Sociology as a science of society

Restivo (1991, p.4) describes sociology as 'a field of inquiry simultaneously concerned with understanding, explaining, criticizing and improving the human condition'. Sociological inquiries are not only about exploring theories and ideas. Theories and ideas must be tested against reality if they are to be any use as explanations. Sociology is an empirical discipline that makes discoveries about social reality through the application of theoretical ideas and methods of research. Here I discuss briefly the practices and status of sociology as a research-based discipline or what many would call a (social) science.

There are many ways to research social life, such as large-scale questionnaire surveys; structured or unstructured interviews; ethnographic observation; or the collection and analysis of documents. For most sociologists, research is not just a matter of choosing a technique — it involves reflection on the fundamental issues of how we 'gain our knowledge of the social world, the relationships that are held to exist between theory and research, and the place of values and ethics in research practice' (May, 1997, p.l). The attention paid to these issues makes sociology somewhat unique as a research discipline.

The assumption that doing sociological research is just a matter of selecting appropriate tools implies an unproblematic relationship between researcher and social reality. Early sociologists such as Comte or Durkheim may have held such a view, but it is not easily accepted by contemporary sociology, with decades of reflection on the difficulty of trying to do good social research. Durkheim, who in 1895 authored one of the first textbooks of sociological research (The rules of sociological method), said that the social researcher should study social phenomena 'in the same state of mind as the physicist, chemist or physiologist when he probes into a still unexplored region of the scientific domain' (1964, p.xiv). Here he was following Comte, who believed that sociology could and should be modelled closely on the methods and procedures of the natural sciences to produce similar systematic knowledge of and control over the social world. Comte thought the social world could be explained as could the natural world — by deriving objective laws or generalisations about the behaviour of phenomena (in the case of sociology, people and groups) that would allow us to predict their future behaviour patterns. Prediction was important to him because the capacity to predict enhances the potential for control. In reality since then, sociologists have rarely been interested in prediction (now more a concern of economists) and have tended to concentrate on close description and interpretation of what has already occurred.