiricism and Scandinavian realism in law (1989: 9–27, 31–64). He was more explicit about normative argumentation than has been usual among sociologists. In the introductory book he distinguishes his sociological discussion from those found in moral philosophy and philosophy of law. Aubert notes that philosophers have claimed that norms cannot be controlled empirically in the way that is possible with descriptive claims. This places the discussion of their validity outside of scientific discourse (1979: 86). He accepts this claim and refers to two contributions from the 1940s, both advocating a noncognitivist position.

Neither Merton nor Aubert were able to follow up their noncognitivist assumptions consistently in their own research practice. Merton did not succeed in his distinction between cognitive and moral norms in science (Kalleberg 2007: 139–41) and there was also tension and ambivalence in Aubert's views (see e.g. 1989: 11–12, 49). They often operate as cognitivists in disguise. It is useful to identify four cognitivistic roles in everyday life in science and society, as a) a supporter, or b) critic of *status quo*, and as a person c) warning against or recommending future alternatives (Kalleberg 2005: 136–42, 166–86). Merton and Aubert are occasionally both supporters and critics of social reality, sometimes even reformers recommending or warning about future possibilities. In his best-known essay, on self-fulfilling prophecies, Merton, for instance, criticizes existing social reality, such as discrimination based on class and ethnicity (1968: 475–490). He criticizes the thinking of typical actors as "moral alchemy", refers to "self-contradictions" and "myths" in the field studied and warns for "false"(!) definitions of situations, because they can "perpetuate a reign of error" in the field described, explained and criticized. He finishes his famous essay as a social reformer with a discussion of how sociologists and people themselves can contribute to "appropriate institutional and administrative conditions" that can stop sociological vicious circles ending in banks going bankrupt or interracial

conflicts. One of his examples is a kind of field experiment, a "bi-racial housing project" in Pittsburgh (see pp. 489–490).

In Scandinavian sociology, Aubert is known for his "problem-oriented" research. Research questions should not only be sociologically interesting; they should also be socially relevant (Kalleberg 2000a: 402–6).[7] Also, according to Aubert, sociologists engaged in basic research should document and analyze "problems", i.e. states of affaires that are not as they ought to be. This presupposes sociology as a normative discipline. His own scholarly work included criticism of discrimination on the basis of social class in the legal system, and the discrimination of the indigenous Sami population in the northern part of Norway. He even developed what he labeled "action research", intervening in order to reform and improve local communities.

Non-cognitivist presuppositions in the work of Merton and Aubert made their analyses incomplete and also distorted some of their descriptions and analyses of what took place in social reality. This follows from the fact that a sociologist of science or a sociologist of law should not redefine all norms as conventions, or implicitly assume that if there should be a difference, sociologists should only relate to conventions. But why should we leave the analysis of moral norms — for example about truth, dignity and justice — to others such as theologians and philosophers and transport the norms out of actual social contexts where they really matter? Merton's and Aubert's more or less explicit programs for research were also contradicted by their own practice as they both also functioned as supporters, critics and even social reformers in their research practice.

3. VALUE-RATIONALITY IN RELATION TO SOCIAL REALITY AND EMOTIONS

There are seemingly paradoxical elements in cognitivist documentation and analysis of claims and emotions. The non-correspondence between a normative claim and what actually takes place may validate the claim, the opposite of what normally happens to a descriptive claim. We all know that emotions are essential in moral disagreements, but can we find cognitive elements in emotions usable in a cognitivist analysis — or are emotions only a problem in contexts requiring rational, normative discourse?

A contradiction between a descriptive claim and social reality generally falsifies the claim. The claim that *The International Institute of Sociology* did not have a meeting in Budapest at the end of June 2008 does not correspond to social realities and can be rejected on that basis. A mismatch between a normative claim and reality may both strengthen and weaken the claim. Many traditional norms about the proper place of African-Americans in the US, or of women in relation to men in the OECD area, have corresponded less and less well with actual social realities in the course of the last half century, largely as a result of reform-oriented social movements. Such violation of unfair norms is widely perceived as normative progress.

On the other hand, there are other violations of norms that validate the norms disobeyed. In 1914, several leading European scientists, among them Max Planck and Pierre Duhem, were transformed into nationalistic "men of war": "Dispassionate scientists impugned 'enemy' contributions, charging nationalistic bias, log-rolling, intellectual dishonesty, incompetence and lack of creative capacity." Merton rightly identifies this as a serious example of a violation of the norm of universalism (1968: 608). An age-old experience and insight, presumably dating back to the dawn of civilizations, is that violation of a norm cannot only make us aware of its existence but actually strengthen and confirm it. As the excellent sociologist he was, Merton appropriately noted in his analysis of the nationalistic violation of the norm of universalism — again as a cognitivist in disguise — that "by the very process of contemning their violation, the mores are reaffirmed" (*ibid.*). A classic example in the history of research ethics is how the inhuman violation of moral norms by medical doctors during the Nazi-period later led to a codification and strengthening of the moral rules of science, for instance norms about informed consent (cf. the *Nuremberg Code)*.[8]

In this classic article on the ethos of science, Merton does not criticize social reality on the basis of the norms of science. He observes that the norms are violated, sanctioned or reaffirmed. Merton does not have conceptual resources to distinguish between different rationality claims that can be disputed and decided with reasons. He only has the concept of a descriptive "truth claim" (e.g. 1968: 608, 607). But in order to acquire a more realistic grasp on what is taking place when moral norms are violated, we have to widen the concept of cognitive claims to also include normative claims, for instance proscriptions and prescrip-

tions. This can be explicated by distinguishing between truth claims (descriptive statements) and rightness claims (normative statements). Noncognitivists fail to distinguish between these two types. They are right in insisting that normative speech acts cannot be "true" in the way descriptive claims can be, but wrong in assuming that there are no other validity claims that are also open for being settled (or redeemed) with reasons (as argued in seminal contributions from Habermas, cf. 1984: 8–42, 273–337; 1990, 2003).

Normative claims can be accepted as valid or rejected as invalid in communication where people evaluate reasons. When we reject the previously mentioned descriptive claim about the meeting of *The International Institute of Sociology*, or accept the normative claim that it is wrong to fabricate fictitious data in science, both positions are based on the acceptance of claims with reasons. In the one case we may speak of a correspondence with what actually took place, in the other about a non-correspondence with legitimate norms. None of these claims is confined to a local context but are intended as valid for (potentially) all rational participants (see Habermas 1990: 62–68, 2003; Boudon 2003: 15–42).

In the scientistic tradition it is common to locate emotions both in a subjective and an intersubjective realm, and both are treated as non-cognitive entities. They can be observed in fieldwork or documented in intensive interviews, but the scientistic perspective is pessimistic in that it is assumed that neither the participants nor the observers can solve emotional disagreements with intersubjectively acceptable reasons. Seen from a cognitivist position, emotions can be used in a very different way. Moral sentiments like anger, shame and admiration are — and should be — essential in cognitivist descriptions and analyses of moral (dis)agreements. They can be explicated as implicit judgments and reconstructed as claims about the rightness of norms.

In this perspective, it is no coincidence that as a sociologist of science, Merton is also a sociologist of emotions, not at least in his studies of scientific misconduct. Violation of basic norms, such as plagiarism or fabrication of data, elicits strong emotions in scientific communities. Norwegian medicine, for instance, recently experienced an extreme case of fabrication and falsification of data about hundreds of non-existing patients. The case elicited feelings of shock, anger and desolation in the scientific community and in the surrounding society, patients and research councils included. In the focus of the investigation were several

articles from a "favorite son" of the research community. The articles had 60 coauthors from 6 countries and several were published in leading journals around the world, such as *The New England Journal of Medicine* and *The Lancet*. Coauthors had been deceived; people being supervised had been betrayed. Coauthors, referees and opponents had not lived up to the requirements of the institutional imperative of organized skepticism.[9]

We all know that feelings are strong in cases of violation of fundamental norms. It is possible to integrate emotions as a constitutive element in a broad cognitivist approach. "Particularly negative feelings have a cognitive content that can be made explicit in the form of value judgments in a similar way that the content of perceptions can be made explicit in the form of observations sentences" (Habermas 2003: 242). This means that feelings can have a value-rational function, giving precision and strength to normative reasons. "Put in explicit linguistic form … feelings too, can take on the role of reasons that enters into practical discourses as observations enter into empirical discourses" (*ibid.*).

Noncognitivistic sociologists have not been able to unpack the rational elements in moral sentiments. They have placed cognitive and rationality on one side, norms and emotions on the other. This can be interpreted as a form of cognitive misbehavior, following from too narrow concepts of rationality and validity claims, only opening for truth claims the possibility to be decided with reasons. But moral sentiments have an internal relation to rationality and normative claims can also be decided with reasons.[10]

4. CONSTATIVE, CRITICAL AND CONSTRUCTIVE PERSPECTIVES: ON SOCIOLOGY AS A NORMATIVE DISCIPLINE

Arguing within a general cognitivist framework it is reasonable to claim that sociology and other social sciences can and should be developed also as normative disciplines. Let me conclude with some reflections on what this should not mean (irrational subjectivism, not empirical), and what it should mean (critical and constructive studies) (cf. Kalleberg 2005).

An argument for sociology and other social sciences also as normative disciplines is not a license for post-scientistic subjectivism and decisionistic standpoint theory. Several critics of scientism and positiv-

ism adhered to noncognitivist assumptions. According to such critics it was impossible to be value-free, and the solution was openly to declare which values and interests one adhered to, for instance binding oneself to a particular social movement. Positivistically oriented sociologists like Merton were more consistent than such anti-positivistic critics. If it is the case that the stronger reasons cannot drive out the weaker ones, a field of discourse should not be made part of an academic discipline. The force of the better argument must have a primary role in a science. Rational normative argumentation is possible, and requirements for clarity and consistency in such argumentation are as strict as for descriptive forms of reasoning.

The social and cultural sciences are empirical disciplines. But unlike the natural and biological sciences these disciplines are not documenting and analyzing "brute facts". They are oriented towards what Searle (1997: 31–57) labels "institutional facts", i.e. practices and institutions that are created and maintained by rational actors. Institutional facts — such as pro-life groups and abortion clinics — are pre-impregnated with definitions of situations, including all kinds of more or less legitimate norms and values, and sometimes also brute force. Norms and values are empirical phenomena, but of a special kind, and not found in chemical processes or in the motions of planets. This social reality influences social scientists to develop specific requirements to descriptions and explanations, adjusted to the existence of actors defining situations with reasons and choosing between alternative courses of action (see Boudon 2001: 57–69, Kalleberg 2007: 145–146).

Because of the scientistic connotations of the word "empirical" in the social sciences, it can be enlightening to occasionally avoid it and instead speak about two general approaches to social reality, constative and critical. A constative approach to social reality is to document and analyze a social reality on its own cultural and normative terms. The English verb "constate", and its equivalent in other European languages, comes from Latin *constare*, meaning to ascertain that which is given or stays firm. An example of a series of *constative questions* can be found in comparative studies of income distributions where the actual distribution of wages can be documented. Also the distributional norms that the people studied adhere to and their conceptions of what would be a fair distribution are documented. In a study by Verba and Kelman (1987) for instance, it was reported that American top managers in car-producing companies

(around 1980) thought it would be fair if they earned approximately 27 times more than workers. Swedish managers thought 4 times the workers' salary would be fair. Feminists and civil rights activists in the US opted for around 8 to 10 times, being rather "conservative" if compared directly to top Swedish managers. A typical task in a constative study is to explain such differences between firms. The explanation here could be, for instance, that the American firms were the most productive and profitable. That was however not the case, as the Japanese and Swedish firms were the more successful in this period.

The *critical* type of question has the following general form: What is the value of the object under study? Here a reliable description of the state of affairs has been achieved, or is presupposed for analytical purposes. The important thing is not documentation or explanation of differences or changes, but evaluation. Critical questions open up for the evaluation of social phenomena according to different value standards and norms, for instance having to do with justice, equality, ecological sustainability, health, efficiency, economic growth, human rights, or good conduct in science. One can evaluate wage-distributions and distributional norms according to their fairness, or the way in which they contribute to good and bad health, or the degree to which they stimulate innovation and flexibility. The value standards may be taken from the field, from existing national or international law, or from a research tradition. The important thing is that they are clearly explicated and applied, so clearly that consistency and argumentative steps can be scrutinized and discussed by other researchers in order to be able to take a stand on the normative conclusions.

To be a "critical" — normative or evaluative — sociologist in the meaning presented here, is something different from being "political". There are a number of value standards that can be applied by a sociologist, for instance related to efficiency, democracy, health, fairness, equality and dignity. Efficiency is a value standard which is neutral, not conservative. Both reasoned approval and disapproval of states of affairs are "critical" (evaluative). In this meaning Milton Friedman was a critical social scientist.[11]

Criticism is an important task in its own right. It is an achievement to be able to identify phenomena and criticize them. When during the 1950s, Aubert made discrimination of the Sami people visible in the Norwegian public sphere, he was able to discern a phenomenon that

was so obvious that most people did not see it. Feminist sociologists achieved similar things during the next two decades. But in the longer run it is not interesting to continue to criticize certain phenomena if it is not possible to change and improve them with acceptable means and costs. This opens up a constructive task. *Constative and critical research questions can be combined to form a third type, the constructive questions.* These have the basic form: What can and should actors do in order to improve their situation? When we ask about "can", we are in a descriptive (constative) dimension discussing feasibility. When we ask about "should", we are in a prescriptive (critical) mode discussing desirability. In the above discussion I gave examples of how Aubert and Merton also operated as constructive sociologists, so to say camouflaged as value-free scientists. But such constructive tasks should be approached in an explicit and systematic way, both as basic and applied research.

The central elements in all research designs are the research questions. There are several strategies for developing constructive questions and research designs. The constructive task is to develop insights about feasible alternatives to existing structures, distributions and practices, alternatives that are better than existing ones. The task here is not to describe and explain a given social reality, nor to evaluate it, but to identify a better alternative for the unit under study. Whereas the critical approach is oriented towards the evaluation of existing social realities, the constructive one is oriented towards their transformation.

There are three basic strategies for developing constructive questions and corresponding research designs: 1) We may ask if there is something to learn from a comparable, existing unit. We can learn from good examples and be warned by bad. 2) The social scientist can intervene, together with others, in order to improve the unit studied. As we saw, Aubert practiced this ("action research"). There were also elements of this in Merton's work, as the housing project mentioned above. 3) We may imagine a non-existent, but feasible and desirable alternative for the unit in focus. Robert Dahl follows this strategy in his *A Preface to Economic Democracy*, ending with recommendations as to why and how American firms should move in the direction of economic democracy. We can also ask constructive questions about the past: What could and should the actors have done instead of what they actually did? And what can we learn from that? (For an extended discussion with examples and reconstruction of existing studies, see Kalleberg 2005: 124–144, 166–186.)

There is nothing special about the data base of constructive studies, here as elsewhere we operate with qualitative and quantitative data. In intervening studies it can be adequate not to be a fly on the wall but rather a Socratic gadfly, challenging the people studied, but the data generated are still qualitative and quantitative. Only constructive research designs about imagined futures are without data, as we can have no data from the future. Constructive studies about alternative pasts are therefore more grounded. The answer to a constructive question has the general form of a recommendation - or warning - with regard to what actors can and should do in order to improve their situation, or to avoid problems. The three constructive approaches have the same goal in common: to make it possible to specify feasible alternatives and argue why they are desirable. As scientific contributions, the three constructive designs yield the same type of humble end-results as all other kinds of scientific research: words on paper, i.e. scientific publications. They are no basis for Comtean science kings. In addition to be good scientifc publications, they can at best become important input in broad democratic procesess of opinion- and will-formation (cf Kalleberg 2009).

NOTES

1. A preliminary version of the paper was first presented in Budapest June 27th 2008 at the World Congress of *The International Institute of Sociology*, in a special session on ”Can Normative Discussions be Rational? Cognitivism and Noncognitivism in Social Science”.
2. “Scientistic” in Hayek’s (1952: 24) sense, i.e. the uncritical import of methods and explanatory strategies from the natural sciences to fields where they are not adequate (such as the social sciences) because of differences in subject matters. Well functioning causal explanations in natural science are inappropriate as models for explanations in the social sciences, where we need cognitive ones (see Boudon in note 4). I have identified this scientistic assumption as an “ethnocentric fallacy”; the tendency to assume that what is valid in one context is also valid in a different one (2005: 108). It is among the most common and serious fallacies in social life.
3. Russell gave an influential presentation of a subjectivist view: ”If two men differ about values, there is not a disagreement as to any kind of truth, but a difference of taste …” (1935: 237–238).
4. The Belgian philosopher, Loobuyck (2001), has documented a parallel line of development, discussing the influence of Wittgenstein in ethics.
5. For some arguments and references to the shift from scientist to post-scientistic theory of social science, see Kalleberg 2000b: 223–25, 2007: 145–46, 2005:

92–108. Boudon rejects "causalist" explanations — with their "rational" and "irrational idiots" — in favor of "cognitivistic" ones (2004: 4–9). Arguments for a methodological dualism between natural and socio-cultural sciences are given by von Wright (1971) and Habermas (2008). On the compatibility of such a dualism with a Darwinian, monistic view of natural evolution, see Habermas 2008: 152–53, 162–63, 166, 170–72.

6. Boudon characterizes his way of doing this as *explication de texte* (Borlandi 1995: 561). The approach can be located under a general umbrella of reconstructive studies. These are more widely practiced in sociology than is commonly recognized (Kalleberg 2007: 147–151).

7. Merton wrote about "the problem of problem choice" throughout his career (Merton 1990: 360–61). He discussed the social relevance of research questions as an observer of other scientists and the possible effects of the research questions of sociologists, but did not insist on social relevance in its own right, only on scientific relevance (e.g. 1959: xix–xxvi). He did not make social relevance part of the ethos of science. There were exceptions, as when in his presidential address (to ASA) in 1957, he criticized the problem choices of sociologists and historians, neglecting scientific institutions. Again he was a cognitivist in disguise, criticizing disciplinary values having "become badly scrambled" and critically pointing to a "spacious area of neglect" (1973: 286).

8. Germany had been leading in the development of medical ethics since before WWI. From 1931 Germany had the most advanced laws in the world concerning medical ethics. The abusive concentration camp experiments were also crimes according to these laws, in force until 1945. Twenty German doctors were prosecuted in the Nuremberg Doctors' Trial in 1946/47. This led to the Nuremberg Code, the first international guidelines for permissible experiments on humans. It took however some time before the medical communities in other countries recognized that such guidelines were essential also for them. "For a long time" the Nuremberg Code "was seen as 'A Good Code for Barbarians', that is for German medical scientists, and was given little serious consideration in the Western scientific establishment" (Schmidt 2004: 16).

9. For an analysis of this case, see *Michael* (2007), especially the contributions from the editor (Nylenna), Ekbom — chairing the investigating commission, Evensen — dean of the medical faculty at the University of Oslo and Horton –editor of *The Lancet*. See also Vastag 2006.

10. The sociological classic in this area is Adam Smith and his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), both a descriptive and normative contribution. He gives a sociological explanation of how moral norms actually emerge(d), and presents a procedure for testing the validity of norms. Both his descriptive and normative lines of reasoning are developed strictly in terms of social action among people interacting in ordinary social worlds. The concept of a well-informed, impartial spectator is essential in both his descriptive and prescriptive analysis.

11. The social and cultural sciences are unavoidably normative (critical) disciplines. This also holds for the scientist position according to which people studied are assumed to have no freedom in action — Homans is consistent when insisting on the "illusion of choice" (1967: 103) — and their moral beliefs are interpreted noncognitivstically as based on illusions. Such a radical critique of ordinary

people's most secure everyday intuitions — freedom of choice, being responsible for actions, rationality in beliefs in human rights and democracy — means that the scientistic position is (extremely) critical.

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