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Let's Do Free-Spirited Sociology!

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Let's Do Free-Spirited Sociology!

Art – Science

Playful – Methodical Attitude

Ingenuity – Discipline

Intuition – Rationality

Informal – Formal thinking

Hypological – Logical

Hypocritical – Critical

Careless – Careful

Gay – Rigorous

Free-floating – Goal-directed

Divergent – Convergent

***Preflexivity** – Reflexivity**

“If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research, would it?” This famous quote is attributed to Albert Einstein, who without doubt epitomises the very idea of genius. Whoever said it pinpointed the indispensability of intuition: to keep going without continuous questioning of what you are doing; to open up for undisciplined, informal thinking; to trust your capacity to attain something of interest without evident rational thought and decision-making. When you think about it, you cannot come up with something novel through critical thinking only, can you? Creative thinking is needed to generate original puzzles and ideas, and more than that: *You have to rise above normal creativity! You have to think like a genius!*

Would Robert K. Merton be the first to object? Richard Swedberg (2019: 85) has pointed out that Merton was probably “the first sociologist to single out the topic of theorizing as [a] distinct area of knowledge, study and teaching.” “It’s a good thing that you know what you are doing,” he used to tell his students (op. cit. 90). In this way Merton stressed the importance of making conscious decisions about how to proceed when theorizing. Swedberg finds this helpful: “it draws attention to the fact that when you theorize you need to pay careful attention to a number of issues that are often taken for granted” (op. cit. 109). On the other hand, “the insight that [theorizing] does not happen in a linear and logical fashion” (op. cit. 86) hardly fits in with Merton’s idea of *disciplined research* (see, for instance, Merton 1949).

To come up with a “puzzle, something about the social world that is odd, unusual, unexpected, or novel,” and “a clever idea that responds to or interprets or solves that puzzle” certainly is the heart of good sociological theorizing (Abbott 2004: xi). *But to what extent is it a good thing to intellectualize the process of invention? Can our knowledge-how be improved through increased knowledge-that?* Arguably, this question of

intellectualism/anti-intellectualism is at the core of the theorization of theorizing. As for Einstein, he warned against analysing too much (Viereck 1929: 113f): “Perhaps you remember the story of the toad and the centipede?” (If you don’t, read the lovely poem from 1871 by Katherine Craster!) “It is possible that analysis may paralyze our mental and emotional processes in a similar manner.” The lesson to be learned is that thinking carefully about what you are doing may be disruptive, and thereby result in impaired performance. Charles Sanders Peirce’s captivating story (1929 [1907]) about how he recovered stolen goods through straightforward guessing can be understood in much the same way. The message is clear: *Put some trust in your capacity to guess right!* And that is exactly what Einstein did.

When asked to “account for sudden leaps forward in the sphere of science,” Einstein ascribes his own discoveries to intuition and inspiration (Viereck 1929: 117): “I sometimes feel that I am right. I do not know that I am.” Interestingly enough, he bridges the gap between art and science: “I am enough of the artist to draw freely upon my imagination.” So does Peirce (1929: 282): scientists need to acknowledge “the art of inquiry,” the creative aspect of hypotheses-formulation that mirrors the hypological (non-necessary) aspect of so-called abductive reasoning. *You mustn’t jump to conclusions, but you’d better jump to “What if ...?”! Make use of your intuition! Draw upon your imagination!* Now we have a clue what genius has to do with research. I will try to give you a Kuhnian answer as well.

Late in life, Thomas Kuhn reflected on his way of theorizing ruptures in physics (Baltas et al. 2000: 264): “I am a Kantian with movable categories,” he said. Let me continue: *Kuhn is a Kantian with blurred distinctions, a Kantian who recognizes the significance of genius outside the realm of fine art – a Kantian touched by Nietzsche?* Whether I am right or wrong, I read *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) as pioneering bricolage: to make sense out of extraordinary shifts of commitment in the history of science, as displayed through historical records of research activity, Kuhn draws on Kant’s writings on genius and art in *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790). In paragraphs 46 to 50, Kant tells us what makes a genius; furthermore, he highlights *ingenuity as a style of thought and creation*. This is how I understand it: through *undisciplined* creativity, a genius produces an original and disciplinary piece of art – an *exemplar* (Kuhn 1970a; cf. Hacking 2012); more specifically, a genius transcends established concepts through *forming* a manifold of intuitions into a composition that excites a heretofore non-communicable idea, in others as well as in “the composer.” In short, a genius *turns informal thinking into forms*, and as a *child of the future* s/he influences others through *resonance*.

From this perspective, the genius is summoned as a *Vordenker* who breaks the ice when serious anomalies make you feel really awkward; whose *formulations* vitalize art, science, and everything in between. *Gai saber!* Kuhn does not downplay the scientific community, however (1962: 122): “the flashes of intuition” through which a new

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exemplar/paradigm is born “*depend upon* [my italics] the experience, both anomalous and congruent, gained with the old paradigm,” that is, by engaging in *normal science*. But “the ‘lightning flash’ that ‘inundates’ a previously obscure puzzle, enabling its components to be seen in a new way that for the first time permits its solution,” might be blocked or neglected, if you are too disciplined to postpone interpretation and/or explanation. This is the main reason why we, researchers, must not make tradition a *disciplinary matrix* (Kuhn 1970b: 182). *How not to? Acknowledge “the art of social theory”* (Swedberg 2014)! *And be enough of an artist yourself!* The thing is, *you can think like a genius, even if you aren’t one*. Genius is a matter of what you think, not a matter of how you think. And unless you make something out of your intuitions – turn informal thinking into forms – it is hard to tell whether you are on to something or not. Doing a sloppy pre-study (Swedberg 2012) may be a good start. *Postpone the puzzle efforts!*

Kuhn himself exemplifies *gai saber*. Not just for fun, we can picture the story of *The Structure* as a classical Greek drama: *hubris* (questioning the philosophy of science), *peripety* (criticisms that prompted him to clarify), and *catharsis* (“Reflections on My Critics” and other postscripts). *What did he do to begin with? He preflexed.*

Sometimes it is a good thing to flex your way of thinking. And that takes preflexivity!

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* In this article, I have tried to give you an idea of *preflexivity*, a concept that I am forming. *What do I mean by preflexivity, and what could this clumsy novelty possibly be good for?* A hyphen can make all the difference, with a rather clumsy word suddenly turning into an intelligible concept: *pre-flexivity*. If you know what a prefix is, you are certainly familiar with the meaning of *pre-*. Flex, for its part, is an English morpheme identical with the Latin morpheme *flex-* ‘bent’, made from the verb *flectere* ‘to bend’. Accordingly, *preflexive* means *before flexion*, in other words, *before the act of bending* and *before the state of being bent*. I would like to propose *preflexive* as the opposite of *reflexive*, which I consequently conceive of as describing *acts of bending anew*. Hence, [p]reflexivity (reflexivity as well as preflexivity) can be understood as the opposite of just going along, more specifically, the normality of moving on by following an indicated path. From a Kuhnian perspective, this is equivalent to trying to solve an already suggested problem in the same manner as a forerunner (*Vordenker*) has solved a comparable problem, that is, without coming up with “a clever idea that responds to or interprets or solves [a true] puzzle” in a creative way. In my view, Kuhn writes about preflexivity without naming the phenomenon. The difference between preflexivity and reflexivity can therefore be clarified in the light of his distinction between *intuitions* and *interpretations*: as compared to reflective thinking, preflexive thinking draws upon intuition to the degree that something like a sudden, unstructured *gestalt switch* (a re-abduction) may happen. Accordingly, preflexivity is at the centre of Kuhnian theory of science and scientific breakthroughs.

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