

**KANT ON THE BEGINNINGS OF HUMAN HISTORY - CONJECTURES BY A  
SOCIOLOGIST**

by

Richard Swedberg

German Studies Colloquium on Immanuel Kant, "Conjectures on the Beginning of  
Human History",

Cornell University,

November 11, 2006

When Peter Gilgen asked me to participate in this colloquium on Kant's *Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History* (1786), he referred to the fact that I am a sociologist; and that adding the perspective of sociology to this colloquium might be interesting for the audience. After thinking for a while, I realized (but did not tell Peter!) that the reason I was happy to participate was precisely because the topic of the colloquium did NOT deal with sociology.

This impression was increased when I started to investigate what was meant by the term “conjecture” (as Kant's “*Mutmassung*” is usually translated). A conjecture, according to the main interpretation of this term (in The Oxford English Dictionary), is defined as follows:

“throwing or casting together, a conclusion derived from comparison of facts, an inference, conclusion, guess, etc”.

This definition delighted me: something that could be a conclusion and a guess was surely worth anybody's attention. What a nice contrast to sociology with its demand for testable hypotheses, good data sets, a rigorous presentation of facts, and so on!

The more I read about conjecture in The Oxford English Dictionary, the better it became: As a verb, “conjecture” could mean “to conclude, infer, or judge, from appearance or probabilities”, and especially the equation of “appearance” with “probability” cheered me up. Conjecture could also mean “to form an opinion or supposition as to facts on grounds admittedly insufficient; to guess, surmise; to propose a conjecture in textual or historical criticism, etc”. What attracted me again was this idea of forming an idea – of thinking – based “on grounds [that were] admittedly insufficient”.

Jeremy Bentham was cited in OED as using the expression a “conjecturist” (a term that sounded better than the more common “conjecturor”); and I got an immediate desire to learn whatever it took to be a conjecturist.

The examples in OED were all very old; and it was clear that “conjecture”, as a noun or a verb, belonged primarily to the past. A number of obscure and hard or impossible to understand quotations littered the article in OED. Some of these had a distinctly poetic tone to them, such as two Shakesperian quotes. In the prologue to *Henry IV*, one can read: “Now entertain conieucture of a time...When weeping Murmer fills the

Universe”. *Much Ado About Nothing* contains a more whimsical line: “And on my eyelids shall Coniecture hang, To turn all beauty into thoughts of harme...”.

What I found attractive about the idea of conjectures, in all brevity, was that it seems to represent a form of thinking that has been forgotten - but is perhaps worth resurrecting. As a method, it does not meet the demands of proof, logic, reason and so on, that good thinking should do, according to accepted criteria. But nonetheless, it is a form of thought that leads to a result – which, after all, is what good thinking should do. It is also a type of thinking that is playful and whimsical and invites to jokes – all qualities that characterize Kant’s little piece, “Conjectures on the Beginnings of Human History”. But let me now stop for a moment and honor my commitment to Peter to introduce a bit of sociology into all of this (and I will then return to my concern with conjecturing as a method of thinking).

Sociologists have been deeply influenced by the work of Kant, mainly at the beginning of the discipline. The three fathers of sociology – modern academic sociology was created at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – were all influenced by the work of Kant. This means Emile Durkheim, Georg Simmel and Max Weber.

Durkheim was as a young man profoundly influenced by neo-Kantian philosopher Renouvier. Georg Simmel, who saw himself primarily as a philosopher (and not a sociologist), was similarly influenced by neo-Kantianism and wrote several volumes on Kant in this capacity. Max Weber was a neo-Kantian as well, especially close to Henrich Rickert and the the so-called Baden or Southwestern School of neo-Kantianism.

How did the classics make use of Kant’s ideas? In all brevity as follows: Emile Durkheim insisted that human beings could not know reality directly, but always perceived it through representations – a position clearly inspired by Kant. What made Durkheim’s claim sociological, was that these representations are collective in nature (“collective representations” as they are known).

Georg Simmel often worked with the concepts of “form” and “content” in his sociology. In a well-known theoretical essay called “How is Society Possible?” he also argues that just as the mind produces nature through categories in the mind, so is society created, through social categories that human beings share.

And Max Weber claims that the humans always invest their actions with meaning – a position clearly influenced by Kant’s work. When these actions are oriented to others, you get sociology (which Weber defines as the study of social action).

Modern sociologists do not read Kant or refer to his work. But they do use ideas that build on Kant, for example in the theory of the social construction of reality. The degrees of separation are four in this case: Berger and Luckman formulated the idea of social construction of reality, and they were students of Alfred Schutz – who was a student of Weber, who in his turn was a student of Kant.

Before finishing this brief account of sociology and Kant, let me also add that modern sociologists have tried to get at Kant’s ideas (as well as the ideas of other philosophers) with the help of networks. Especially Randall Collins has been active in this enterprise; and his analysis is to be found in a book called The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change (1998). This work represents the best introduction to the network approach to philosophy and Kant.

Let me now (and much too abruptly!) return to Kant’s piece on the conjectures on the beginnings of human history; and to the notion that conjecture represents a special form of thinking, well worth resurrecting and knowing more about. Let me again reiterate that the reason for taking this task seriously (but not so seriously, as to destroy the playful spirit of conjecturing) is that this conjecturing is a form of thought that leads to serious and important results. Note that Kant starts out with the quasi-absurd idea of using the Bible as a source of human history – but ends up with some very serious ethical ideas about the way for the individual to behave, in accordance to reason.

Kant argues that there are certain things that are, as he puts it, “discoverable by conjectural means”. Kant makes clear that this way of proceeding must not be seen as a (in his words) “serious activity”, and that it only represents “a healthy mental recreation” - or a “journey on the wings of imagination” (in his most poetic description).

But there is more to the method of conjecturing than so, according to Kant. One can, for example, go too far – and indulge, as Kant puts it, “in wild conjectures”. What exactly wild means in this context is not clear. But just as there is a lower limit, so to speak, to the method of conjecturing, so there is apparently also an upper limit as well.

Conjecturing does not mean, for example, to wildly guess – but to guess in a reasonable way.

What then characterizes conjecturing beyond these descriptions by Kant, which represent pretty much all that he has to say about conjecturing (and which can all be found on the first few pages of his article)?

Let me start out by noting that Kant is engaging in what we may term a pure type of conjecturing – drawing exclusively on conjectures, and not just using them as an additional form of thinking or technique.

In the opening lines of the article Kant indicates what the conventional use of drawing on conjectures is, and then goes on to say that he wants to go beyond this use. The conventional use is when you already have quite a bit of facts or knowledge, and need to fill in the gaps, something that allows us, according to Kant, to discover things “with reasonable certainty” (as he puts it) and to add to making things “intelligible”.

But what Kant himself wants to explore, is what happens when you draw “solely on conjectures” (as he puts it). This would seem to be and I quote again! – “little better than drawing up a plan of fiction”. But it is better – and much better.

What does the pure type of conjecturing then look like? There are several elements to an answer. One is clear enough: you have to draw on your reason; you have to think! But you must not just think in any way whatever; and you definitely have to avoid conventional ways of thinking, such as normal forms of logic and arguments based on full knowledge of some phenomena. You have to think, it appears, in a playful manner. Kant’s article contains several jokes, even though he has put the best jokes in the footnotes (all these jokes are incidentally about thinking, or not so incidentally perhaps). It would seem, in short, that a conjecturalist would naturally lapse into humor.

It would also seem that in order to engage in conjectures, you have to have something to start from; you cannot just start conjecturing from nowhere. In Kant’s case, it is the Bible; and one can of course poke fun at this material. But this might well be a mistake; and I would venture that in order to engage in conjectures, you have to find just the right kind of material.

What would that material be like? Well, it would seem to have the following two qualities: it cannot be so tight or dense that it makes the mind switch into some rigorous

form of thinking. But neither can it be so uninspiring that it does not lend itself to conjectures. In brief, it has to have the quality to inspire conjectures. What such a quality is like, is not so obvious; and it may well have more to do with the result than with some formal qualities (or what is evident at first sight).

The same goes for conjecturing as a whole – and here comes what I consider to be the most interesting and central fact about conjecturing as a method. It is a method that is mainly valid for the results it produces, not for the formal qualities it displays in getting to these results, as is the case with logical forms of thinking.

There is also something else about these results of conjecturing that is interesting, to my mind. This is that they all seem to be characterized, to some degree, by conflict, contradiction or something that simply does not add up, according to formal logic. Here are some examples:

Inequality is (and I quote) an “abundant source of so much evil but also of everything good”. “The risk of war is the only thing which keeps despotism in check”. “The history of nature begins with goodness...but the history of freedom begins with evil”. And – more daringly! – the element of “refusal” between men and women may be linked to “love”, and the use of “the fig leaf” linked to “reason”!!!

Some of Kant’s examples are quite sociological in nature and could be used in “SOC 101. Introduction to Sociology”.

This goes, for example, for the argument that certain problems in modern society are caused by the disconnection of sexual maturity (which takes place at puberty) from that of social maturity (which takes place about ten years later; and even later, if the person wants to be an academic). The idea that threat of war undoes despotism is equally sociological in nature. Indeed, Max Weber would later use the same example in Economy and Society. Weber contrasts China, where the emperor was in a position to control everything, with Europe, which consisted of many small states. By competing with one another, these small states opened up the space for the bourgeoisie and for bourgeois freedoms to emerge – and for despotism to be kept in check.

What makes some of Kant’s examples sociological is that they deal with society; and Kant uses terms such as “civil society” and “social classes” in his article, which are sociological enough. But what makes them into good sociology is something else and

harder to pinpoint. I would say that it resides in the acute sense for contradictions that Kant has, and which in some cases are reminiscent of Mandeville's paradoxes along the lines of "private vices and public benefits".

At one point in his essay Kant refers to "restless reason", and this is a good expression for the type of mind that the conjecturalist has. At another point Kant refers to "uncertainty", and that is another quality that the conjecturalist should be open to. More generally, it seems to me that the method of conjectures is an excellent tool for laying bare some of the ambiguity and contradictions that are central to human and social existence. Normal reasoning, and more formal types of logic, must not be seen as excluded from the exercises that the conjecturalist engages in – but (as the example of Max Weber shows) they may come in at a later stage of the development, when you have to pin down exactly what it is that causes something, and, of course, also when you have to present the results of your work to a thinking audience.

But – to state the case for the method of conjectures (and I will end on this note): at an early stage of thinking, before all the evidence has been gathered and the logic has been fixed (and, I should add – sad to say - the jokes have been eliminated), you may well need conjectures, and you may well need to be a bit of a conjecturalist if you want to produce something worthwhile.