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SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY AS AN AREA OF INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

There can be little doubt about the increasingly international character of sociology as a science. Indeed, it is possible to speak of an international boom in sociology, to the point where sociology appears to be a necessary ingredient in the *Ueberbau* of any self-respecting country from the United States of America to Nepal (I'm not making this up — I happened to notice recently that there actually is a solitary Nepalese member of the American Sociological Association). It is also quite clear that this crosscultural *succès fou* of sociology now bridges the division between socialist and non-socialist countries, as anyone who has attended, successively, the world congresses of sociology in Washington (1962) and Evian (1966) will readily testify. This is not the moment to speculate on the reasons for this (though this, in itself, is a very interesting sociological question). One of the results has been a growing mutual interest among sociologists in different countries and with this the development of a certain „ecumenical“ tolerance at least on the level of good manners. I can personally assure you that F. Konstantinov, of the U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences, and Talcott Parsons, of *The Social System*, had a seemingly jovial lunch together at Evian — so perhaps one can even say that the “central committees“ have begun to get together. All this, no doubt, is a good thing.

If we narrow our focus to the relations between sociologists in the socialist and non-socialist countries, it is perfectly obvious that this new “climate“ opens up possibilities of collaboration in specific empirical areas, both in terms of methods and of research results. The growing interest in comparative sociology is likely to accelerate such collaboration. International comparisons of data in, say, medical sociology or the sociology of education are of obvious interest to anyone working on these problems, no matter where he is. And the developments of new research techniques, such as new applications of computers to sociological materials, are of equally obvious international interest. When it comes to theory, however, the situation is rather different. Here, the long shadow of Karl Marx continues to divide those who sit in the darkness from those who walk in the light (the respective allocation of light

and darkness depending, of course, on which side of the fence one puts' oneself). In other words, it is more difficult to bracket the question of whether one is or not a Marxist in dealing with problems of sociological theory than in dealing with concrete empirical data — and since Marxism is a fundamental theoretical position with implications for all the social sciences, it is quite proper that this question *should* not be bracketed. This has lead, however, to a paradoxical consequence — namely, to the fact that those who can talk most easily with each other across the dividing line are the narrowest empiricists, the technologists, those with least affinity to the humanistic tradition in sociological thought. This, I believe, is unfortunate.

Let me assure you that I have no hostile feelings against technologists — some of my best friends are computer men. But I really think that the fact that a computer man from New York can communicate with a computer man from Leningrad does *not* represent a tremendous achievement of international understanding. What can one do about this? Very few of us, I hope, whether Marxists or non-Marxists, would like to go back to attitudes which, on the one side, viewed western sociology as *nothing but* a bourgeois ideology and, on the other side, viewed Marxism as an anti-scientific dogma. Most of us, I believe, have come to regard these rigid positions as unreasonable. What, then, are the reasonable options? I can see three principal options.

One option, of course, is simply to avoid theoretical problems and collaborate, where convenient, on research data and methods. I have already said that I find such a prospect unfortunate. I do so as a non-Marxist sociologist, with a rather strong commitment to the idea that our science is, by its very nature, a humanistic discipline. But, it seems to me, that the prospect of a sort of scholarly internationale of positivists — „computer men of all countries, unite!“ — must be equally unappealing to a Marxist, especially at a time when there is a deep concern within the Marxist camp to arrive at a fuller definition of Marxist humanism. There is a certain attraction to what American sociologists like to call „hardnosed empiricism“ — a no-nonsense attitude of sticking to verifiable facts and leaving the theorizing to the philosophers if not to the posts. This, of course, is a very prevalent attitude among sociologists in America and in western Europe today, but what I have been able to see of sociology coming from the socialist countries during the last decade makes me think that, perhaps for understandable reasons, this attitude has a certain frequency here as well. I suppose it all depends on what one thinks sociology is capable of doing. If one simply looks on it as an instrument of „social engineering“, the empiricist attitude makes sense. My own view is somewhat more ambitious and, consequently, I am reluctant to abandon sociology to the technicians altogether. I am even more reluctant, because I believe that such a divorce from theory (which also means a divorce from history and from

philosophy) eventually makes for sterility and distortion even on the strictly empirical level.

A second option would be direct and intensive discussion of precisely those issues that divide Marxists and non-Marxists in the interpretation of social phenomena. This would entail the method that the Germans, rather nicely, call *Streitgespräche*. Under the right circumstances this can give a lot of satisfaction to all concerned, but I am rather sceptical whether it gets anyone very far intellectually. For example, one can have endless discussions about the possibility or impossibility of a „value-free“ social science, or about differing conceptions of „class“ and „class struggle“, without getting to anything beyond the place from which one started — namely, the understanding that Marxists and non-Marxist disagree on these things. Quite apart from the likelihood that such head-on discussion will simply become political controversy, I strongly suspect that intellectual progress is usually made by less dramatic means.

The third option would be to begin with *common* theoretical problems and then to discuss these with some readiness to learn from one another. This is the option I very much prefer. Since I am speaking here in a Marxist milieu, it would be both impolite and (more important) illogical to speculate on what Marxist sociologists might learn from non-Marxist theory. Clearly, this is something they must decide themselves. But it is pertinent to indicate the areas in which I see common theoretical problems and the points where those of us outside the Marxist camp might look for help from Marxist work in sociological theory.

Before I do this, however, it may be useful to make a few brief remarks about the state of theory in western sociology. In this, as in other areas of the sociological enterprise, American sociology occupies a dominant position today. I think it is fair to say that the „hardnosed empiricism“ for which American sociology, or at least a major portion of it, is correctly known, has exerted a very strong influence on sociologists in western Europe since World War II. The United States today is to sociology, at least in the west, what Germany was to philosophy in the 19th century — a kind of Mecca, to which academic pilgrims come with expectations which, for someone inside the American situation, are rather ridiculous. I myself was amazed to see, when I was a visiting professor at the University of Cologne three years ago, how students applied themselves to newly arrived copies of the *American Sociological Review* and the *American Journal of Sociology* as if these were so many oracles of profound wisdom — hardly a plausible attitude in view of the mass of triviality with which these publications are usually filled. The result of all this has been that, by and large, sociology in western Europe has been as dependent on America for theory, such as it is, as it has been for other aspects of the discipline. There are, of course, some exceptions to this (particularly in France and in the

German Federal Republic), but I don't think that these have as yet begun to change the general picture.

American sociology has been viewed by some observers as a theoretical Sahara. This is not quite accurate. If nothing else, of a course, there is the massive presence of structural-functionalist theory, which (for reasons that brevity forbids going into here) has almost attained a sort of „semi-official“ status in the American sociological establishment. By this I don't only mean the position of great prestige occupied by Talcott Parsons and his work, but (actually more important) the fact that the theoretical parlance of structural-functionalism has become a *lingua franca* even among sociologists with little theoretical interest of their own. Other theoretical approaches have been very much put in the shadow by this dominant orientation. The approaches of the generation of European „masters“ — Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Georg Simmel and so on — have become „classic“ in the most depressing sense of the word — that is, relegated to prefaces and footnotes, where they are given a cursory and ritualistic obeisance. Often, „theory“ is equated with „methodology“, in the sense of a systematic reflection about the logic of empirical research — certainly a necessary undertaking, but also a great shrinkage in the scope of theorizing. There are, indeed, two indigenously American approaches that continue with some vigor — the one, a generally „left“ (though hardly Marxist) approach, in the footsteps of Thorstein Veblen and C. Wright Mills — the other, the approach commonly known as symbolic-interactionism, derived from the theories of George Herbert Mead. Lately, however, these approaches have themselves emphasized empirical analysis over theoretical construction — in the former case, critical analysis of present-day American society and politics — in the latter case, the analysis of concrete problems of social psychology of occupations or in medical sociology. I think it is fair to say that no one coming from any of these other directions has been able to match Parsons either in quantity or in scope when it comes to theoretical work.

I think it is also fair to say that there has been a growing malaise about this situation, and a rather vague groping for a way out of the unedifying alternative „*aut* Parsons *aut nihil*“. Some of this malaise has probably come from disappointments with the results of Parsonian theory itself. This is not the place for a criticism of Parsons — though I should say that I would not associate myself with the more violent criticisms, which, in my opinion, have been inaccurate and unfair (for instance, the widespread criticism that there is no place for social change in the Parsonian system is quite simply, factually, incorrect); and, if nothing else, Parsons deserves a great deal of gratitude for making theorizing once more a respectable activity within American sociology. My own trouble with Parsons is less with what he says than what he leaves

out. When all is said and done, the Parsonian system thus far is mainly an immense array of classificatory schemata, which only rarely help us to grasp the concrete, historical reality of social events. There are indications in the most recent work of Parsons's, particularly in comparative sociology, that he is moving beyond this and modifying the system accordingly, but it is in earlier version that his theory has attained its present status. In any case, I would agree with the current malaise in feeling that important tasks of sociological theory still lie ahead of us.

Let me now mention briefly a few problems, which, in my opinion, constitute such tasks. I shall not do so in any particular order of respective importance or with the aim of being exhaustive, but I want to pay special attention to problems where conversation between Marxists and non-Marxists theorists is most likely to be productive.

It seems plausible to me that the border territory between the social sciences and human biology will be of great importance to sociological theory in coming years. It is clear that the revolution now taking place in the biological sciences will posit problems in the area of social policy, of law and morality, but this is not what I mean here. The great strides in the advancement of biological knowledge about man (and not only in genetics) also posit problems for anthropological theory, problems that must not be ignored by the sociologist. Non-Marxist sociological theory, at least since Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner, has been quite oblivious of and even inimical to biological considerations — for understandable reasons, perhaps, in visum of the theoretical fiascos of „social Darwinism“. Some neo-Darwinistic noises have been made by a few sociologists since the celebration in 1959, at the University of Chicago, of the 100th anniversary of *The Origin of Species*, but there have been few concrete results of this. Parsons has liked to use the term „evolution“ in his recent work, but I have the strong feeling that if one simply substituted „history“ for this, one would not distort his meaning. In other words, what has been called a new evolutionary emphasis in sociology is not really the result of a serious encounter with modern biology. The most interesting indications of what such a result might bring come, I think, from recent German work, particularly that inspired by the human biology of F. J. J. Buytendijk and Adolf Portmann, and by the ethological school of Konrad Lorenz. The theory of institutions of Arnold Gehlen should be specially mentioned in this connection. I do not know what the situation is in this regard among Marxist sociologists, but I have not seen anything that would seem to come from a confrontation with new biological insights.

It seems to me that sociologists, almost *a priori*, are disposed to avoid biological explanations of social phenomena. I fully share this disposition and am certainly no advocate of some new version of biologism. What we need in

sociological theory, I think, is a fuller grasp of the *dialectic* between society and its biological substratum. By this I don't mean so much the interaction between any human community and its natural environment — on that, after all, we have a good deal of knowledge, most of it coming from ethnology and cultural anthropology — but rather the interaction between socialization and organism. We owe to Marx the fundamental categories of *praxis*, of labor as the human world, eventuating in an anthropology that understands man as his own product. I think that we still have not come fully to terms with the radical transformation in man's self-understanding that these Marxian insights entail. Man's world-production and self-production, however, take place within a condition that has biological determinants. *Praxis* can never be a magical sovereignty over its biological circumstances — but neither is it mechanically caused by these circumstances. The real relationship can, I think, only be grasped in dialectical terms — but to say this is the beginning, not the end, of a mass of theoretical problems. Specifically, sociological theory will have to clarify how the organism imposes limits upon the scope of social phenomena — and it will also have to clarify in what manner society modifies the organism in its turn, in collective *praxis* and in the socialization of the individual. Let me only mention sexuality as the most obvious area in which these theoretical problems may be concretely dealt with.

Another area in which (contrary to superficial appearance) essential theoretical tasks remain to be accomplished is that of social psychology. In this area, of course, there has been an enormous amount of work, particularly in America, but I would argue that the basic theoretical task still remains undone. Speaking of the American situation only, this is due, I think, to an unfortunate dichotomization between experimental and clinical approaches in psychological work — the former dominated by behaviorism and learning theory, the latter by various psychoanalytical approaches. But neither behaviorism nor psychoanalysis, in most of their varieties, will satisfy the requirements of a sociological perspective. Both (though for different reasons) are really not capable of dealing with the social as a phenomenon. My own conviction is that the tradition of American social psychology that started with George Herbert Mead, and particularly the work of Mead himself, ought to be the starting point for viable theoretical work in this area — specifically, because Mead gives us the basic categories for a truly dialectical understanding of the relationship between society and individual consciousness (including individual identity). It seems to me, incidentally, that for this very reason Mead ought to be of special interest to Marxists — much more so than Freud, whose anthropology, in my opinion, is essentially non-dialectical.

Sociological theory will have to insist on the necessity of what may be called a sociological psychology, that is, on consciousness and identity as products

of social processes (socialization, in the broadest sense of the word). But such an axiomatic statement is not enough. Sociological theory will also have to clarify what some French Marxists have aptly called the problem of mediations, that is, the problem of the concrete interaction between social structures and psychological phenomena of all sorts. This is lacking in Meadian social psychology — Mead never developed a conception of social structure and his followers, quite logically, have usually concentrated their attention on microsocial phenomena. The theoretical bridge still to be built, however, is that between macrosociology and social psychology. You may recall the famous question of Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* — „how can one be a Persian?“ We are still faced with this question in trying to understand sociologically any given individual — how can he be a *Persian* (that is, representing in his person a multitude of things pertaining to a specific, historically formed social structure) and, at the same time, a *concrete individual* (that is, an individual with a specific biography that is not simply the mechanical particularization of the social structure within which it has unfolded)? It seems to me that the theoretical clarification of these problems is a particularly fascinating intellectual task.

Further, I believe that much work remains to be done on a comprehensive sociological theory of institutions. To be sure, there is a large literature dealing with institutional problems of one kind or another. But the existence of institutions is usually taken for granted in this literature, posited as an unexamined starting point for the investigation of particular empirical questions, or alternatively dealt with in terms of more or less complex classificatory procedures. My opinion is that we have not yet reached the point of theoretical clarity where we can afford to do this, but rather that we must return once more to the very fundamental question, „what are institutions in the first place?“ This will appear as a naive step mainly to those who have left unexamined their own theoretical presuppositions (perhaps in the, much more naive, faith that all such questions have already been „taken care of“ by the „classics“). Of course, it is quite possible to undertake useful sociological work without returning to such root questions. But, I think, that in the long run a re-examination of these questions will be fruitful even in terms of very „hardnosed“ empirical work.

It seems to me that a number of avenues might be pursued here. One, already mentioned, is an inquiry into the biological presuppositions of institutionalization. Another is the phenomenological analysis of the *Lebenswelt* in its social dimensions, an enterprise where special attention must be given to the work of Alfred Schutz (whose *Collected Papers* are now finally available in a three-volume English edition). Another avenue might lie in an intensive confrontation with recent work in linguistics — something that few sociologists have done so far and where they might learn a lot from their colleagues in cultural

anthropology, not least from Claude Levi-Strauss (without necessarily becoming „structuralists“, in the sense now being given to this term in France). I also think, though, that here too the contribution of Marxist sociologists could be of very great importance. It is to Marx that we owe the fundamental insight into the processes of objectivation (*Versachlichung*) and into social institutions as products of objectivation. It is also to Marx that we owe the fundamental analyses of reification (*Verdinglichung*) as a social phenomenon. Seen in a Marxian perspective, a good deal of sociological theorizing appears as a deificatory enterprise, as the distortive hypostatization of social reality, or, if you wish, as the production of „fetishes“. Conversely, Marxists particularly should be interested in the potential of sociological thought as a *de*-reifying, and thereby humanizing undertaking.

If institutions are understood as collective objectivations, and if the full theoretical implications of such an understanding are realized, then sociological theory will be compelled into an intensive conversation not only with philosophy but also with history, that is, with historical scholarship. Institutions are not only human products; they are products with a history. Only if this history is understood, can any given institution be grasped in its present state (including its present „functionality“). For this reason, the historical study of institutions is of great relevance to sociological *theory* (quite apart from the interest sociologists might have in this or that particular historical development). For example, it seems to me that any sociology of contemporary religion (to mention an area in which I have done some work myself) will be hopelessly inadequate unless it is undertaken against the background of a broad knowledge of the historical roots of the present situation — and, furthermore, any sociological theory of religion will have to take cognizance of the history of religion if its concepts and generalizations are to be adequate.

Another important area of theoretical work is the sociology of knowledge, including the critique of ideologies. It is most regrettable, I believe, that, at least in western sociology, the sociology of knowledge has been a peripheral sub-discipline, of interest only to a few people concerned with sociological aspects of the „history of ideas“. It was one of Schutz's important achievements to have shown that the sociology of knowledge ought not, primarily, concern itself with „ideas“, but rather with „commonsense knowledge“, that is, with the whole range of (mainly pre-theoretical) taken-for-granted cognitive and normative assumptions that make everyday social life possible. In other words, the sociology of knowledge ought to concern itself with everything that passes for „knowledge“ in society. As soon as this is granted, the sociology of knowledge will be seen to deal not with peripheral but with the most central questions of sociological theory — first of all, with the central question, „how is a social reality produced and maintained?“

Since this is the area to which I have devoted most of my time in the last few years, I shall refrain from the temptation to start a long discourse on this here, though I shall take the liberty of pointing to the recent book I wrote about this with Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*. But I would like to make one observation that might be relevant to you — namely, the dialectical perspective into which we found ourselves led by the intrinsic logic of our inquiry. This was not the result of any previous predilections on our part, and neither of us is a Marxist in any sense. We found, however, that a dialectical understanding of the relationship between society and consciousness, between the objective reality of the institutional world and the subjectivity of the individual acting in that world, was the only one that was adequate to our theoretical problem. We began with Schutz's definition of the problem. We were then led to seek a theoretical solution to the apparent contradiction between a Durkheimian and a Weberian view of social reality. It is at this point that we found Marx of very great importance indeed. As a result of all this, I would feel that Marxists have an important contribution to make in this area, not only because they have a predilection towards ideological analysis and because they are prone to operate with concepts such as "false consciousness" or the like, but rather because they have a predilection towards dialectical perspectives on these matters. It seems to me that, in this connection, a fuller confrontation between Marxism and phenomenology (particularly the phenomenology of the *Lebenswelt* would be very useful).

Needless to say, these remarks have been exceedingly sketchy and programmatic. Perhaps a few of the questions I have raised may be clarified further in discussion. But I hope that I have at least made clear the general character of the task as I see it for sociological theory. The practical implications are fairly obvious. Sociological theory cannot be undertaken in some sort of disciplinary isolation. It will have to be in an ongoing conversation with other sciences, both social and biological. It will also have to retain its "classic" connection with both philosophy and history, and with the humanities at large. Indeed, a good case can be made that sociology itself must be counted among the humanities, in the very specific sense of those disciplines that deal with man *as man* rather than in terms of abstractions that lose the concrete, historical reality of human life. Sociology in this sense, and particularly sociological theory, has a considerable contribution to make to the construction of an adequate anthropology and thus to the intellectual classification of a truly contemporary humanism.