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## Sociology without Societies

**S**ociological analysis, whether we realize it or not, is set in a context of an overall view of society. This is true for the sociology which deals with describing the working of the institutions or the processes of social change, and even more so for critical sociology. This is not to say that all sociological work is primarily ideological. This representation of society does not imply, at least not when the work is of interest, the expression of a biased perspective; on the contrary, a sufficiently abstract and general image of social life enables the inclusion of extremely varied work, in terms of spheres of application or intellectual orientation.

In my opinion, sociology has referred to a particular concept of social life which has been dominated by the notion of society at least in the course of the last half century but probably over a longer period. An example will be enough to explain what I mean: in 1961 a book titled *The Theories of Society* (Free Press) was published in two volumes (reissued in a single volume 1479 pages long in 1965) edited by Talcott Parsons, Edward Shils, Kaspar Naegele and Jesse Pitts, in which these authors, whose own work was not included in this collection of texts, apparently intended to show the unity of sociological analysis over a long period of time and over and above the various schools of thought. We can therefore consider this book, which is now quite old, a good testimony to the continuity in representation of social life which constituted what can be called classical sociology, a term we shall not attempt to define. It is true that the concept considered as primordial in this book is not society, but action; however it is clear, on reading Talcott Parsons' major studies – which at the time had recently been published: *Social System* (with other authors) and *A General Theory of Action* – that the term 'action' refers directly both to the social system and to society.

The study of interactions, institutions, methods of socialization and processes of change forms a whole which can be defined as the study of society. There is nothing imprecise about the use of the word itself. On the contrary, we can indicate some of its characteristics. In the first instance, and this has

been generally recognized, what is meant by society is a national entity or part of a national entity, and even more specifically, a socioeconomic entity, i.e. one defined to a large extent on the basis of its economic functioning. Though it is seldom explicit, we are constantly meeting the idea that there is an underlying unity incorporating all the phenomena: political, economic, social, cultural, etc., and that this unity can be observed within entities of which the principal is far from the national state.

A second characteristic, which is no less important than the first, is that the idea of society implies high degrees of cohesion between the working and the transformation of a society. For example, one of the constants in sociology is a statement to the effect that there is a link between the idea of industrial society and that of capitalist society, therefore between a 'mode of production' and what has been referred to as a 'mode of development', or modernization, since capitalism is primarily the control of the process of economic transformation by a national and private (bourgeoisie) governing elite. These two components of the idea of society lead in turn to the importance which is constantly granted to the idea of socialization. By this I do not only mean the idea that the school or the family fulfils primarily functions of socialization, but also, in the tradition of the Enlightenment, that it is socialization which shapes the individual into a being endowed with universal rights.

There is a final dimension attributed to the idea of society which we have to mention because it seems to be of a different orientation. Not only was sociology never part of an optimistic and rationalist vision of progress, but, on the contrary, was associated with the cultural pessimism dominant at the end of the 19th century. The idea of society emerges as 'constructive', that is to say as susceptible to creating order in these areas where violence, desire, or communitarianism introduce crisis and destructuring of individuals and communities.

Assuredly this idea of society, as I have just briefly described it, is too general to provide us with an adequate analytical framework in all situations. Moreover, it obviously does not completely tally with the intellectual projects of the different sociologists. But it is difficult, perhaps even impossible, to analyse the problems in sociology today without referring to this general conception of social life, which is almost the life blood and, in any event, a considerable part of the strength of sociology itself. This idea of society has never been obvious or natural. It has always been constructed and must be recognized as a highly elaborate and very complex approach to forms of behaviour and social organization. It would be dangerous to imagine that the numerous sociologists of different tendencies who participated in the development of their discipline have nothing in common. This statement is particularly true for the last half century, which has been dominated by what could be called the two facets of an analysis of society as a social system. On

one side we have the 'institutionalists', endeavouring to define the functions of institutions by referring to the need for diversification, integration and change of any concrete society; and on the other, the 'critical' sociologists, for whom the underlying unity of social life is the result of a system of domination, which increasingly uses very different channels from those used by those in power.

### The Destruction of Society

The recall of this conceptual framework is therefore the basis for a definition of the transformations which have resulted in the almost total destruction of the idea of society. Over the past few decades, the key to understanding the evolution of sociology has been the desire, whether explicit or not, to destroy the idea of society. A considerable part of sociology or the social sciences has indeed consisted in stressing the importance of social facts which cannot be included in the representation of society by itself. Here a plethora of observations come to mind in support of this general statement. We only have to make a brief reference to the most important social facts, the explanation of which cannot be included in the representation of social life which I have just outlined. Society, conceived of as a set of institutions, norms or processes of social change, has been superseded; this is primarily due to facts that are attributable to international politics on the one hand, and to the economy on the other. We can predict that in the centuries to come the characteristic of the 20th century will not be the enrichment of some countries or the rapid changes in techniques in most fields but the immensely destructive role of what is known as the 'great war' and totalitarianism, even if one rejects the use of the term. Throughout the period the world has been divided by war: first the American Civil War, then the two world wars and the Cold War. All were horrific demonstrations of how power structures could destroy all the internal logic of the institutions and forms of social organization. On the other hand, the world has become increasingly capitalist and an increasingly numerous population has entered market economies whose prime concern is to refuse any regulation or economic, political and social control of economic activity. This has led to a disintegration of all the forms of social organization, particularly in the urban context. Individualism has become widespread and one interpretation is that it leads to the disappearance of social norms, which are replaced by economic mechanisms and the search for profit.

In conclusion, it can be considered that the central issue of sociological analysis has become increasingly the study of the disappearance of social actors, who have lost ground either to the voluntarism of states, parties or armies, or to the economic policies which permeate all spheres of social life,

even those which appear distant from the economy and market logic. The most influential idea in Europe and in other parts of the world, in recent decades, has been the death of the subject, which is the equivalent of what has been called critical sociology, or of the elements associated with the rise of structuralism, first in linguistics and in many other spheres of sociology or social anthropology.

Thus the immense field of studies in classical sociology is disappearing or disintegrating, both in what we could call its optimistic variant, and in its critical version, sustained by cultural pessimism. The question which now arises is: can we redefine the sphere of sociology or must we admit that its days are now numbered and that new intellectual approaches must replace that of sociology, just as sociology replaced, or partly took the place of, the philosophy of law and of the state at the time when the powerful development of modern economies had deprived the state and more generally politics of the central place they had occupied for several centuries in the understanding of societies? There is no need to consider this sort of question as provocative. It is perfectly possible to imagine that the majority of the studies which are today classified as sociology could be divided up into other subjects or linked to other modes of dealing with social realities. But we would have to advance more specific arguments if we wished to defend such radical conclusions as the death of sociology or the disappearance of a specifically sociological approach to social facts. But the most serious mistake would be to refuse to accept a general critical analysis of what is known as sociology, as if we could enhance our knowledge step by step with no reference whatsoever to a general mode of construction of social reality.

Obviously my role here cannot be that of a messenger from another world bearing the answers to problems which disturb us and seem insoluble. But it can be to stress the need for a total rethinking of the representation of the social facts which are the foundation of what we consider to be our specific domain of research and reflection. What we could call the philosophy of history has now disappeared from sight and we can understand the attraction exerted by the schools of thought which completely rejected the theme of modernity, as if sociological knowledge had nothing to gain from setting the phenomena studied in a historical context. But, to tell you the truth, I see no reason why the disappearance of grand narratives, to use Jean François Lyotard's words, i.e. the philosophy of history, must lead to the conclusion that we have entered a period, or at least an arena, where thinking must be defined as postmodern or post-historical. I would like to defend a rather different – or even opposite – idea.

Our times, and the thoughts and social movements which construct and interpret them, can be defined in terms of a new and powerful expansion of the historicity of societies. It is the creation of the modern state which has led to the predominance of the social in political thought; it is industrial

society in all its developments which has led us to have a specifically social vision of social facts. In a society dominated by information structures, modes of communication, the extreme diversification of modes of consumption and even of modes of creation of new social realities, it is permissible to imagine that our social representation of social facts necessarily gives way to a cultural representation. This word, which is far too vague, does in fact have a very specific meaning. It means that the main issues at stake in all sorts of actions no longer refer to principles of rational organization of society or to a concept of progress, but to a social subject's chances for living and risks of dying. The social subject opposes his or her own existence, continuity, his or her reference to liberty and creativity to the chaotic stop and go of modern societies and industrial societies in particular; the latter no longer control their own fates because they are superseded, as I said at the outset, by world wars, the globalization of the economy and the non-managed, unmanageable mix of cultures, taking this word in its widest meaning. This vision signals the emergence of new collective actors and, in particular, new social movements.

Since the major movements which shook part of the world in the 1960s, the key orientation of social actors – and there are no two ways about it – has been the direct defence of the subject as such. The subject is no longer hidden from view by a philosophy of history, a conception of the state or a religious vision. The unity of analysis in classical sociology originated in the unity of the social system of society. This unity has disappeared but it is replaced by the unity of the subject itself with its reference to self and no longer to an external or transcendental principle of order. This is why, after a long period of silence, we are once again discussing fundamental human rights; these now go beyond the sphere of political, and even of social, rights and extend to the vast domain of cultural rights, that is the right of all individuals and groups to combine, each in their own specific way, their participation in a globalized economy with the specificity of cultural projects which are in part, but only in part, controlled by a cultural heritage.

This type of formulation is similar to the opposition which long held sway between the nation and the prince, or the workers and the employers. But today it is the social order in ruins/shattered which constitutes the main threat to movements for liberation and for self-assertion, the ultimate goal of which is the liberty of the subject. Is this not an indication of a representation of social life which is at least as strong and as coherent as the representation which disappeared from view at the turn of the century?

At the same time, any reference to the social order, to a coherent set of institutions or to agencies for socialization becomes useless and even dangerous. It is not the idea of the class struggle which organizes our new vision; it is that of the key opposition between a non-existent social order, which one can also refer to as the logic of the market or the management of the

unpredictable, and the constant reminder by the subject of his or her existence and liberty.

Although this is not the place to define the new social actors more precisely, we must at least point out that the central place occupied by the idea of nation, then by that of workers, or working classes, can only be occupied today by that of women's action. The reason for this is that the characteristic of masculine domination has been to terminate and therefore annihilate all feminine self-awareness – women themselves are divided between their confinement to a being which is that of natural life and their subordination to categories established by the masculine order. The search by women for their own self-unity, their awareness and their action is not in opposition to working-class struggles for social justice or anti-colonial struggles for national liberation; conflicts and social movements of this type are incorporated into a broader and more radical vision. It is also permissible to imagine that a close link between women's movements and what seem to me to be children's rights will rapidly develop.

Here we could say that political and social movements have been replaced by cultural movements which are at the same time broader in their aims and much less linked to the creation and defence of institutions and norms. The weakening of norms can lead to chaos and social disorganization; it can also characterize the reinforcement of cultural orientations of values which are now detached from social norms and constituted in opposition to them. Societies, particularly western ones, replace the grand historical narratives with grand personal narratives, i.e. narratives which deal with the strengths and weaknesses of social actors who have become the ultimate aim of their own action. This directly transforms the fields of studies about society, and sociology, if this category is still operational, must focus on the head-on confrontation – even if always to some extent controlled and regulated – between the non-social logic of war and profits and the logic, which is in no way social either, of the liberty of individual and collective subjects.

This sort of formulation is very far from the 19th- and 20th-century discourses, but, contrary to postmodern thinking, it does maintain a historical definition of the social facts and consequently of their analysis. We were in societies which we referred to as industrial, or capitalist; today we are in situations which can be analysed both as belonging to information societies and as being incorporated into an economic, social and political power structure. For reasons of clarity, we can call this vision hyper-modern, or we could also use the term 'late modernity' in opposition to the idea of postmodernity.

The weakness of this sort of representation stems from its radical nature. There is a more complete opposition between culturally defined subjects and economic and financial systems than there was between social classes in industrial society. It is true that we are often aware of living in two worlds whose only relation with each another is their permanent conflict. We are

dragged into violent economic, warlike and geopolitical transformations at top speed; but we also live in worlds defined and ruled by principles of law and we frequently attempt to redefine the major social institutions not so much in terms of the interest of society but in terms of strengthening the liberty and the creativity of the subject in the midst of economic and military upheavals.

### The Social Bond

However, even if the underlying principle of this radicality has to be maintained, it cannot conceal a very heterogeneous set of unfinished, local, barely institutionalized reconstructions of what is usually referred to as the social bond. To prevent barbarism, social theory and social action alike appeal to the capacity to create or recreate bonds, which can be bonds of solidarity as well as bonds to regulate the economy; these can reinforce the networks which are the driving force in civil society as well as the large-scale but non-institutionalized actions, like major humanitarian campaigns.

An increasing number of sociologists are devoting their work to the exploration of these new forms of social life, both to the increasingly 'weak' forms of economic and social policy as well as to the creation of centres of counter-culture. At times, this new field of social thought springs directly from the desire to safeguard or create new institutions enabling direct social interaction. On numerous occasions we have observed the emergence of orientations of this type in some of the components of the anti-globalization movements and which coexist with the more radical critical approaches. Similarly, the importance given to local issues and to the environment, which is increasingly threatened by economic and financial disorder, is most frequently evidence of the desire to seek a compromise and a balance, rather than to sustain confrontations between contradictory logics. We observe the very rapid development of projects which occupy what used to be in industrial society the space of social policies for redistribution or welfare. And the space which used to be the preserve of the trade unions is now filled by NGOs and various forms of mobilization of civil society. All these developments could well lead to sociology emerging triumphant, delivered from all subordination to political philosophy or philosophies of history. We can also remark that the old expression 'moral and political sciences', used in the 19th century and since fallen into disuse, has been rehabilitated. There is the same opposition but also the same complementarity between the search for new social bonds and the declaration of a fundamental conflict between markets and subjects as there was between the idea of the class struggle and the policies for social reform in the industrial societies we called social-democracy or the welfare state.

Thus we have the construction of a new representation of social life and consequently a new definition of sociology which should enable the latter, insofar as it supersedes the old modes of representation, to play an ever more important role in the construction of the social sphere within the scope of which it falls.

### Conclusion

Sociology has often been defined as the critical analysis of modernity and this concrete, material definition is complementary in all respects to the definition given here. This is because the object of sociology, which has usually been the study of modern societies, cannot be separated from a mode of construction of this object, which is not given naturally but produced by means of analysis and through political practice and social conflicts. In concluding, there is something we have to add to the observations which have just been made, and which have attempted to define a new mode of representation of society: we need a definition of society which is more material and also more historical since the societies which we study, no matter where they may be, are dominated by the increasing separation between two worlds (the economic and technical world, in which instrumental reason reigns triumphant, and the world of cultural projects).

These two components often enter into direct conflict with one another. If the idea of society has disintegrated, as did the idea of progress or of people before it, the reason is that there is no longer any institutional mediation sufficiently strong to maintain the interdependence of the world of the economy and the world of cultures. The only mediation which exists and which consequently constitutes the focal object in social science is the idea of the subject, because it combines the theme of general participation in economic life with the greatest possible respect for the multiplicity of cultural projects.

To quote Claude Lefort's well-known words, we can say that the democratic societies today are not those which replaced one prince by another in the seat of power, but those which left the seat empty or which burnt it. Social life as a whole constitutes a system without a centre, formed by the opposition of modes of orientation of which the insurmountable opposition is only rendered liveable by both sides recognizing that it is the subject – who is neither an economic, nor a cultural actor – who renders the two halves of human experience compatible by subordinating them to higher demands. It is liberty which gives meaning to forms of behaviour which attempt simultaneously to become part of one of the opposing logics and to make them compatible.

An expression of this sort seems to be capable of defining the concrete object of sociology: it is the study of situations in which the institutionalized



forms of appeal to the subject and respect for his or her demands succeed in establishing a zone of peace and of creation between aggressive forms of communitarianism and a market economy which destroys all forms of social, political, cultural and autonomous life. The object of sociology is to seek the path to liberty through the chaos of a landscape disrupted by war, growth and crisis.

#### Note

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