Sociological Essayism – Essayistic Sociology. On the Evolution and Actuality of a Style of Thought in the Postdisciplinary Age

Sociology, the essay and the novel share hermeneutic horizon: the question of modernity. They all rise as responses to a world characterised by contingency and transformation. Indeed, these characteristics are constitutive of sociology, the essay, and the novel as well. Today, the world is no less a world in transition than was the classical modern world, and hence sociology, the essay, and literature confront new challenges. The paper will briefly discuss the genesis of sociology, its problems and possibilities, and also its relations to other modes of understanding man and culture in classical modernity, i.e. in an essentially predisciplinary age. The second part will define similarities and differences between sociology, the essay, and the novel, and discuss works were different perspectives are deliberately combined in a particular style of thought which we may label essayistic sociology or sociological essayism (works by Simmel, Weber, Mannheim, Musil, Bauman, Sennett). The presentation will be concluded by some theses on the significance and actuality of sociology in a time of fundamental transition, and on the possibilities (and dangers) of renewing the discipline, especially with reference to the essay and the novel, in a postdisciplinary age. As much as cultural boundaries are transgressed and changed, science and its boundaries undergo necessary and possible transformations – a fact which contributed to the emergence of sociology more than a century ago.