

## **The Poverty of Paradigmaticism: A Symptom of the Crisis in Sociological Explanation**

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The present paper works toward a critical examination of the implications of continued reliance on the notion of paradigm in sociological theory. The authors advance the belief that given the state of affairs in contemporary sociology, paradigm has become a legitimizing device for sociological theory. Paradigmaticism is identified as an ideological invocation which in itself is a manifestation of the crisis in sociological explanation. Attention is directed at exposing the tensions and contradictions surrounding the conceptualization of paradigm, particularly the Kuhnian version, as it is employed within sociology. The reasons for the misconception that the Kuhnian paradigm offered a useful way of examining the discipline are explored. Continued reliance on the Kuhnian paradigm is explained not only in terms of the intellectual attractiveness of the concept, but also by an examination of the social and political context in which sociology functions. The implications of becoming overly involved with paradigmatics are viewed in relation to sociology's role as the market researcher for the welfare state. An alternative conceptualization is cited which can be used to take account of the advancement of knowledge in sociology. Finally, a greater reflexivity is called for in focussing on the more important goals of sociology.

If there is a single statement which all sociologists can accept, it is that "people are social beings." Beyond this we might add, without losing more than a very minor percentage of our colleagues, "human beings behave in patterns." And if we are really reckless we might try to slip by with the statement that "these patterns may be predictable under certain conditions." Upon these exceedingly general claims rest the barely congruent imperatives of contemporary sociological theory—a state of affairs which led Turner (1982) to declare:

Much of what is labeled sociological theory is, in reality, only a loose clustering of implicit assumptions, inadequately derived concepts, and a few vague and logically disconnected propositions. (p. 13)

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The present state of sociological theory is one where numerous theoretical orientations are offered to explain social phenomena in terms of a variety of concepts; many of which have multiple meanings, some of which are interrelated with others, others which are unrelated but are able to coexist with established concepts, and a few that even nullify others. These theoretical orientations have thus created multiple perspectives which have their grounding in such diverse dynamic elements as structure, order, conflict, function, dysfunction, causality, symbolic interaction, reality construction, micro and macro processes, consensus, stability, change, and on and on. The list has grown in past decades and there is no reason to expect this growth to cease. Our major premise is that what has occurred in sociological theorizing has been an attempt to impose order where there is none. In particular, the use of the concept "paradigm" has served to gloss over a lack of consensus by introducing the aura of "science". Thus, ideas of paradigm in the 1970's became a legitimizing device for social theory, an ideology to shore up a shaky disciplinary matrix. Given the legitimizing function of a paradigm, we hold that it is an "ism" like many other "isms": doctrinal in character yet serving an ideological invocation. Moreover, we believe that the use of the term paradigm has become excessive, contributing to a morbid condition in the discipline. We therefore treat paradigm as an "ism" rather than a model for sociological theorizing. If we are correct, our position has profound implications for social theory, and raises the spectre of what has been called the "crisis" in sociological explanation (Eisenstadt, 1976; Gouldner, 1970).

A brief analysis of the introduction of the concept "paradigm" to sociological theory is offered to lay the foundation for the ensuing analysis of this particular crisis in sociological explanation. Our analysis begins with and makes frequent reference to the all too familiar work of Kuhn. And while it may be true that some social scientists are beginning to complain of overexposure to Kuhnian paradigmatics, it remains that they work within a community which has been profoundly affected by the Kuhnian conceptualization of paradigm. Indeed, as Barnes in a new piece entitled *T.S. Kuhn and Social Science* (1982, p. ix) definitively states, "Thomas Kuhn's work is widely known, readily intelligible, and easily obtained. Its account of scientific research and the growth of knowledge is an accepted point of reference throughout the academic world." Similarly, Eckberg and Hill (1979, p. 925) state that *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is "undoubtedly one of the most influential and controversial scholarly books in the last few decades." This makes clear that reference to Kuhn's work is unavoidable in any discussion of the paradigm concept in sociology. Ritzer's (1981) work reminds us again of the reliance of contemporary theory development on the Kuhnian paradigm.

Therefore, our efforts will not be aimed at resurrecting Kuhn, for this is unnecessary. Instead, we direct our attention to the underpinnings in the conceptual dynamics which have on the one hand, acted as an attraction for

sociologists as they attempted to impose conceptual order on their discipline, and, on the other hand virtually locked sociologists into a view of the development and advance of knowledge within sociology—a view which we contend is inimical to the more important goals of sociology and which continues to exert an impact upon the course and direction of the discipline. Moreover, we will not only look critically at the internal dynamics of the use of paradigms within sociology but also at its relationship to sociology's role in providing solutions to the problems of industrial society.

### Enter Kuhn

In 1970 Thomas Kuhn published a second, larger edition of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Although it is our contention that Kuhn's centrality to the discipline is based upon a misconception, (i.e., that it offers sociologists a useful way of looking at their own field), no one can argue the fact that Kuhn's concept of paradigm became an important addition to sociological terminology in the 1970's. The impetus for this incorporation into sociological theorizing was initially provided by Friedrichs' (1970) *A Sociology of Sociology* which sought to apply Kuhn's ideas directly to sociological theory. Friedrichs' work was followed by further analyses of the "paradigmatic status" of sociology by Lodahl and Gordon (1972); Effrat (1972); Friedrichs, again (1972); Phillips (1973, 1975); Ritzer (1975, 1981); and Eisenstadt (1976), to cite the most significant. From all indications the list will continue to grow.

#### *The Paradigm*

In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, one of Kuhn's major objectives is to challenge commonly-held assumptions about the way in which science changes. In the view of most individuals (1) science advances in a cumulative manner with each advance building upon all those that came before it; (2) science has achieved its present state through slow and steady increments of knowledge; and (3) science will advance to greater heights in the future. To Kuhn, it is revolution that marks the important changes in science and not the accumulation of knowledge. It is Kuhn's contention that accumulation of knowledge plays a minor role in the advancement of science in comparison to the major changes in science caused by revolutions.

Kuhn's view of scientific development can best be understood in the following way. At a given time science is dominated by a specific paradigm. Paradigm, used in this sense is seen as a "fundamental image of a science's subject matter," (Kuhn, 1970). This is the stage of normal science, a period of accumulation of knowledge in which scientists work and expand the reigning paradigm. The work of scientists will eventually give birth to certain findings which cannot be explained by the existing paradigm. Kuhn calls these anomal-

ies. At the next stage these anomalies mount, producing a crisis. This crisis stage can only end in revolution; the final stage occurs when the reigning paradigm is overthrown and a new one takes its place at the center of the science (Kuhn, 1970, pp.144-159)

An important part of Kuhn's analysis is what he conceives to be the reasons for the replacing of one paradigm with another. In his original version (1962), he argued that paradigm change was a political phenomenon. The paradigm that eventually surfaces would not have done so unless a consensus was present, regardless of whether or not it had greater explanatory value than the paradigm which it replaced. The emergence of a new paradigm, then, was seen as being determined by subjective and even irrational forces. In 1970 Kuhn revised this interpretation stating that paradigms win out over others for "good" reasons which include accuracy, scope, simplicity, and fruitfulness.

### **The Inapplicability of Kuhn's Thesis for Sociology**

Our conclusion as to the inapplicability of Kuhn's thesis for sociology is based on the following reasons. First, and foremost, it is a model for the physical and natural sciences. The very nature of sociology prevents its being subsumed under a model conceived with the natural sciences in mind. The phenomenologists have focussed on this with their insistence that there is a contradiction between natural world phenomena and social world phenomena in terms of intrinsic meaning structures; that is, the natural scientists cannot reveal relevance structures (Schutz, 1967; Wagner, 1970). Walsh (1973) cogently summarizes the phenomenologist's argument:

The paradigm employed by the natural sciences is singularly appropriate to the character of a world which is unpossessed of an intrinsic relevance structure and upon which, therefore, meaning may be conferred by the deductive analytical procedures of the community of scientists itself. To apply this paradigm to the entirely different social world which is constituted by an intrinsic relevance structure necessarily mistakes both the character of that world and the character of the scientific paradigm itself. (p.35)

However, since the overwhelming majority of sociologists are not phenomenologists, further criticisms are necessary. In order to advance a different set of criticisms, we recapitulate Kuhn's views concerning how it is that paradigms actually change.<sup>1</sup> Kuhn's position can be summarized as follows:

1. Paradigms enjoy a monopoly over the scientist's thinking: there are no rivals. Scientists, while working under one paradigm, cannot seriously entertain another. Once a scientist starts toying with another paradigm, the old paradigm is useless to him or her.
2. There is no transitional period between the end of the old paradigm's reign over a

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<sup>1</sup>We are indebted here to the brilliant criticism of Kuhn's position by Watkins (1970, pp. 25-37).

scientist's work, and the beginning of the new paradigm. In essence, a scientist abandons one paradigm and without hesitation embraces a new one.

3. A new paradigm will be incompatible with the paradigm it supercedes. Kuhn is quite emphatic that the new paradigm will be incommensurable with the old one. (Watkins, 1970, p. 34)

Concerning the incommensurability of competing paradigms, the two most influential exponents of Kuhn's notion of paradigm for sociology, Friedrichs and Ritzer, both deny any incommensurability between functionalism and conflict. The former sees the possibility of a synthesis of functionalism and conflict in the form of a dialectical model (Friedrichs, 1970); the latter subsumes functionalism and conflict under the same paradigm, that of "social facts" (Ritzer, 1975). What they both fail to see, is the paradox in their own positions. If functionalism is a paradigm as Friedrichs states, then by Kuhnian definition it is incommensurable with a conflict paradigm. Or, in terms of Ritzer's view, if functionalism and conflict are one paradigm then there has never been any sociological paradigm in the Kuhnian sense of the term. To take Ritzer's position a bit further, the "social reality" and "social behaviour" paradigm must be *incommensurable* with the functionalist-conflict or "social facts" paradigm. But the early works of criminologists such as Quinney (1970) and Shur (1971) for example, attest to the commensurability of conflict ("social fact") and symbolic interaction ("social definition").

One can either accept Kuhn's notion of paradigm, or Friedrichs' and Ritzer's, but not both, for Kuhn's and the Friedrichs-Ritzer positions are *incommensurable*. In short, the term paradigm as used by Kuhn has left in its wake a conceptual controversy resulting in such stretching, manipulation, and modification of the term to fit sociology that what remains has little or no conceptual power. At best, we have been offered varying degrees of intellectual gymnastics to accommodate a thesis of natural and physical science development to a social science.<sup>2</sup>

Phillips (1975) also takes issue with Kuhn in a similar vein. He charges Kuhn with inconsistency concerning Kuhn's own actions related to the notion of the *incommensurability* of different paradigms.

All of this is to say that Kuhn is totally lacking in reflexivity; he never applies his paradigm concept to himself and his own work. But, then, of course he really cannot stand both inside and outside the new paradigm of historiography. However, the very fact that he exempts himself and the new historiography from the mode of analysis which he applies to others, as well as ignoring his own switch from theoretical physics to the history of science, tends, in my view, to undermine the very position he has advanced and defends. Kuhn's arguments that "the history of science shows . . ." or that "the evidence reveals . . ." assume that there is one correct transcendental viewpoint which can reveal what was hidden from earlier historians of science. This, I believe, is a further reason to doubt the completely closed and deterministic conception of paradigms described by Kuhn. (p. 59)

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<sup>2</sup>The irony, here, is that Kuhn's earlier (1962) emphasis upon the political nature of change is more appropriate to sociology.

Another reason for our contention supporting the inapplicability of Kuhn's thesis to sociology rests upon the empirical findings of Lodahl and Gordon. Lodahl and Gordon (1972, p. 58) express interest in "whether or not it is possible to operationalize the paradigm concept in a manner that will be viable in terms of research, and then, in testing key hypotheses based on the paradigm concept, which if supported, could provide the framework for increased investigation of differences between scientific fields." A series of hypotheses were generated in which relatively high paradigm development in a discipline was predicted to facilitate research and teaching through improved processes of communication and access to stored information. Scientists in each of four major fields—physics, chemistry, sociology, and political science—were asked to rank the fields in terms of consensus over theory, methodology and training. In addition, two tests of consensus over scientific content were devised. Lodahl and Gordon conclude that the social sciences are less developed paradigmatically than the natural sciences. Sociology ranked near the bottom in terms of paradigmatic development as compared to biology, physics, chemistry, economics, political science, and psychology. Furthermore, in addition to their contention concerning the low paradigmatic status of sociology as compared with the natural sciences, Lodahl and Gordon (1972) also include in their conclusion other evidence supporting the distinction between the social and natural sciences:

Social scientists operate in a much less predictable and therefore more anxious environment than physical scientists. We have seen that they have more difficulty in agreeing on course and degree requirements. This continuous struggle to reach consensus in a relatively unpredictable and uncertain environment is likely to produce high levels of conflict, both within and between individuals. (p. 70)

A recent article by Eckberg and Hill (1979) reiterates the findings of Lodahl and Gordon. After pointing to the logical problems and inconsistencies in the way paradigm is used, Eckberg and Hill conclude the following:

Those who state so emphatically that there are paradigms in sociology must support their assertions by showing that there is at least one area of research that is guided by concrete examples of scholarship, which serves to generate and solve puzzles. What we often actually find is research modeled upon no other research at all, upon a shortly soon extinguished line of research or upon a single theorist's speculations. There is little extended puzzle solving. There are few instances in the literature where an important puzzle has been solved. Indeed, there are few puzzles, mostly problems. If a problem is considered important, it is never solved at all, but serves as a point of contention among variant perspectives. We find constant arguing, bickering, and debate, but very little agreement. This lack of agreement affects operationalization and manipulation of concepts, such that different research requires different, often incommensurable data. The concepts themselves seem to change from study to study. (p. 935)

Advances in sociology simply do not occur in the manner depicted by Kuhn in his stages toward revolution in science. It is possible to find a more

plausible approach to this question in Mullins' *Theories and Theory Groups in Contemporary Sociology* (1973). Although Mullins' model has its roots in Kuhn's theory, he finds the concept of theory groupings more useful than the theory of paradigms. Mullins contends that the sociology of knowledge has not possessed the theoretical and empirical tools necessary to construct and test an adequate explanation for the development of a theory—social or otherwise. He then (Mullins, 1973, pp. 18–24) offers a model based on recent findings in the sociology of knowledge, to explain the development of sociological theories. Mullins examines how groups of theorists form, grow, and then cease to exist, and the ways in which this affects the parent discipline through the social and intellectual interactions of the groups of theorists.

Finally, we cite a very important constraint placed on the conceptual nature of the advancement of science if one were to accept Kuhn's description of how scientific revolution takes place. Kuhn explains that as anomalies and contradictory findings occur throughout a science, their discovery will cause paradigm shifts and eventual dominance by a new paradigm, as in the case of physics. This view is in conflict with the actual conditions of social science. Anomalies and contradictory findings occur throughout the social sciences and if their discovery caused paradigm shifts, scientific revolutions would be an everyday occurrence.<sup>3</sup>

Our conclusion, then, is that we should abandon Kuhn's paradigmaticism without further ado. It tells us very little if anything about the nature of sociology as a discipline, and only serves to legitimize an otherwise outmoded means of sociological theorizing—that of positivism or scienticism. In short, sociology is not a science in the way that many sociologists would like to believe it to be; and for it to gain legitimacy by covering itself with a theory of the development of natural and physical science is a sham. To invoke a cliché, sociology can stand on its own two feet; sociology no longer needs the crutch of emulating the older social sciences to achieve respectability. It is time for all sociologists to take seriously Lee's (1973) eloquent statement that "Man is Not a Tool; Society is Not a System" (p. 1). What is needed "is the development and wide dissemination of social wisdom and social action techniques that will enable more and more people to participate in the control and guidance of their groups and their society" (Lee, 1973, p. 6). Paradigmaticism, in contrast to Lee's admonitions, is a destructive form of "navel gazing."

### Considering Alternatives

There are ways to avoid the traps and limitations of paradigmaticism. One possibility would be to substitute a derivation of the concept 'metaphor' to account for the state of the intellectual domain of sociology and the advance-

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<sup>3</sup>See Phillips (1975); Popper (1970); and Watkins (1970).

ment of sociological theory. Valuable work done on this subject has been forwarded by Pepper (1942) and more recently Brown (1976). Brown had advanced a theory of metaphor based on the belief that an awareness of metaphor will yield greater self-awareness in the construction of sociological reports and the making of sociological theory. Such a conceptualization has profound implications for the philosophy of science as well as for the logic of methods in human studies, "for it suggests that both the deductive and inductive models of scientific explanation be reformulated by the view that formal representatives . . . can be understood as metaphoric redescriptions . . . of the domain of the explanandum" (Brown, 1976, p. 171). Referring to Kuhn and others who attempt to account for scientific explanations, Brown comments (1976, p. 172) "Much recent literature holds that the traditional accounts of scientific explanation are in trouble . . . We propose a cognitive aesthetic theory of metaphor be considered as an alternative logic of discovery."

The advantages of metaphoric over paradigmatic conceptualizations are that the broadness of the metaphor would help to account for not only the internal variables of the scientific domain but also the external ones that exert a critically important influence upon it. This can be made very clear if one examines the genre of 'crisis' writers in sociology (Boudon, 1972; Eisenstadt, 1976; Gouldner, 1970; Sorokin, 1951). These writers clearly show the relationships between the structure of the scientific field and the structure of society. For example, it can easily be argued that sociology does, in fact, fluctuate with every social crisis. The theme of crisis is an extremely critical element in the sociological tradition and the Kuhnian notion of paradigm does not nearly suffice as a mediator between sociological change and societal crisis.

Another matter concerns the relationship between paradigm and crisis particularly as exemplified in the structure of sociological language itself. Central concepts in sociology such as "structure" and "function" are very general; "paradigm" and "crisis" in particular are often confused, as attested by their multiple meanings. These weaknesses in sociology at the semantic level call for a critique of its epistemological structures (Boudon, 1972). An important focus of that critique should be toward the reconceptualization of paradigm. These and other criticisms cited thus far give us a strong basis upon which to move on to our next objective: raising the question of the significance of becoming overly involved with paradigmatics.

### **The Paradigmaticism of the 1970's**

One of the major contributions of Kuhn's work was to point out the irrational and political factors that affect the development of science. From what we have just sketched and without too much stretching of the imagina-



tion, one may now begin to perceive the paradigmatic climate of the 1970's as having been part of the irrational and political factors affecting the development of the science of sociology. This can best be understood by viewing the activity of paradigmatics as a way station for those sociologists or groups dislodged from the slippage of functionalism as the dominant influence in American contemporary sociology. Many sociologists now have a tenuous hold on the disciplinary matrix in which they have a stake. Following Gouldner's brutal analysis of academic sociology, many have kept their eyes closely peeled to paradigmatics in hope of salvation. One way contemporary academic sociology can retain its strength is through a convergence with, rather than a break away from, marxist and other forms of conflict theory. Indeed, Gouldner (1970) saw a drift of the dominant functionalist and parsonian models toward a convergence with marxism. A few years after Gouldner's expression of this, Ritzer (1975) conveniently paradigmaticized conflict theory with structural-functionalism in a way that highlighted the appearance of theory-sharing commonalities. In short, many functionalists and non-functionalists may have found paradigmatics functional to the preservation of their security within institutional sociology. This type of paradigmatics is often a form of theory making used to ward off threat. Gouldner (1970) emphasized this:

Theory making is often an effort to cope with threat; it is an effort to cope with a threat of something in which the theorist himself is deeply and personally implicated and which he holds dear. (p. 484)

### **Corporate and Institutional Paradigmatics**

An alternative way of perceiving the paradigmatic climate of the 1970's as indicative of irrational and political factors in the development of the science of sociology concerns an understanding of how paradigmatics have acted as a support for corporate sociology in an effort to preserve sociology's role as the market researcher of the welfare state.

The growth of the welfare state after World War II meant, among other things, that sociology was pressured into service. The emergence of a new set of social structures aimed at managing new situations in industrial society while commanding a large amount of resources and funding provided sociology with not only a tempting challenge but also an imposed directive.

And while, on the one hand, corporate sociology's principal theoretical perspective, functionalism, carried with it a focus on morality which made it difficult to adapt to the expression of the welfare state, this was tempered, on the other hand, by functionalism's emphasis on social utilitarianism.

Since corporate sociology functions for the dominant institutional structure, it fulfills the system's need for legitimation and practical knowledge. One

of the foremost critics of corporate sociology, Albert Szymanski (1971) explains,

The needs of the corporate system are translated into the specific outputs of sociology. The social structure of sociology is determined by the dominant institutional structure of the society in which sociology is part. Sociological activities take place within well developed bureaucracies, specifically universities and research centres, both of which are integrally tied to the interests of corporations and government. It is quite obvious then, that the university and within it, the department of sociology, is not an autonomous value-free institution, dedicated to the free pursuit of pure knowledge but rather a central and integral institution of corporate society. (p. 98)

Szymanski (1971) also comments on the myths which paradigms seek to uphold.

Sociologists assure themselves of the truth of their system by the myth of the self-correcting science. That is, social science is supposed to have a built in mechanism that automatically corrects errors. The operation that any given social scientist follows can be repeated by another. Since science has institutionalized the value of criticism, an objective consensus is supposed to be created. This logic, however, holds only for those immersed in the same paradigm; i.e., agreement on the significance of data can be applied only when there is prior consensus on modes of thinking, concepts, methods and problems. Only a given paradigm, and not social science as a whole, is thus self-correcting. (pp. 98-99)

Sociology's role as the market researcher for the welfare state became particularly well adapted to service since it put forward a conceptually uncommitted and methodological émpiricist approach typical of corporate sociology.

It was this particular role as market researcher for the welfare state that became threatened when there was a shuffling in the stacked deck of theoretical dominance positions in sociology. Paradigmaticism was a temporary method of dissonance reduction within and between theory groups thus neutralizing any rupture between academic sociology and institutional (corporate) sociology. In this way the role of institutionalized sociology comes to foster an optimistic image of American society as a system whose major problems are still solvable within existent major institutions. Gouldner (1970) describes this role well: "It becomes the function of the sunshine sociologists to assure American society that the cloudy glass of water is really safe rather than dangerous to drink" (p. 501).

### **Rediscovering the Goals of Sociology**

If anything has surfaced through our discourse on Kuhn's nonapplicability to sociological theory it is that sociology in the 1970's was floating aimlessly within the mysticism of paradigmatics. Only a renewed reflexiveness by sociologists will free sociology to direct its energies toward more important

work. Such work must be oriented to the more basic concerns of sociology such as (1) a further development of an understanding of human beings and society; (2) a further understanding of the organization and dynamics of our society; (3) understanding how individuals organize and internalize social phenomenon, in particular how meaning and structures are formed; and finally (4) a sociology relevant to the practical problems facing human beings. Szymanski (1971, p. 191) sums this up quite well when he says that sociology should not lose sight of the goals of "having a fundamental compassion for people and an identification with the victims of the routine workings of social structures."

In order to accomplish the basic concerns outlined above, it may at times be necessary to expose the constraining system in order to overcome its stifling qualities. We speak here of subversion directed toward preserving the autonomy of those who struggle to accomplish these basic concerns. Our reflexivity must feed our awareness in order that we may avoid being transformed into "an ideologue of the status quo and an apologist for its politics or into a technician acting instrumentally on behalf of its interests" (Gouldner, 1970, p. 448).

The reflexivity needed to escape from paradigmaticism presupposes an awareness of a fundamental paradox: the powers which supply institutional sociology with the resources needed for it to survive and grow may also be at the same time inimical to the most important goals of sociology. Although we feel strongly that the argument (that paradigmaticism is a cloak for the deficiencies of scientific sociology) is a sound, cogent one, we are not naive enough to believe that it will result in a wholesale desertion of the concept and the positivist view of sociology it masks. Indeed, it has been the man behind the paradigm, Thomas Kuhn that "is himself both an exponent and an advocate of sociological functionalism" (Barnes, 1982, p. 125). As such, both Kuhn and his paradigm are inadequate in helping us move toward the more important goals of sociology. While it may be true that Kuhn has saved functionalism's position in sociology, it is no less true that functionalism condemns human freedom to irrelevance. Scientific sociology has not helped, but rather it has hindered what we consider to be the primary purpose of sociology—the insurance and maximization of freedom for the individual<sup>4</sup>. We sound the call for the rejection of paradigmaticism. Only then will sociology begin to embrace the Enlightenment principle of seeking to liberate the human spirit and ensuring the progressive development of the person.

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<sup>4</sup>For a developed conception of Humanistic sociology see Scimecca (1981).

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