

Hacking's 'Between Goffman and Foucault': A Theoretical Frame for Criminology

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Abstract—This paper aims to analyse how Ian Hacking states the theoretical basis of his research on the classification of people. Although all his early philosophical education had been based in Foucault, it is also true that Erving Goffman's perspective provided him with epistemological and methodological tools for understanding face-to-face relationships. Hence, all his works must be thought of as social science texts that combine the research on how the individuals are constituted 'top-down' (as in Foucault), with the inquiry into how people renegotiate 'bottom-up' the classifications about them. Thus, Hacking's proposal constitutes a middle ground between the French Philosopher and the American Sociologist. Placing himself between both authors allows Hacking to build a frame that is expected to adjust to Social Sciences' main particularity: the fact that they study interactive kinds. These are kinds of people, which imply that those who are classified can change in certain ways that prompt the need for changing previous classifications themselves. It is all about the interaction between the labelling of people and the people who are classified. Consequently, understanding the way in which Hacking uses Foucault's and Goffman's theories is essential to fully comprehend the social dynamic between individuals and concepts, what Bert Hansen had called dialectical realism. His theoretical proposal, therefore, is not only valuable because it combines diverse perspectives, but also because it constitutes an utterly original and relevant framework for Sociological theory and particularly for Criminology.

Keywords—Classification of people, Foucault's archaeology, Goffman's interpersonal sociology, interactive kinds.

I. INTRODUCTION

HACKING'S dynamic nominalism, formulated in diverse research and works—as in the *Social Construction of What?* (1999)—aims to study the interaction between classification of people and classified people. This task is based on a fundamental distinction between the object of the study of natural sciences and social sciences [15]-[17]. The first studies *indifferent kinds*; that is to say, inanimate things that are not conscious of the way in which they are classified by humans. In contrast, social sciences study *interactive kinds*: kinds of people that are able to be aware of how they are classified and, thus, they can change the manner in which individuals experience themselves—and this even can lead to them changing their feelings and behaviour due to that classification. Furthermore, that change of behaviour can generate the necessity of a modification of the classification itself (hence, leading to a looping effect of human classifications). In this regard, analyzing that cardinal

difference requires a conceptual frame that allows the researcher to study, in the case of social sciences, interactions between the classification and the classified. In effect, it implies: a) a conception of "a person" that could be conscious of how he or she is classified; b) a particular understanding of the setting: classifications are not given in the abstract, but incarnate in concrete acts and institution; c) an idea of how classification of people is established (for example, by physiologists, sociologists or criminologists), how is that classification incorporated into practices and institutions based on it, and how people, in face-to-face interactions from daily life become aware of being thereby classified, and thus, re-think themselves—and adjust or not, their courses of action to the standards of that classification.

Hacking developed, throughout his career, studies about "making-up people" based on this idea of a dynamic nominalism, intermittently specifying some of these premises. His works' list includes, for example, *Rewriting the Soul* [11] and *Mad Travelers* [10], which studied "multiple personalities" and "mad travelers" as classifications, respectively. Here, our intention will be not to examine these works, but to analyze the premises previously mentioned, indicating the authors and perspectives that Hacking utilized to build up his theoretical proposal. In his article *Between Foucault and Goffman: Between discourse in the abstract and face-to-face interaction* [9], our author describes those influences, which can be introductorily outlined as:

- His conception of the person is based on Sartre's existentialism.*
- His idea of how classifications always emerge framed in discursive forms and historical institutions is influenced by Foucault's archaeologies and genealogists.*
- His representation of the ways in which people are constituted, defined by the others and by themselves in terms of face-to-face interactions from daily life is founded on Goffman's interpersonal Sociology.*

This work will propose, therefore, to analyze all of these points, in order to reach a better understanding of that interaction process that constitutes the particularity of social sciences' object and that delimit them from other sciences. Moreover, it can be sustained that dynamic nominalism constitutes an enriching perspective in terms of criminology studies, as it can be thought in continuity with the contributions from the labelling theory [1], [7], [8], [19].

II. EXISTENCE PRECEDES ESSENCE

It has already been mentioned the idea of *looping effect*: firstly, there is a classification "K" of people, associated with

regularities and laws that deal with the behaviour of that kind of people. These people can become aware of being classified as such, and hence, modify their actions, generating the necessity of a change in the classification itself. This is the process that our author tries to disclose. That is to say, it is not about a nominalism that studies kinds of people as closed histories, but as dynamics and dialectics in action. Classifications imply more than a mere “naming”: they open and close new possibilities of doing and being; they open and close fields of human possibility. That means that Hacking believes that possible behaviour and forms of being are not something independent from the descriptions that at a certain place and time are available to choose. People are certainly affected by the manners in which they and the others are described as definite kinds of people. Nonetheless, the author could be asked: “Then, are not individuals determined in their decisions by a realm of descriptions of classes of people existent at a certain social-historical moment?” There is a key point in the idea of *interactive kinds* and *looping effects* that must be underlined, which allows to answer that question and that Hacking explicitly recognize: “What is your idea of a person, who can be thus made up?” [9, p. 281] This aspect is crucial, as it permits to understand the idea of *looping effect*. Hacking believes, following Sartre, that Human’s nature is to have no nature, that is, to constantly have to decide who one is. There is a phrase that is helpful in order to understand this point, and that, as Hacking says, was in fashion in the 1960’s: “Existence precedes essence”. Hacking is an anti-essentialist. Notwithstanding this, he does not omit the existence of individual restrictions. Yes, there are contexts, circumstances; however, as Sartre would sustain, people can choose what to do under those circumstances. Those limits can be understood in different ways. One could emphasize on biological, psychological or social conditionings. What can and what cannot an individual choose at a given historical moment? The following Sartre phrase illuminates this theme:

“Of course a contemporary of Duns Scotus is ignorant of the use of the automobile or the aeroplane.... For one who has no relation of any kind to these objects and the techniques that refer to them, there is a kind of absolute, unthinkable, and undecipherable nothingness. Such a nothing can in no way limit the For-itself that is choosing itself; it cannot be apprehended as a lack no matter how we consider it” [18, p. 522].

Here the phrase “a kind of absolute, unthinkable, and undecipherable nothingness” is used focusing on the absence of artefacts at a certain time as, for example, the automobile. Hacking is more interested in classifications: that “absolute and unthinkable nothingness” also exists in the level of institutions and practices that suppose that existence of certain kinds of people and the non-existence of others. Therefore, understanding Hacking’s existentialist influence is key in two possible senses: Firstly, to comprehend how people can – following here the idea of looping effect- be conscious of being classified in that way and to change their courses of actions; thus, generating the need of a modification of the classification. Individuals can and must constantly choose who

they are in their day-to-day actions, although they are inserted in a social-historical context that, a-priori, conditions and limits them. Secondly, that same context supposes not only physical and social barriers for individuals, but also the non-existence of artefacts and also of definite manners of thinking and experimenting themselves. The reason of this is that a new way of describing (or its absence) implies new ways of being and, fundamentally, new ways of choosing –according to Sartre’s terminology, of choosing who one is. These issues prompt Hacking’s questions: Do people feel different, experiment themselves in a different way if they are led to see themselves as being a certain kind of person? How are peoples’ possible and real lives constituted? Which is the field of the possible and of the action conditioned, not only for social and physical barriers, but also for the ways in which individuals conceptualize themselves and become aware of who they are here and now? [9]

Michel Foucault and Erving Goffman provided our author with different answers to these interrogations. Nevertheless, as Hacking indicates, both answers are complementary and necessary for dynamic nominalism’s philosophy.

III. DISCOURSE IN THE ABSTRACT: FOUCAULT’S “TOP-DOWN” RESEARCH

Hacking confesses that all his philosophical formation has been permeated by Foucault’s archaeologies and genealogies. For the constitution of the dynamic nominalism, he was particularly interested in what Foucault has called the “pure description of discursive events” [3] and what Hacking himself calls “discourse in the abstract”. In effect, Foucault starts his research analyzing the sentences or declarations in themselves, without associating them with who has pronounced them. This allows him to establish -in his archaeologies- “the preconditions for and the mutations between successive institutional forms” [9, p. 288]. As what Foucault has made is thus a history of the present that aims to analyze the determinant structure of discourse; as his research is directed at entire “systems of thought”, Hacking sustains that these studies were “top-down”, and that they are key to understand what in one particular historical time can be said and what is possible: “(...) I think that there are sometimes fairly sharp mutations in systems of thought and that these redistributions of ideas establish what later seems inevitable, unquestionable, necessary (...)” [12, p. 5]. In his latter genealogies, Foucault showed “(...) how the historical settings work on people to form their potentialities (...)” [9, p. 288]. In this way, Foucault evinces how institutional structures have emerged and which are their relations with the discursive forms from a certain time. What has never been studied in his archaeologies of present is how those institutions concretely impact on people, and how people’s daily possibilities are delimited.

There are numerous Foucauldian works that analyze the origin of modern institutions, fundamentally of those that, as we will see, Goffman has called *Total Institutions*. To indicate only a few of those studies: *Folie et Déraison: Histoire de la folie dans l’âge de la raison* [2], which analyzes the

emergence of the asylum; *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Penitentiary* [5], which describes Bentham's panoptic and its relations with modern prisons; and *The Birth of the Clinic* [4].

There is something missing in these approaches, as Hacking indicates: "(...) an understanding of how the forms of discourse become part of the lives of ordinary people, or even how they become institutionalized and made part of the structure of institutions at work." [9, p. 278]. To understand this, we must turn to Goffman.

IV. FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTIONS: GOFFMAN'S "BOTTOM-UP" STUDIES

One of Erving Goffman's most famous books, *Asylums* [7], was published exactly the same year as Foucault's *Folie y déraison*. In it, Goffman tried following the research line held in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* [6] –perspective that will be maintained in *Stigma* [8] - to study the way in which human roles are constituted in face-to-face interactions within an institutional frame, and how deviance and normality patterns have concrete impacts on individuals' lives. Hence, *Asylums* described how nearly the totality of patients' lives is lived within the *total institution*. Total institutions are places of residence and work in which various individuals, being isolated from society, have a closed and formally administrated form of life. Some examples of these are: monasteries, convents, navies, prisons, asylums, etc. That is to say, several institutions like those whose origins Foucault studied. Places in which nearly the whole life of the residents is lived, and where the institution orders almost all aspects of their lives' [9]. In that context, Goffman made a true analysis on how total institutions are places of coercion destined to change people, but that are not necessarily succeeding in directing that change. "Goffman truly offered an analysis of making up people. The changes are not deliberately brought about by the system of control, but instead take place in the presence of another person, and by virtue of this presence. It is a question of the glances, gestures, postures and, of course, of words that each person inserts, intentionally or not, into the situation. The vocabulary of gestures and words is adapted to a multitude of uses interiorized by the individual. Each person learns how to behave, whether by concealing one's feelings, by affirming one's central role or by a tactical effacement." [9, p. 294]. This is what was missing in Foucault: an entire analysis on how, in day-to-day life, individuals are constituted within a frame of practices and institutions that pretend to give a certain shape to them, but that usually fail in that task. Classifications become part of people's lives based on a face-to-face presence that involves looking, gestures, postures and words. Hence, it is also within this presence where people become aware of how they are classified (and they do -or not- act accordingly).

Missing in Goffman is another aspect: he never specifies how those institutions that underlie interactions have emerged. For this, Foucault is needed. However, he never establishes how discursive forms become part of ordinary life. It is this

double lack-complementarity that Hacking gathers in order to develop his own perspective, dynamic nominalism.

V. INTERACTIVE KINDS AND LOOPING EFFECTS: THE PARTICULARITY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES' OBJECT

Goffman was part of the Chicago school of sociological thought. Associated with it is *the labelling theory*, which sustains that any individual deviance within society is not an inherent behaviour to a concrete individual, but a certain manner of describing him or her. It is a label. Deviance is the product of how individuals are labelled: "The process of making the criminal, therefore, is a process of tagging, defining, identifying, segregating, describing, emphasizing, making conscious and self-conscious; it becomes a way of stimulating, suggesting, emphasizing and evoking the very traits that are complained of" [19, p. 19f]. These labels, these classifications are created, for example, by sociologists, psychologists and criminologists. In this sense, Howard Becker has shown how the process of defining the "outsiders" of a certain society is also influenced by diverse social groups that aim to obtain a definite benefit [1]. For labelling theory, there are not kinds of people until the classes are defined and have an impact on people. This does not imply that those effects are always direct. In effect, as Hacking constantly indicates, classifications always exist within practices and institutions, which means that they never exist "in the air". Those institutions, based on those labels, have a set of rules and laws that actually affect the individuals that are part of them. This signifies that the mentioned effects are not necessarily direct: for example, "few criminals know the elaborate theories and structures of criminological classification" [9, p. 297]. Notwithstanding this, they can be conscious, or auto-conscious, of their classification based on how they are treated in daily life, and thus, they can start to see themselves in a different way. Moreover, this can lead to their feelings and conduct being modified due to that classification. "*Interactive kinds*" supposes an "inter", an interaction between classifications and the classified, as people can think themselves as being a certain kind of people. Here the key word to understand the difference between those kinds and what Hacking calls "indifferent kinds" is consciousness (classification consciousness) –the influence that Sartre had on Hacking's philosophical formation has already been underlined, and it is fundamental to comprehend this emphasis that the latter makes on individual consciousness.

We have sustained that interactive kinds constitute social sciences' specificity. Having said that, the problem of demarcation between them and natural sciences is that several times: "There is a constant drive in the social and psychological sciences to emulate the natural sciences and to produce true natural kinds of people" [14, p.104]. But these are particular classes: they constitute a changing object, precisely because that consciousness of the classification can lead to *looping effects*: "That is, new knowledge about "the criminal" or "the homosexual" becomes known to the people classified, changes the way these individuals behave, and

loops back to force changes in the classifications and knowledge about them” [14, p. 105]. In contrast, the objects studied by natural sciences constitute indifferent kinds, as their behaviour does not change because of being classified in a definite manner. They are not aware of the fact that humans “label” them; thereby, “atoms” are not conscious of their classification and they do not act accordingly to that label. The fundamental distinction between natural and social sciences is that the first studies stationary objects, whereas the second analyzes an object that is constantly changing due to looping effects.

However, *classification consciousness does not imply that people must know all the complex systems of scientific classification*. As they are inserted in definite practices and institutions, individuals can become aware of –by means of the roles that they are given in face-to-face interactions–, for example, how they are labelled –here it can be understood how Goffman provided Hacking with a way of comprehending how classifications become part of the lives of ordinary people. This is evident in the cases of completely incarcerated criminals, or people with diverse disabilities who in many cases cannot explain how they are being classified. Nevertheless, Hacking indicates that they can experience and understand –in their own ways– the label better than anyone else, because their lives are partially or completely organized around it within particular institutions. Thus, looping effects can be indirect. These individuals can change their courses of actions, or even their families can modify their conduct, as they can also be affected by a new manner of experiencing their family member. These changes can lead, then, to the classification itself becoming false –as it described certain regular behaviours that are then untrue– so it has to be changed. Therefore, it can be said that, formally speaking, looping effects are based on two staple stages: “(a) There is an effect on people who are classified. There is a classification K of people, which is made as part of our scientific knowledge. Associated with K are what are conjectured to be laws or regularities about people who are K. At least some people, thus classified, change their behaviour in consequence of being classified so. (b) It may be necessary to change the criteria or the knowledge about people who are K, because in virtue of the classification, they no longer fit the old criteria. Or at any rate, one may have to modify the regularities about such people, not because one was wrong in the first place, but because the people have changed somewhat. This, in turn, may affect the people classified, and looping may continue. (I proposed that looping effects are one of the prime differences between human and natural sciences. Objects known about in the natural sciences do not change because they are classified, although we may change them in the light of our classifications.)” [9, p. 297-298].

To illustrate this, here is an example given in *Criminal Behaviour, degeneracy and looping* [13], at a US Congress workshop about the genetic causes of crime. Hacking found that, in a black-American slum, experts sustain that many enclosed young men have a genetic tendency to crime. Once they become aware of this, these individuals think: “What is

the sense of working then? I was born a criminal!” The tendency to crime, if ever there was something like that, is strongly enforced. Correlations between genetic markers and crime are confirmed; one can even become more incontrollable than before, and so, there are new and stronger correlations –not genetically generated, but that are due to the classification itself. In this way, scientists would find that these individuals are even more dangerous than they had previously thought. This constitutes a clear example of the looping effect [9].

VI. WITH SARTRE, BETWEEN FOUCAULT AND GOFFMAN: DYNAMIC NOMINALISM

The main ideas of dynamic nominalism have been exposed. It aims to comprehend and study the specificity of social sciences’ objects (that is, interactive kinds that sometimes imply looping effects). Also described were the central influences of Sartre’s existentialism, Foucault’s archaeologies and Goffman’s daily life studies on Hacking:

- I) Hacking’s research supposes that people can become aware of how scientists classified them within practices and institution. This must be understood, at least partially, taking into account Sartre’s influence; “Existence precedes essence”. Hacking is an anti-essentialist: he sustains that, although there are diverse conditionings and limitations to individual behaviour, people can always choose freely between different courses of action, even if they are just little decisions in day-to-day life.
- II) Foucault is key for Hacking to understand how institutions were born related to certain “discursive forms”, to definite “systems of thought” that exist at a given place and time. In this way, Hacking can understand what gave birth to the available kinds of roles at a certain time. In other words, Foucault shows how to understand what is said, what can be said, what is possible –and, simultaneously, what cannot be thought nor said, which constitutes the “absolute and unthinkable nothingness” from a historical time.
- III) But how do people incorporate those possibilities and impossibilities as part of themselves? Goffman provides Hacking with tools for understanding how individuals are “made-up” in the day-to-day scene within a given institutional structure.

In this way, a new question could be formulated, which Hacking (based on these contributions) tried to answer throughout his life’s research: In which ways individuals –in their daily life within an institutional frame– individually or collectively, modify their courses of actions –based on being aware of how they are classified; hence, prompting the need for a scientific reformulation of the classification itself (thus changing, again, the field of the possible, of what is and can be said –as well as the space of the unthinkable and ineffable)? In this line, it can be said that Sociology and Criminology studies must take Hacking’s inputs into account as to be able to analyze the definition of criminals in terms of interactive classes and looping effects.

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