

# The Transcendental Dimension in the Construction of the Universal Social Sciences

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## Introduction

The major characteristic of Western thought, centered around the notion that rational, rationalistic reasoning is real understanding, is based on the Enlightenment and progressive ideas which hold that mankind will eventually reach a single correct perception and be able to build a just society. Starting from the nineteenth century, but especially in the twentieth century, various critiques of this view have emerged. With time, these critiques seem to have advanced in number and improved in quality. However, modern rationalistic reason has not been dethroned, and its detractors have yet to offer a positive alternative, as we can learn from the expression “deconstruction.”

Let me now call this problem of modern rationalistic reason and its criticism the problem of the “reflection of modern rationalistic reason.” How has contemporary sociology dealt with this problem of “reflection of modern rationalistic reason”? This paper shows the achievements and the problems of its attempt, and offers a direction to advance reflexive sociology.

Let me first distinguish the two principal types of reflection that set the framework for my argument. One is “transcendental reflection”; the other is “hermeneutic reflection.” According to Yasusuke Murakami, reflection in general can be divided into partial reflection and holistic reflection. Holistic reflection reflects on all objects for its reinterpretation while partial reflection limits itself to parts of objects. Holistic reflection is further divided into two sets of reflections. The first is “transcendental reflection” that centers on the post-reflective self, which is separated from the lifeworld as it transcends the lifeworld. The second is “hermeneutic reflection” which looks at the pre-reflective self that is embedded (again)

in the lifeworld as its component.<sup>1</sup> On this distinction, sociology would mainly deal with hermeneutic reflection as a matter of fact.

## **The Rise of Reflexive Sociology**

It was Alvin W. Gouldner who first proposed reflexive sociology in the field of sociology. With Harold Garfinkel, he showed, that the background assumption of everyday life, which is “seen-but-unnoticed,”<sup>2</sup> is a departing point from, and a returning point to, the lifeworld and an interpretive framework for matters, and that this background assumption of everyday life and its common rules stabilize, standardize and normalize everyday life. Gouldner defines as historical what is not expected from this everyday life: what is remote, what is not everyday life. According to Gouldner, this historical existence and the everyday life constitute social theory. Thus, the special task of reflexive sociology is to focus on the everyday world as a foundation for theory. Certainly, a theorist’s interpretation of history and everyday life is formed not solely from the background assumption that is not observed. The theorist’s tradition of intellectual field and subculture would play an important role. Theory would be shaped through and by way of its interaction with these. A theorist naturally needs to implement professional operational codes and reveal the level of life which has been submerged under certain conditions.

When its task is defined this way, reflexive sociology can be considered as dealing with a special case of sociological task which is not so different from sociology in general. That is to say, reflexive sociology shares with sociology the task of releasing the reality that has been subordinated. Nevertheless, Gouldner considers that the task of reflexive sociology slightly differs from that of sociology as it is normally understood. The task of sociology in general is said to be one of discovering reality by finding and identifying social laws and regularities. But Gouldner thinks that the task of reflexive sociology can be better addressed as recovering

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<sup>1</sup> Yasusuke Murakami, *An Anticlassical Political-Economic Analysis: A Vision for the Next Century* (translated with an Introduction by Kozo Yamamura), Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1996, pp. 398-408.

<sup>2</sup> Alvin W. Gouldner, “Sociology and the Everyday Life,” in Lewis Coser ed., *The Idea of Social Structure: Papers in Honor of Robert K. Merton*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1975, p. 422. Discussions on Gouldner’s reflexive sociology are based on this article. pp. 417-432. Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1967.

what is already discovered instead of finding what is new. Another important point relating to this is that sociology involves special research that deals with humans who also look at human behavior. The target of sociology cannot simply be an object; The target is defined by humans who themselves participate, reflect, theorize and possess substantial knowledge about life. In sociology, unlike natural science, there is no fundamental difference between the subject and the object of cognition. Sociology and its target of research constitute two cognitive communities which interact and compete with each other. Gouldner thinks that one may not be able to see the task of reflexive sociology fully unless one understands this point well.

A reflection of the subject of cognition, when it rejects the perspective that treats objects as things, and accepts the reflector's kinship and common subjectivity with objects, reveals itself not only to professionals but amateurs, and becomes capable of accepting their judgments. Only when the reflection of the subject of cognition achieves this does its reflection become an "interpretation" and not merely an explanation. Accordingly, Gouldner thinks that reflexive sociology must be "hermeneutic" and thus historical reflexive sociology.

Therefore, the task of reflexive sociology is to study everyday life where its object recovers rather than discovers its features, and to help the object become less like an object, and more like a subject, more capable of understanding and controlling everyday life. Through research, sociology has no choice but to intervene in, and change, the world.

## **The Development of Reflexive Sociology**

After Gouldner, reflexive sociology develops into Pierre Bourdieu's interpretation via reflexive sociology centered on the problem of reflection on the system level and the problem of structure and agency as discussed by Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck.<sup>3</sup>

After showing that Bourdieu's reflexive sociology aims at examining reflexivity of cognition, Loïc Wacquant argues that Bourdieu's reflection

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<sup>3</sup> About the history of reflexive sociology, see Barry Smart, *Facing Modernity: Ambivalence, Reflexivity and Morality*, Sage Publications, London, 1999. Of particular interest is Chapter 3: Reflexivity, Modernity and Sociology, pp.67-87. Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Cambridge, Polity, 1994.

differs from others' in three points. First, the main object of reflectivity is not individual but the "social and intellectual unconscious embedded in analytic tools and operations"<sup>4</sup> of analysis. Secondly, it is a "collective enterprise"<sup>5</sup> rather than an attempt assigned to an individual scholar. Thirdly, it "seeks not to assault but to buttress the epistemological security of sociology"<sup>6</sup>. But Wacquant rather overemphasizes the uniqueness of Bourdieu's reflexive sociology. Gouldner's reflexive sociology incorporates the first point mainly through the "background assumption"; that Gouldner stresses the theorist's community as a medium between subject and object suggests that he also fully understood the non-individual aspect of reflection. Bourdieu's reflexive sociology must be taken as a thorough completion of Gouldner's reflexive sociology.

Bourdieu's reflexive sociology rejects all the biases that distort sociological perception. Such biases include class, nationality, ethnicity, sex, academic position and intellectualism. This can itself be called transcendental reflection since it denotes the operation where one selectively excludes the dangers that might distort cognition and build up post-reflective self. But Bourdieu's reflection is never cut off from the pre-reflective self. He has no dualism between the pre-reflective and the post-reflective self. This is because the pre-reflective self is considered the "socialized body," "the repository of the generative and creative capacity to understanding" or "the bearer of a form of 'the kinetic knowledge' endowed with structuring of potency"<sup>7</sup>. Thus, transcendental reflection returns immediately to hermeneutic reflection again. His reflexive sociology is "the work of objectivation of the objectivating subject"<sup>8</sup>. Bourdieu could show himself as a developer of "Pascalian meditation"<sup>9</sup>. When we compare his reflexive sociology with that of Gouldner's, which is characterized by dualism between consciousness and thing, Bourdieu's reflexive sociology must be evaluated as reflexive sociology at a higher stage.

The reflexive sociology built by Bourdieu analyzes the social as its object, finds thence the original, indigenous universalities and creates

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<sup>4</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J.D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992, p.36.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J.D. Wacquant, *ibid.*, p.36.

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J.D. Wacquant, *ibid.*, p.36.

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J.D. Wacquant, *ibid.*, p.20.

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J.D. Wacquant, *ibid.*, p.40.

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, translated by Richard Nice, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK, 2000, 256p.

universality as the consummation of those operations which collect, compare and examine the indigenous universalities that have been found. This is the direction that Western sociology now pursues. When it does so, globalism and internationalism must embrace cosmopolitanism. It is essential to relativize the idea of nation-state. Certainly, cosmopolitanism is only a passing point.

## Transcendental Reflection

As I said above, reflection can be divided into “hermeneutic reflection” and “transcendental reflection.” Most sociology study is engaged in “hermeneutic,” “historical” reflection as a “reflexive sociology.” In what follows, I will advance my analysis of “transcendental reflection.” It is expected that doing so further clarifies the nature and the problems of “hermeneutic reflection.”

Yasusuke Murakami, who divided holistic reflection into “hermeneutic reflection” and “transcendental reflection,” regards “transcendental reflection” as that which stresses the post-reflective self, cuts the “self” off from the lifeworld and establishes it as a cognitive subject transcending the lifeworld. He clarified the features of this reflection through the following logic.<sup>10</sup>

This reflection can never reach a holistic reflection no matter how often it repeats reflection. Thus, it must go through an endless “process of transcendentalization” and “upward progression.” Therefore, “transcendental reflection” discovers historic religion (Robert Bellah<sup>11</sup>). This is because historic religion exempted one from transcendentalization by “introducing absolute God or principles” and also by offering “practical guidance about transcendental or quasi-transcendental thought for human beings.” Among historic religions, Christianity was especially useful for Western “transcendental reflection.” This is because it offered absolute principles and was capable of directing one’s attention to the lifeworld. Descartes’ so-called dualism opened up a channel for the shift of interest from religion to the lifeworld. As a result, natural science developed rapidly. This is how “transcendental reflection” came to be represented by “natural scientific, lawful reflection.”

Mr. Murakami’s argument, shown just above, is an extremely

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<sup>10</sup> Yasusuke Murakami, *op. cit.*, pp.399-411.

<sup>11</sup> Robert W. Bellah, *Beyond Belief*, Harper and Row, New York, 1970.

perceptive argument deserving high consideration. But there is one big problem with this argument. Such an argument as his is trapped in a vulgar discussion of Descartes' philosophy and fails to capture the strand of thought that attempts to overcome modern philosophy, including the thought of Descartes, Spinoza, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Lévi-Strauss and Wittgenstein. This results in the failure to grasp the differing meanings of transcendental reflection. In what follows, I will look into this point, based on Kojin Karatani's argument.<sup>12</sup>

First, Karatani says, modern philosophy treats subject as classification or concept, not as singularity. It transforms singularity into particularity and manages to connect particularities by placing an assumption of intersubjectivity. Singularity suggests and assumes the asymmetry or difference between self and the other as such. This is expressed through the proper noun. A proper noun does not express individuality: It expresses singularity. What should be noted further is that a proper noun exists inside and outside language at the same time. A proper noun cannot be translated in either a foreign or a native language. The externality of proper nouns in language suggests that language cannot be reduced to the closed *langue* and the sociality of language. A proper noun assumes a social existence rather than a common existence.<sup>13</sup> We should not forget this.

Moreover, according to Karatani, a proper noun denotes "none-other-than-this-ness." "None-other-than-this-ness" means not simply that "it is not other," it means "it-actually-is-even-though-it-could-be-otherwise." If so, in order to talk about a proper noun, we must think about the modalities of "possibility, actuality, contingency and necessity." A proper noun tries to maintain itself by fixating the none-other-than-this-ness and excluding the otherness=many possibilities. That assumes otherness and the contingency of relations.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the problem of proper nouns comes down to the problem of communication, which cannot establish itself without "the leap of life and death."

Now, Karatani faces the task of overcoming modern philosophy in

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<sup>12</sup> My understanding of Kojin Karatani's theory is based on the following works of his: *Tankyu I* (in Japanese), Kodansha Gakujutsu Bunko, 1992. *Tankyu II* (in Japanese), Kodansha Gakujutsu Bunko, 1994. *History and Repetition*, edited by Seiji M. Lippit, Columbia University Press, New York, 2004. *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*, translated by Sabu Kohso, MIT press, paperback edition, Cambridge, Mass. 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Kojin Karatani, *Tankyu II* (in Japanese), Kodansha Gakujutsu Bunko, 1994, Part 1, chapter 1 to chapter 5.

<sup>14</sup> Kojin Karatani, *ibid.*, chapter 5.

order to deal with singularity and proper nouns in a sufficient manner. The objective of that task is to overcome the dualism between mind and body. This dualism is generally attributed to Descartes. However, according to Karatani, Descartes tries to overcome this dualism. Descartes' spirit aims at rejecting this dualism. Karatani quotes the famous passage from Descartes' *Discourse on Method* :

I resolved to feign that all the things that had ever entered in my mind were no more true than the illusions of my dreams. But, immediately afterward, I took note that, while I wanted thus to think that everything was false. It necessarily had to be that I, who was thinking this, was something. And noticing that this truth—I think, therefore I am—was so firm and so assured that all the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics were not capable of shaking it, I judged that I could accept it, without scruple, as the first principle of the philosophy that I was seeking.<sup>15</sup>

What does *cogito ergo sum* mean? According to Karatani, “in Descartes, ‘I doubt’ is a personal determination of will.” And this ‘I’ is a singular existence, which refers to Descartes himself (1). In a sense, (1) is an empirical self, and simultaneously the doubting subject (2), who doubts the empirical subject (1); through this process the transcendental ego (3) is discovered”<sup>16</sup>. Descartes asks who I am apart from all the systems. And Descartes answers this question by saying that I exist because I think and doubt. Thus, Descartes' thinking is consciousness or self-consciousness and at the same time is outside consciousness or self-consciousness.

The location of the spirit is in the discursive space and not in the geographical space. And the spirit is shown in a formal way, deductively. But it is utterly “private” and does not have any base. What ultimately grounds it, then, is world, nature or what can only be called God.

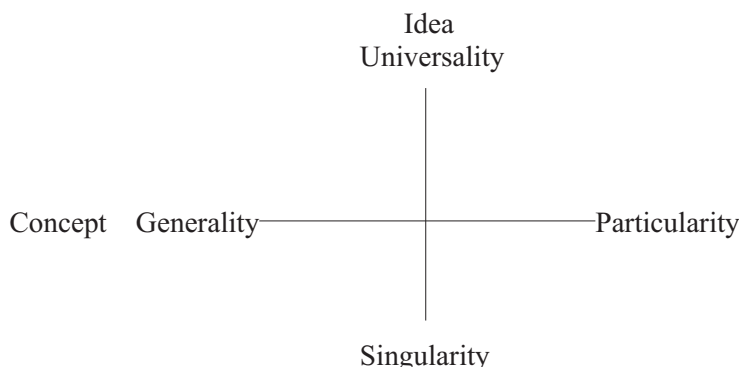
In summation, Karatani argues that we must stand outside the system to which self belongs and searches for the infinite idea=God. This is what Descartes did. And the person who continues this line of thought is Spinoza. Of course, this God is not God as representation (identification of language), illusion or consciousness. It is God as an idea or definition. The

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<sup>15</sup> Kojin Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*, translated by Sabu Kohso, MIT press, paperback edition, Cambridge, Mass. 2005, p.87.

<sup>16</sup> Kojin Karatani, *ibid.*, p.87.

idea we talk about here cannot be represented empirically. But it is something whose existence we cannot deny; nor can we deny the place in which one looks at transcendence itself as representation. If we follow the arguments through the relationship between concepts, we can depict them as in the following figure.



Idea and Concept, Singularity and Particularity  
(Kojin Karatani, *Tankyu II* (in Japanese), Kodansha, 1994, p.150)

We can understand God as an idea which differs from a concept by dealing with infinity. In infinite space, the system is closed and everything belongs to it. No dualism will be necessary, and we can put an end to endless transcendence.

Karatani tries to dig into the problem of overcoming modern thought, and focuses primarily on Spinoza. Karatani maintains that Spinoza's subject is not a cognitive subject. This fact is made clear when a cognitive subject is doubted and criticized. It can be called a transcendental subject, subject as singularity. The impossibility of transcending the world, the attitude of singularity (only this I, only this world) is different from self-consciousness or reflexivity. It is precisely this fact that creates society's thinking and universality, transcending the community's thinking and generality (common subjectivity) which stays in a single world.

The nature of the givenness of everything must be clarified by the work of the transcendental subject. This is called critical, archeological thinking. It is important that the asymmetrical relation between the self and



the other is made clear by critical, archeological thinking. Karatani calls the asymmetrical relation between the self and the other as “society” and defines “community” as the symmetrical relation of having the same rules. Social science has a critical, archeological approach dealing with society as its object. Thus, social science aims at clarifying as its object the givenness of communication, transportation and exchange which appears as an asymmetrical relation between the self and the other<sup>17</sup>.

## Tentative Conclusion

This paper clarifies how universality is pursued in modern sociology by tracing the establishment and development of reflexive sociology. It also elucidates the argument that stresses, in the attempts to overcome modern philosophy, the importance of the transcendental subject that does not assume common subjectivity, a notion absent in modern sociology, and the meaning of that argument. The two aspects that are reflexive sociology and the argument that stresses the importance of a transcendental subject look similar in terms of emphasizing the lifeworld, but they come to differ significantly. But does not the development of globalization and of planetarization show us the need for modern sociology to realize the importance of the transcendental subject?

This kind of sociology already exists. Alberto Melucci’s reflexive sociology is one example. According to Melucci, “Finally, the planetary extension of the world system has by now acquired a total scope: countries and cultures only exist as inner dimensions of a global system. This new ‘internalization’ introduces a fourth dilemma, that between *inclusion* and *exclusion*. Inclusion irons out differences and transforms peripheral cultures into insignificant and quaint appendages to the few centres where languages are elaborated and diffused through the great market of the media. Any resistance to this standardization almost inevitably leads to exclusion, spelling silence and cultural death”<sup>18</sup>. But Melucci also thinks that “individuals gain wider control over the formation and orientation of their action”<sup>19</sup>. Namely, he understands that the self-reflective capacity of individuals to produce communication and solidarity can grow at the same

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<sup>17</sup> Kojin Karatani, *Sekaishi no Kozou* (in Japanese), Iwanami Shoten, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Alberto Melucci, *The Playing Self: Person and Meaning in the Planetary Society*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p.127.

<sup>19</sup> Alberto Melucci, *ibid.*, p.3.

time. His sociology takes the body and language as “the foundations of an ethic responding to the need to cope with the problems of a planet.”<sup>20</sup> Therefore, his sociology is an attempt to learn to move between body and language. Through this sociology, we can understand that we are social existences and that we can live with others.

At the end of this investigation, I would like to point out one more thing related with the history of sociology. As I stated earlier, the social thought of Descartes, Spinoza, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche Marx, Freud and Wittgenstein are very important to sociology. Therefore, we have to include these social thoughts in the history of sociology and to examine the relationship between these thoughts and sociology. For example, F. Tönnies investigated the revision of the medieval world view and the philosophy of Hobbes and Spinoza.<sup>21</sup> Of course, we have to deploy critical, archeological research or historical sociology that deals with the asymmetrical relation between the self and the other as its object.

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<sup>20</sup> Alberto Melucci, *ibid.*, p.131.

<sup>21</sup> Ferdinand Tönnies, *On Social Ideas and Ideologies*, edited, translated, and annotated by E.G. Jacoby, Harper and Row, New York, 1974, Part I, pp.3-58.

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