FASHIONS IN SCIENCE

OPINION LEADERS AND COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOR IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Irwin Sperber

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PREFACE

In our earliest impressions of the social environment, while still innocent of any abstractions about justice and truth, we already feel what we cannot explain: we are sometimes blamed for misbehavior we did not commit and praised for good deeds we have not done. We are made uneasy, sometimes hurt or frightened, by parents punishing the innocent and praising the guilty. We are sometimes mortified when our parents and teachers lie to us, to each other, to themselves. We eventually reconcile ourselves to the fact that blame and praise are often not fairly allocated, that the road to "maturity" consists in quietly adjusting to the eccentricities of parental authority. We gradually find ourselves telling other people what they want to hear, what is in good taste, not what we know to be the truth.

As we are socialized into the larger society, we continue to observe punishments and rewards given out for blatantly cruel, unfair, or inappropriate reasons. We become less and less surprised to hear that a man is lynched because he is black, that a second is promoted because he is well connected and white, or that a third is fired because he is gay. We are hardly startled to hear that a woman is beaten because her husband does not want her working outside the home, that a second is hired for soap commercials because she "passed the couch test," or that a third is fired because she is a lesbian. And we are accustomed to a candidate's victory in an election because he has a nice smile, while his opponent is defeated because he says what he means and means what he

says; we commonly see voters all but ignoring the substantive issues that might divide the candidates. Although such injustices and irrationalities are sometimes recognized and even condemned, little is done to examine why they take place or how to prevent them. Yet we always feel uneasy about them. We believe that they should not prevail in our educational system, that they must be held to a minimum in those domains in which the pursuit of reason is the declared objective. But why is praise so often given to those who do not deserve it? Why is ridicule heaped on those who deserve praise? Why are these practices so widespread, so taken for granted, in our political system? *Why do these things happen even in the realm where they are least expected, in the very embodiment of human reason and the search for truth, in the temple of science itself?* These questions, however crudely formulated, have troubled me ever since I was old enough to understand such vernacular wisdom as "Nice guys finish last"; "It's not what you know but who you know"; and, "Only the good die young." In the embryonic stages of this research, I wanted to find out why anyone would want to accept or follow such unjust and corrupt beliefs. I eventually realized that these questions were unduly simplistic, one-dimensional, and unanswerable so long as they were cast in such a moralistic form; that an explanation of these absurdities in the realm of science, in which they are most openly disavowed in principle, would be necessary before attempting to explain their presence in those political, entrepreneurial, and cultural realms in which they are more readily accepted.

A number of important forces have profoundly shaped and conditioned the growth of science in the twentieth century: the rise of fascist and totalitarian states as well as the less direct but equally effective trend toward the commercialization of knowledge, commonly called "sociology for sale" in my own discipline, have been particularly influential. I do not wish to minimize their importance per se or the extensive research done by social scientists and historians on their continuing effects. Indeed, I am indebted to this research literature in the pages to follow. But far less recognized and far more influential than these well-recognized forces in the shaping of irrationality in science is the play of fashion or the fashion process in the scientific community.

The purpose behind the present study of irrationality in the scientific community is not to offer just another account of the social forces shaping the rise of modern science. Rather, it consists in an article of faith: I hope that an explanation of irrationality where it is least expected and least acknowledged can help to serve as a basis for understanding the forces responsible for injustice as well as irrationality in the more familiar domains of everyday life. This article of faith guides the task at hand:

to investigate the processes at work when the undeserving are praised, when the truth is dismissed, when the scientific community compromises itself and deceives the public in rituals of self-celebration.

Organized religion and monarchies in centuries past indeed suppressed and played havoc with scientific inquiry: it was for good reason that Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton felt compelled to go underground in their "invisible college" even as late as the seventeenth century. But other forces, perhaps more subtle, have emerged to produce new distortions, new orthodoxies, new forms of irrationality in the modern scientific community. I will show that even those scientists who try to study the scope of irrationality in general and its presence in the scientific community in particular are themselves caught up in the same social forces that shape their object of study.

Although congressional committees do at times investigate some of the more glaring manifestations of outright fraud in the scientific community (e.g., the Subcommittee on Fraud and Plagiarism in Science ably chaired by Congressman Ted Weiss), public officials, historians, and sociologists alike have neglected the larger issues raised by these episodes. My original concerns needed revision, expansion, and historical specification: (1) Why is the scientific community so lenient, even indifferent, toward these intellectual misdemeanors? (2) To what extent are these recurring manifestations of blatant fraud only the tip of an iceberg, suggestive of a vast array of dubious scientific activities commonly passed off as valid or even certified as major breakthroughs and achievements by all concerned? (3) What are the long-term consequences of such activities and their celebration by the scientific community and the larger society? (4) How are these activities and the scientists who become role models or exemplars of these activities selected for adoption or approval in the first place? (5) What are the underlying causes of and possible means of preventing such styles of research, such modes of discourse, such paradigms in the face of their certification as orthodox or in good taste?

To begin to come to terms with these questions—and I only *begin* to answer them—I advance a series of working hypotheses to the effect that the scientific community, like the domains of costume adornment and automobile design, is profoundly influenced by a particular form of collective behavior, that is, the play of fashion. I suggest that styles or models of scientific thought rise to and fall from prominence just as shifting hemlines and chrome fenders are brought onto and cast off center stage, that their fate is governed by the operation of collective tastes or sentiments that are shifting, amorphous, pervasive, and usually unacknowledged by the audience. I further suggest that opinion leaders in

the scientific community are comparable to those in commercial design; that the emergence of a Kroeber, a Simmel, a Merton, a Kuhn, an Alexander in the social sciences, for example, is a manifestation of the same process that elevates a Christian Dior, an Yves St. Laurent, a Gloria Vanderbilt, a Max Factor, a Lucien Picard to prominence in the world of costume adornment and cosmetics. I propose that this same process is equally responsible for relegating some opinion leaders, designers, and models to obscurity, for designating some candidates as modern and in good taste and others as old-fashioned and in bad taste; that the fashion process is uncritically and routinely passed off as equivalent to the application of objective criteria for the evaluation of competing models in the scientific community as well as the world of commercial design.

The praise given to bad ideas and undeserving people along with the scorn given to the good and the deserving seemed to be a tantalizing mystery, even a morality play. But the puzzle called for further redefinition so that it could be described, explained, and solved in researchable terms. For example, could it be that these practices are only the manifestations of underlying social forces found in some historical contexts rather than others? Could it be that these seemingly eccentric, erratic, unjust, irrational tendencies are crucial mechanisms of institutionalized social control, that they represent a structure of domination largely unrecognized by its own participants? Could it be that these practices are neither random nor bizarre? I could not help but marvel at their ubiquitous and persistent nature in modern society. Most remarkable, I thought, was the great extent to which they seemed to operate without regard to any objective criteria of validity, truth, or precedent. I eventually suspected that I was dealing with special patterns of collective behavior rather than immoral conduct and idiosyncrasies. I accordingly drew upon concepts in the sociology of collective behavior to sketch a map of the territory I wished to explore.

The dimensions of this map can be outlined by reference to "the fashion process" and "the play of fashion in science" as well as the observations made by applying them to the task of understanding the acclaim given to some opinion leaders rather than others in the scientific community.

The fashion process is a form of collective behavior marked by a series of normative preoccupations: keeping in step with the times, with the latest developments; following the example of prestigious opinion leaders who "keep their ears to the ground" and articulate the shared and implicit sentiments of the public; admiring proposals for adoption when they are in good taste and new, discarding them when they are in bad taste and old; dismissing the weight of tradition while rediscovering

and repackaging old proposals as though they were unprecedented, exciting, and modern; ignoring or downgrading explicit criteria by which competing proposals can be evaluated. The identity and well-being of opinion leaders, participants, and groups in modern society are often profoundly affected by the degree to which they are deemed to be in step with the latest developments, in tune with modernity itself.

The operation of the fashion process or the play of fashion in science is indicated by the pattern of collective behavior of participants in the scientific community: the design, packaging, and articulation of the "latest developments" presented by opinion leaders and the praise given to those opinion leaders by the audience in accordance with its collective tastes; the adoption of some paradigms and rejection of others on the basis of those same collective tastes that ordinarily remain unrecognized by opinion leaders and followers alike in this community. Opinion leaders as well as rank-and-file participants in the scientific community are under relentless pressure to adhere to the latest styles or trends considered to be in "good taste"; to think and work only within the boundaries of the perceived social consensus, the mainstream, the orthodoxy of the "intellectual vanguard" of the moment; to refrain from going so far out in experimentation with unrecognized models as to incur the disapproval of peers in that community; and to avoid at all costs any interest in any trends considered to be old or "dated" on pain of ostracism or any association with opinion leaders and followers still clinging to obsolete models.

The first case study of a scientific opinion leader caught up in the fashion process examines the theoretical research of Georg Simmel and calls attention especially to his essay "Fashion." The many serious fallacies identified in Simmel's research are traced to the unacknowledged yet pervasive operation of this same process in his own sociological thought. The equally serious fallacies in Alfred Kroeber's empirical research on the play of fashion are also traced to the unacknowledged operation of this process in his own investigations. Nearly all contemporary studies of the fashion process are inadequate and misleading because of their uncritical acceptance or "rediscovery" of the precedents established by such prestigious opinion leaders as Simmel and Kroeber in the history of social science.

With the stage set for the submission of new models and for the competition among various designers and performers to gain recognition as the new savior of the discipline, the stature of Thomas S. Kuhn in modern sociology in general and the sociology of science in particular is critically examined. The many fallacies and ambiguities in Kuhn's claims about the scientific community are traced to the operation of the fashion

process in his own thought. These fallacies and ambiguities receive enthusiastic applause from his audience and help to explain his rise to prominence. His stature is the result more of his unwitting accommodation to collective tastes in the discipline than of the alleged validity of his research. Kuhn's most important contributions to the sociology of science, especially his efforts at critical self-awareness and his recognition of the need to study anomalies on a systematic basis, are consistently ignored by the sociologists who most acclaim his work.

The next case study examines the ascendance of Robert Friedrichs's model of dialectical pluralism in American sociology. The ahistorical assumptions and caricature of the sociology of knowledge taken for granted in his model lead to grave misrepresentations, both theoretically and empirically, of developments in sociological inquiry. Friedrichs's model is a skillful modification of Kuhn's paradigm in the service of legitimating the present and proximate future of the discipline. His work is yet another instance of the unacknowledged but pervasive fashion process at work in the thinking of an opinion leader in the scientific community.

The next case studies call attention to the far-reaching influence of Pitirim Sorokin and Robert K. Merton in the development of American sociology. These eminent opinion leaders are unwittingly caught up in the fashion process even as they attempt to investigate fads, foibles, rivalries, and irrationality in the scientific community. Merton's professional stature is attributed in part to his ingenuity in representing trivial research and ideological polarization in the discipline as proof of a bountiful future for "world sociology" rather than a threat to its very existence.

The final case study examines the rise of Jeffrey Alexander to prominence as an opinion leader in sociological theory. It traces the boundaries of collective taste within which the doctrines of "neofunctionalism" and "postpositivism" have been celebrated as new and exciting paradigms in the scientific community. This analysis emphasizes the conservative mood in sociology as the impetus to the adoption of a new paradigm and the emergence of a new opinion leader onto center stage. The ideological requirements of capitalist society in general and the shifting collective tastes of the sociological profession in particular have combined to shape a selection process favorable to the adoption of seemingly revolutionary concepts and themes: politically sanitized and up-to-date meanings for "structural analysis," "dialectics," "transcendence," and "feeling the pain of others" have emerged as the ostensibly daring language, as the scientific orthodoxies, of the day.

These case studies indicate that the fashion process can have im-

mense influence on all social participants—even on those scientists who critically study it. The play of fashion can render the self into an object readily caught up in the appeal of "keeping in step with the times." It can be a major determinant of what Fromm calls "the marketplace personality," the implied declaration that "I am as you desire me." It has great influence under conditions of organized insecurity and alienated intellectual labor, especially in the context of the modern scientific community.

I also show that an understanding of the fashion process helps to illuminate the rise to prominence of the functional theory of stratification; that the functional account of differential rewards based on social need and personal merit obscures the systematic rewards given to the incompetent and mediocre; and that the adoption of this model is specifically a manifestation of collective tastes formed in a crisis-ridden scientific community.

Beyond an analysis of opinion leaders in social science, the present study examines the origins and scope of collective taste in the scientific community in general and sociology in particular. Such an examination helps to explain why some proposals and opinion leaders are deemed orthodox one moment only to be discarded as obsolete the next. One set of forces shaping these collective tastes derives from the requirement of an advanced capitalist society for the appearance, indeed the illusion, of "new solutions to new problems," "better living through science," and an endless proliferation of scientific projects and models leading to "progress just over the horizon."

A closely related requirement for the maintenance of legitimacy in an advanced capitalist society is a disdain, even a sense of revulsion, for historical self-awareness; there must be an especially pronounced disdain for any interest in the accumulated wisdom and wealth in society made possible by the past struggles, sacrifices, and contributions of the working class. There must also be a correspondingly great faith in the doctrine that all progress is due to the contributions of the Rockefellers, the Du Ponts, the Carnegies, the Mellons, the Fords, and the boundless energies of the scientists whose work they sponsor and direct.

An effect of these requirements is an ongoing preoccupation with the present and the proximate future, not with the long-term origins and consequences of a given problem or trend. Its manifestation is typically in the formation of *ahistorical thought*: it becomes an institutionalized and pervasive orientation taken for granted as good social adjustment, as the normal way for scientists and laypersons alike to perceive themselves and their society, as the celebration of the here-and-now above all else. This mode of thought is given expression through such beliefs as "Keep in step with the times"; "Stay abreast of latest developments";

"What is new is true and good, what is old is false and bad"; and through the reverence for modern science as an end in itself. This ahistorical outlook is strongly reinforced by the satisfaction of yet another requirement of capitalist society: the task of creating and playing upon the perception of artificially heightened needs for new and sensational products, services, and ideas to ensure a demand for all manner of commodities sold to consumers. That most of these commodities are, upon closer inspection, neither new nor sensational (and for that matter, are often unnecessary, useless, even downright unhealthy or dangerous) must be systematically ignored, trivialized, or suppressed; those who try to bring this fact to the attention of the scientific community or the larger society are ostracised, ridiculed, and worst of all, labeled as "old-fashioned," "out of step with the times," "out of touch with reality," and perhaps just a little senile.

Another set of forces behind these collective tastes in the scientific community is the alienation of intellectual labor, the exclusion of scientists as part of the working class from positions of corporate and state power, the artificially contrived and culturally reinforced distinction between mental and manual labor. A result of this alienation is the decline of any sense of intellectual craftsmanship, the decline of pride in one's participation in the scientific community, with a corresponding rise of vanity, other-directedness, and unabashed pursuit of self-aggrandizement by any means necessary and regardless of its consequences for one's colleagues, students, or fellow citizens.

Without self-esteem, without pride in their role as ineffectual or token participants in the larger decision-making process, scientists engage in all manner of secondary adjustments to their environment: they become academic entrepreneurs, devise strategies to market and package their ideas and services as though they were commodities, learn that career mobility depends on selecting the appropriate means of transportation—not rocking the boat while riding on the gravy train. They launch an attendant search for compensations to ameliorate the anguish of their powerlessness to control the applications, the fruits, the profits generated by their intellectual labor and scientific discoveries. The most important of these compensations, and the most plausible means by which to deny the realities of political impotence in the scientific community, is the ongoing proliferation of new awards, prizes, and grants administered by miscellaneous groups of scientists, by quasi-public agencies, by corporate think tanks, by universities. These groups and agencies administer a flood tide of rewards to scientists who engage in "vanguard" research, who are at "the cutting edge of the future," who are certified as advancing this or that "revolutionary paradigm," who

must embody the very latest developments in the field. *The ritual process of giving out rewards, especially when they are capriciously given to mediocre candidates heralded for the moment as geniuses and prophets in the professional priesthood, maintains the illusion that the scientific community is in control of its own destiny.* This same ritual process also drives scientists to compete fiercely with one another and to compromise themselves for a few crumbs, for a ride on the gravy train. Scientists quickly abandon any critical perspective on their own discipline and on the making of social policy precisely because they get the message loud and clear that any irreverent or distasteful conduct leads to banishment from the promised land.

Even though scientists may well be *legally* and *technically* protected from political repression through academic tenure and civil service codes, the fact remains that their intellectual and political activity is profoundly shaped and mutilated by the mechanism of arbitrary, capricious, and even sleazy issuance of professional awards. The grim and incessant competition for individual rewards helps to ensure that scientists view each other as *rivals*; that they dismiss cooperative efforts as a sign of weakness or maladjustment; that their debilitating search for recognition leaves little time or energy for pursuing science in the service of social justice or progress, much less criticizing any of the antics, foibles, and orthodoxies in their own discipline.

The most ominous and pervasive sign of alienated intellectual labor in the scientific workplace is *cynicism*: cynicism about the validity of one paradigm versus another, cynicism about the role of scientists in the larger society, and cynicism about the legitimacy and worth of science itself. Even when a scientist is proved to have committed acts of fraud or plagiarism, the standard response is, "He was stupid to have gotten caught" or "So what else is new?" No effort is made to reexamine, much less to tighten, the standards of peer review by which the culprit was awarded a grant, prize, promotion, or other recognition for work that was bogus or not his own. In the context of such cynicism, objective truth-content is not a decisive factor in the selection of competing models. Standards of good taste (based on whatever is felt to be the latest development, the most pleasant, in the mainstream) become the governing criteria for the rise of some models to prominence and the decline of others to obscurity. Cynicism in the scientific community, in turn, promotes *relativism*; this ideology assumes that all ideas are more or less valid from one standpoint or another, that there is no objective criterion by which a given idea can be proved superior to others, that it does not make much difference which idea is adopted today because it will not be around for long in any case, that whatever looks good, feels

good, or seems advantageous at the moment is superior to competing models. This ideology is an essential part of the soil in which endless varieties of new models sprout and proliferate, a precondition for the play of fashion in science.

Despite the corrosive effects of the fashion process in the scientific community, they are not inevitable or irreversible. Indeed, the play of fashion can help to facilitate the introduction and serious consideration of new models that would otherwise be suppressed at the outset. Just as the fashion process establishes an orthodoxy of what is in good taste at a given moment, it also allows for the entertainment and proliferation of new ideas, even those that some opinion leaders might dismiss as unduly "visionary" or "too far out." But the fashion process can have this constructive effect only if its presence is explicitly and candidly acknowledged (as it is in the domain of costume adornment), if its range of operation is itself subjected to critical *public* scrutiny and its potential mischief kept at the forefront of attention. An obstacle to the recognition of the fashion process within the scientific community is that its participants are loathe to admit to any irrational collective behavior in the evaluation and adoption of competing paradigms. Yet the constructive role of the fashion process cannot take effect unless its presence is candidly acknowledged by its adherents and critics alike. (Indeed, some of the opinion leaders in the scientific community who expose and condemn manifestations of the fashion process in sociology, for example, are themselves unwittingly caught up in that same process; even Sorokin and C. Wright Mills are very much under its influence despite their assaults against other sociologists for a miscellany of irrational collective behaviors.)

One rule within the scientific community is suggestive of what Sumner meant by a *folkway*, and is not unlike the Mafia's principle of *omertà*: those who break the code of silence within the community and wash dirty linen in public by "ratting" on their brethren are severely taken to task. There is a tacit but compelling rule that scientists must not expose or criticize other scientists caught in acts of fraud and plagiarism. How can the presence and strength of such a rule be ascertained? One reliable way to estimate the salience, sanctity, and level of consensus behind this (or any other) rule as viewed by social participants is to note their collective response to those who violate it. What happens when a scientist identifies colleagues engaged in the production of bogus research findings and plagiarism in their quest for grant money and proceeds to notify the appropriate federal agencies (HEW, NIH) of the irregularities? The scientist filing the well-documented charges is subjected to retribution (discontinuation of funding, ostracism) for his

trouble while the culprits fudging and plagiarizing their "hard data" are neither investigated nor penalized for their antics by the same agencies. The testimony given to the congressional Subcommittee on Fraud and Plagiarism in Science has aired instructive testimony about the normative pattern according to which fraud in science is condoned and efforts to expose it are suppressed.

Most of the irrationality in science is far more subtle, unwitting, and pervasive than suggested by a given scandal or even a series of scandals uncovered by conscionable scientists and well-intended muckrakers: most of this irrationality is the unfolding or playing out of the collective behavior inherent in the fashion process and the collective tastes that give it scope and direction. A defining characteristic of this collective behavior is the emergence of opinion leaders who serve for the most part unwittingly to reflect and reinforce the collective tastes within their community. We will see that even those scientists who specifically investigate the fashion process in modern society, the play of fashion within the scientific community, and the manifestations of irrationality in science and society can themselves be intimately caught up in this very same process. It is now time to direct our attention to such opinion leaders as Simmel, Kroeber, Friedrichs, Sorokin, Kuhn, Merton, and Alexander in order to ascertain what they say about the play of fashion, how much they are themselves subject to its influence, and what we can learn from their insights, their myopia, and their role in the scientific community. We will then examine the origins and consequences of alienated intellectual labor as well as the structural and ideological conditions that shape the pattern of rewards and recognition conferred by the scientific community on its opinion leaders. We will also examine the degree to which rewards are systematically allocated to the undeserving, the marginally competent, or the mediocre as an important mechanism of social control in the scientific community. Last but not least, we will explore the possibility that *the fashion process rather than the Protestant ethic may well have been the major impetus to the rise of modern science*; that *the widely held view of the Protestant ethic as the driving force behind scientific ferment and discoveries from the seventeenth century to the present era, the Weberian thesis popularized by Merton, is itself a manifestation of the fashion process in the scientific community*. The excursion is a long one, I hope you enjoy it.

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Much of the credit for whatever value this work may have belongs to a number of scholars and teachers.

During my formative days as a graduate student at the City College of New York in the early 1960s, I was encouraged to pursue studies in the sociology of knowledge and allowed to write a master's thesis on Karl Mannheim's contributions to this domain. I was allowed to utilize the remarkable faculty resources on all five CUNY campuses and even to take courses at other nearby universities toward my degree. I had the benefit of instruction from Alfred McClung Lee at Brooklyn College, Joseph B. Gittler at City College, and Robert K. Merton at Columbia University. From these three I learned much about collective behavior, symbolic interactionism, and classical social theory, respectively. To CUNY in general and these faculty in particular, I remain deeply grateful for my initiation into the discipline.

This work is a substantially revised and expanded version of a doctoral dissertation on the sociology of science I completed at the University of California at Berkeley. During my studies at Berkeley in the more turbulent period of the 1960s, I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to learn more deeply about collective behavior and symbolic interactionism from Herbert Blumer and Erving Goffman; I learned much about the history of social thought, especially the bearing of evolutionism and the Enlightenment on sociology itself, from Kenneth Bock and Ernest Becker. I am indebted to Richard Lichtman for enabling me

to appreciate the relevance of historical materialism for the tasks of social theory and practice, and to go beyond the caricatures of Marxism all too often on display in graduate sociology programs. I am also indebted to Hanan Selvin and Robert Somers for their tireless efforts at convincing an impatient antiwar activist that methodological self-awareness is an essential goal in the analysis of public policy.

During that stormy decade, these faculty constituted a "critical mass" of original scholarship, dedicated teaching, and, in the case of Ernest Becker, charismatic leadership as well; these faculty educated and inspired a generation of graduate students in a progressive, critical, and interdisciplinary tradition. I was fortunate to have been part of that generation.

I would like to thank Stanley Aronowitz for his suggestions and pleadings that I take leave of more mundane tasks in order to revise and complete this work at long last. I am glad I did so, for it has taken me back to my roots and reminded me just how much I owe to the teaching and research of others.

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Last but not least, I want to thank Erica Sher for her artistic talent and keen sense of irony in drawing the sketches of three figures whose works are examined in this study. I trust that the irreverence in these portraits of Mills, Sorokin, and Merton is understood in the context of respect for the scholarship these theorists have exemplified. A sense of humor is necessary for life and growth; I think it has a place in the scientific community.

The next generation is entitled to a world more just, honest, and nurturing than the one it will inherit. To my own wonderful daughters, Janette and Claudia, already striving to make the world a more fit place in which to live, and to all those contributing to the struggle for justice and reason however they can and wherever they are, this book is dedicated.