



SERRC

Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>

ISSN: 2471-9560

On the Sociology of Subjectivity

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Kochan, Jeff. "On the Sociology of Subjectivity." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 7, no. 5 (2018): 39-41.

Short url <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-3Xm> (provided by WordPress)

Raphael Sassower has the rhetorician's gift for creating pithy and compelling images to ornament his arguments. In this instance, he has me presiding over a forced marriage between Heidegger and sociologists of scientific knowledge. I'm relieved that he didn't put a shotgun in my hands. At the end of his review, Sassower asks: '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?' Momentarily granting the legitimacy of Sassower's image, the answer to his first question is: no.

Freedom of Interpretation

Neither Heidegger nor SSK practitioners thought they were formulating an incomplete account of science, thereafter desperately awaiting its consummation through a union with they knew not what. Luckily, these scholars also made their works public, so we're free to play with them as we like (within legal limits). In answer to Sassower's second question, since published texts are not the sort of thing that can either give or withhold consent, it's nonsense to say that anything can be forced on them in the way he implies. Here, Sassower's image falls apart.

Granted, one could potentially charge me with a 'forced' interpretation of some of the texts I discuss. But one should then show this, not just say it. Anyway, much interesting work has been produced through the careful misinterpretation of past scholarship. If, based on evidence and argument, I were found guilty of this, I should not complain.

Using an unfortunate heteronormative gender assignment, Sassower has me arguing that 'Heidegger [...] presents an ideal groom who can offer his SSK bride the theoretical insights of overcoming the Cartesian-Kantian false binary of subject-object (11).' Page 11 of my book, where evidence for this characterisation ostensibly lies, says only that 'Heidegger deconstructs the Kantian subject-object distinction.' Later, on page 40, one finds the sentence: 'It must be emphasised [...] that Heidegger does not dismiss the orthodox subject-object distinction as a false account of the subject's relation to the world.' The point is that the orthodox subject-object distinction, despite its many intellectual merits, brings with it some intractable problems. One is the problem of the external world. Those who subscribe to the distinction, and who also claim to be realists, remain vulnerable to sceptical attack regarding the existence of the external world.

The Importance of Heidegger's Deconstruction

In Chapter One, I argue that SSK practitioners, though certainly aware of and actively contending with this problem, have nevertheless remained vulnerable to it. I propose to remove this vulnerability by combining SSK with Heidegger's deconstruction of the subject-object distinction, which treats it as a 'founded mode' dependent on our phenomenologically more basic experience of being in the world.

Why might this be important? Because, as I demonstrate in Chapters Two and Three, SSK's competitors in the broader field of science studies have exploited these vulnerabilities in order to discredit SSK and successfully erect their own, different, methodologies. My goal is to show that, with some help from Heidegger, these attacks can be deflected, thereby leaving SSK's methodology intact and ready for action.

Sassower's review overlooks my discussion of this internal dispute in the sociology of science. As a result, in what appears to be an objection directed at me, he argues that the role of the social subject in scientific knowledge production is already well-established, his point presumably being that my book adds nothing new. According to Sassower, 'as philosophers of science have understood for a century [...], the observer is an active participant in the observation.'

But that's not all: '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 Scientific Community and eventually into the study of the Scientific Enterprise.' This is a tidy and commonplace history of science studies, one from which the role of SSK has been quietly erased.

What do I mean by this? On page 1 of my book, I write that SSK – also known as the 'strong programme' in the sociology of scientific knowledge – arose in critical response to what was retrospectively dubbed the 'weak programme' in the sociology of science: 'The weak programme focussed mainly on institutional studies of the scientific community.' This sounds like Sassower's description of scientists as being 'institutionally subjected' to social dynamics, as well as his description of science studies as the study of 'Scientific Community' and the 'Scientific Enterprise.' Here, the core epistemic products of scientific practice – theories and facts – as well as the means by which they are produced – techniques and methods – are excluded from sociological analysis.

This is an exclusion that 'strong programme' practitioners sought to overcome. For their efforts, they were ferociously attacked by historians, philosophers, and sociologists alike. Why? Sassower's popular, potted history cannot answer this question, because it fails to recognise science studies as a field of historical contestation. From the century-old insight of philosophers of science that observation is theory-laden, the current state of social studies of science naturally flows – says Sassower. It's always nicer when the bodies have been neatly buried.

A Book's Immanent Domain

Sassower has another objection. To wit: 'what about the dynamics of market capitalism and democratic political formations? What about the industrial-academic-military complex?' My answer: what about them? These are not what my book is about. Sassower seems to object that I wrote the book I did, rather than some other book. To this charge I happily admit my guilt. But it goes on. Having granted that science is social, Sassower asks: 'does this

recognition alone suffice to understand that neoliberalism has a definite view of what the scientific enterprise is supposed to accomplish? My answer: no it doesn't – and what of it? My book isn't about that either.

I'm not a political theorist, nor do I desire to become one. Nevertheless, Chapter Seven of my book does address some issues that may interest those engaged in political theory. As Sassower notes, in Chapter Seven I 'nod' to those, discussed in earlier chapters, whom I now retrospectively name 'conservative' and 'liberal' critics of SSK. (The 'nod' to liberals was a prolonged one, spanning most of Chapters Two and Three.)

My claim was that both kinds of critic are united in their rejection of subjectivity as a legitimate theme for micro-sociological study. The conservatives reject the subject as being, at best, just one more object among objects. The liberals reject the subject as being irremediably infected with the Kantian subject-object distinction. Because they reject this distinction *tout court*, they also reject the subject. With this, the sociological study of subjectivity is prohibited.

What interests these critics instead are fields of practice. Within these fields, the subject is constituted. But the fundamental unit of analysis is the field – or system – not the subject. Subjectivity is, on this theory, a derivative phenomenon, at best, a secondary resource for sociological analysis.

From my perspective, because subjectivity is fundamental to human existence, it cannot be eliminated in this way. In reality, the liberal account submerges subjectivity in fields of practice, where it effectively disappears from the analyst's view. I call this position 'liberal' because it seems to rely on a tacit model of the subject as being unconstrained by social and historical limits.

If the existential subject is not properly acknowledged to exist, then how can its limits be acknowledged, much less studied and understood? And if the subject really does, in fact, exist, but one can't ascribe limits to it, then doesn't this reflect a liberal notion of negative freedom? Taking a phrase from Baudelaire, I liken this model of the subject to 'a prince who everywhere enjoys his incognito' (379). By offering an alternative to this model, by combining Heidegger with SSK, I hope, through my book, to equip those scholars who are keen to challenge and expose this incognito.

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