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Heidegger and the Sociologists: A Forced Marriage?

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Jeff Kochan is upfront about not being able “to make everyone happy” in order to write “a successful book.” For him, choices had to be made, such as promoting “Martin Heidegger’s existential conception of science . . . the sociology of scientific knowledge . . . [and the view that] the accounts of science presented by SSK, sociology or scientific knowledge] and Heidegger are, in fact, largely compatible, even mutually reinforcing.” (1) This means combining the existentialist approach of Heidegger with the sociological view of science as a social endeavor.

Such a marriage is bound to be successful, according to the author, because together they can exercise greater vitality than either would on its own. If each party were to incorporate the other’s approach and insights, they would realize how much they needed each other all along. This is not an arranged or forced marriage, according to Kochan the matchmaker, but an ideal one he has envisioned from the moment he laid his eyes on each of them independently.

The Importance of Practice

Enumerating the critics of each party, Kochan hastens to suggest that “both SSK and Heidegger have much more to offer a practice-based approach to science than has been allowed by their critics.” (6) The Heideggerian deconstruction of science, in this view, is historically informed and embodies a “form of human existence.” (7) Focusing on the early works of Heidegger, Kochan presents an ideal groom who can offer his SSK bride the theoretical insights of overcoming the Cartesian-Kantian false binary of subject-object (11) while benefitting from her rendering his “theoretical position” more “concrete, interesting, and useful through combination with empirical studies and theoretical insights already extant in the SSK literature.” (8)

In this context, there seems to be a greater urgency to make Heidegger relevant to contemporary sociological studies of scientific practices than an expressed need by SSK to be grounded existentially in the Heideggerian philosophy (or for that matter, in any particular philosophical tradition). One can perceive this postmodern juxtaposition (drawing on seemingly unrelated sources in order to discover something novel and more interesting when combined) as an attempt to fill intellectual vacuums.

This marriage is advisable, even prudent, to ward off criticism levelled at either party independently: Heidegger for his abstract existential subjectivism and SSK for unwarranted objectivity. For example, we are promised, with Heidegger’s “phenomenology of the subject as ‘being-in-the-world’ . . . SSK practitioners will no longer be vulnerable to the threat of external-world scepticism.” (9-10) Together, so the argument proceeds, they will not simply adopt each other’s insights and practices but will transform themselves each into the other, shedding their misguided singularity and historical positions for the sake of this idealized research program of the future.

Without flogging this marriage metaphor to death, one may ask if the two parties are indeed as keen to absorb the insights of their counterpart. In other words, do SSK practitioners

need the Heideggerian vocabulary to make their work more integrated? Their adherents and successors have proven time and again that they can find ways to adjust their studies to remain relevant. By contrast, the Heideggerians remain fairly insulated from the studies of science, reviving “The Question Concerning Technology” (1954) whenever asked about technoscience. Is Kochan too optimistic to think that citing Heidegger’s earliest works will make him more rather than less relevant in the 21st century?

But What Can We Learn?

Kochan seems to think that reviving the Heideggerian project is worthwhile: *what if* we took the best from one tradition and combined it with the best of another? *What if* we transcended the subject-object binary and fully appreciated that “knowledge of the object [science] necessarily implicates the knowing subject [practitioner]”? (351) Under such conditions (as philosophers of science have understood for a century), the observer is an active participant in the observation, so much so (as some interpreters of quantum physics admit) that the very act of observing impacts the objects being perceived.

Add to this the social dimension of the community of observers-participants and the social dynamics to which they are institutionally subjected, and you have the contemporary landscape that has transformed the study of Science into the study of the Scientific Community and eventually into the study of the Scientific Enterprise.

But there is another objection to be made here: Even if we agree with Kochan that “the subject is no longer seen as a social substance gaining access to an external world, but an entity whose basic modes of existence include being-in-the-world and being-with-others,” (351) what about the dynamics of market capitalism and democratic political formations? What about the industrial-academic-military complex? To hope for the “subject” to be more “in-the-world” and “with-others” is already quite common among sociologists of science and social epistemologists, but does this recognition alone suffice to understand that neoliberalism has a definite view of what the scientific enterprise is supposed to accomplish?

Though Kochan nods at “conservative” and “liberal” critics, he fails to concede that theirs remain theoretical critiques divorced from the neoliberal realities that permeate every sociological study of science and that dictate the institutional conditions under which the very conception of technoscience is set.

Kochan’s appreciation of the Heideggerian oeuvre is laudable, even admirable in its Quixotic enthusiasm for Heidegger’s four-layered approach (“being-in-the-world,” “being-with-others,” “understanding,” and “affectivity”, 356), but does this amount to more than “things affect us, therefore they exist”? (357) Just like the Cartesian “I think, therefore I am,” this formulation brings the world back to us as a defining factor in how we perceive ourselves instead of integrating us into the world.

Perhaps a Spinozist approach would bridge the binary Kochan (with Heidegger’s help) wishes to overcome. Kochan wants us to agree with him that “we are compelled by the system [of science and of society?] only insofar as we, collectively, compel one another.” (374) Here, then, we are shifting ground towards SSK practices and focusing on the sociality

of human existence and the ways the world and our activities within it ought to be understood. There is something quite appealing in bringing German and Scottish thinkers together, but it seems that merging them is both unrealistic and perhaps too contrived. For those, like Kochan, who dream of a Hegelian *aufhebung* of sorts, this is an outstanding book.

For the Marxist and sociological skeptics who worry about neoliberal trappings, this book will remain an erudite and scholarly attempt to force a merger. As we look at this as yet another *arranged* marriage, we should ask ourselves: would the couple ever have consented to this on their own? And if the answer is no, who are we to *force* this on them?

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References

Kochan, Jeff. *Science as Social Existence: Heidegger and the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2017.