

INTRODUCTION

This book is about social change. This should not surprise anybody since we do, after all, live in a time of accelerated transformations, a topic addressed in some way or another by most sociological studies published these days. This book also focuses on contemporary social processes, raising the question whether we are dealing with a merely “quantitative” intensification of changes, or with some kind of a “qualitative” shift in the forms that organize human behavior – a shift that has been tentatively called the transition from modern to postmodern society.

It is quite astonishing that today’s sociology avoids providing an unambiguous answer to this question, or even shies away from posing it. Instead, it limits itself to exploring particular regularities or processes that can be found in social life today. One could even have the impression that sociologists have focused on developing a kind of “sociography” which is able to document the emergence of new phenomena but which remains helpless when it comes to explaining them. These phenomena are usually considered to be either an effect of behavioral trends, which have always been present in modernity and became merely accelerated or intensified by technological progress (such as individualization, rationalization or consumerism), or a consequence of some modifications in the structures of modern society (such as civic society, social trust or democratic systems). In both cases, however, concepts employed in sociological accounts are not framed by a more general theory of social change.

Such an attitude appears all the more astounding when we remember that sociology was founded as an intellectual response to the changes caused by the “transition to modernity.” The basic set of concepts developed by the classics of sociology, which determined its status as a separate discipline, was supposed to detect these changes and provide their theoretical explanation, not a mere description. It was supported by the conviction that modern society was born through the emergence and subsequent dissemination of radically novel patterns of social action – “illegitimate” ones, in Weber’s phrasing – and not through the maturation or development of trends that have originated in the preceding form of traditional society.

The classics of sociology – like Durkheim, Simmel, Tönnies or Weber – would assume that if there is no identifiable consequential logic, which governs the transformations, the only way to understand the relation between various forms of social organization is to grasp the mechanism or mechanisms that generate and reproduce these forms in the historical process. It was the search for such

universal mechanisms – operating in diverse contexts and interacting with various factors, ultimately giving rise to different forms of social order – that was meant to constitute the fundamental task of sociology. Each of the abovementioned authors attempted to indicate certain general factors responsible for producing and then sustaining coordination of human actions, assuming the “transition to modernity” to be a historical event – neither the fulfillment of some historical necessity, nor another stage in the development of humanity. Furthermore, each of these authors emphasized that this transition involved a radical shift in the relative importance of factors that integrate human actions, rather than a substitution of one group of factors for another. In other words, the founding force of sociology was the effort to create a general theory of such mechanisms of coordination and integration human actions – after all, these mechanisms constitute the essence of what we call “society” – that have underlain all historical manifestations of sociality.

Thus, when we started our own analysis of social change, it seemed sufficient to revisit classic (albeit nearly forgotten) sociological concepts – such as social bond, sociality, or social action – and employ them so as to order the rapidly expanding mass of descriptions of contemporary society. We thought it would suffice to answer the above question whether we are witnessing the emergence of a new form of social order or merely evolution of modernity’s characteristic features. However, it soon turned out that such an approach would be difficult, or even dangerously fallible, for at least several reasons.

First of all, having firmly established themselves in sociological discourse – including its didactic, theoretical, and research-oriented subtypes – all those classic concepts became trivialized and clichéd, losing their original meanings. In our view, they are no longer an integral part of the discipline’s paradigm but rather an assembly of stereotypes in sociological thinking. Not only do they fail to generate new hypotheses, ideas or experiments but also bring sociology to a standstill, inducing intellectual stagnation. To put it differently, we have developed a habit of reacting to the sound of certain words without taking into consideration their meaning. Indeed, it was already Locke who argued that “society influences the individual.” But what did he mean by that? What kinds of mechanisms of influence did he have in mind? How did he understand society? And most importantly, what does it mean today that “society influences the individual”?

Second, as a result of the above, certain classic formulas which seem indispensable to sociology’s theoretical discourse have acquired the ability to “lull” their potential recipients. It is sufficient to use the concept of “anomie” to make readers believe that they already know what the text is about and therefore can

skim through it without paying attention to the actual argumentation. In this situation, attempts to formulate new theses on the basis of such concepts frequently fail because of the tendency to follow the beaten track, fall back on readily available schemas, and pretend not to notice any incongruities. While working on this book, we have often caught ourselves resorting to ready-made formulas which otherwise may be right but which also invariably occlude the nature of the discussed issue. Struggling with the worn-out language of sociology proved to be probably the greatest difficulty in completing this book.

Third, most key ideas and expressions developed within classic sociology have been layered with so many interpretations that it sometimes becomes impossible to establish their original meaning. What is more, a large portion of these explications has a clearly “classificatory” character. Durkheim, for instance, has earned the label of “positivist” and “naturalist,” whereas many new readings of classic works focus on proving that, for example, Weber is not only the father of interpretive sociology but also of the rational choice theory. Regardless of the fact that nobody knows to what extent such findings might help us understand what these authors wanted to say, this kind of analysis turns their works into dusty old scrapbooks, full of quotations used to support arguments that often have little in common with the problems they actually explored.

Finally, and fourth, classics of sociology worked at a specific time in history. This also regards a specific state of knowledge in other scientific disciplines, which they used as a point of reference or source of inspiration. Durkheim’s works were indebted to the achievements in anthropology of that time, while Weber relied heavily on findings not only in history and economy, but also logic, since – as he explains in a footnote – he would use the concept of value in the sense given to this term by “contemporary logic.” Do we really know what sense was that, or are we rather using Weber’s concept in accordance with our own, intuitive and blurred understanding of values? Of course, the development of particular sciences during the time that separates us from Durkheim or Weber can mean that most of their claims have ceased to hold ground. However, it can mean something else, namely that the current state of knowledge could help these theoreticians to substantiate and express their theses better. For example, William James would be probably enthusiastic about Joseph LeDoux’s *The Emotional Brain*, while Durkheim and Mead could find it very useful to study the latest findings in neurophysiology, which demonstrate that their theses about the integrating role of ritual and “taking the attitude of the other” have a strictly “physical” basis since the human brain shows signs of imitating other people’s actions and emotions while observing them.

An awareness of these conditions and pitfalls has decidedly shaped this book. Its main goal is to explore social change in terms of dominant forms of “socializing processes,” i.e. processes that generate relatively stable patterns of coordination of individual actions. We explore a certain theoretical model of such processes, presenting mechanisms that fundamentally impact their course and pointing to key historical and contextual conditions in which these mechanisms lead to the emergence of different forms of “sociality” that organize social life. Such a delimitation of the scope of inquiry rests upon the assumption that the history of human societies is discontinuous and aimless, while changes that occur within it have a unique and abrupt character. We also assume that historically distinguishable forms of sociality constitute merely models or abstractions from the incessant stream of activities, just like language (*langue*) is only an abstraction from the stream of speech (*parole*).

Adopting the socializing processes as a key notion we return to the roots of the sociological thinking developed by the discipline’s classics for whom the basic question was how individuals come to coordinate their actions into forms that are, in return, perceived as “social” i.e. external and obligatory. Quoting extensively from their works we wish not so much to support our claims with their authority as to enter a dialogue with those of their findings that are directly connected with our own concerns, and thus recall and refresh them, placing their meaning in new light. At the same time, we wish to strongly emphasize that we neither attempt to develop “the only correct” interpretation of classical sociology, nor wish to assess its findings in terms of truthfulness and falsehood. Our primary goal is to expand on certain theoretical ideas present in them – ones that, to our astonishment, seem more suitable for explaining today’s changes than many of the currently developed theories.

When relating the classic findings to the current state of knowledge in other disciplines (primarily those that are crucial for better understanding of basic sociological concepts and models built on top of them) we have tried to implement an important methodological principle that recurs, in different forms, throughout works by almost all authors considered to be the classics of sociology. This principle holds that sociology is, by its very nature, an interdisciplinary science. Thus, in breaking away from history, anthropology, neurophysiology, evolutionary biology, and psychology, it condemns itself to a futile juggling of empty concepts.

The main problem of contemporary sociology is how to grasp the social. Under conditions of intensified change that destroys the hitherto existing social structures, sociology turns from analyzes of social systems, institutions and structural determinants of human actions towards analyzes that focus on individual

behavior, nature of interactions, and culturally established meanings. As we argue in the first chapter, such a mode of thinking results in an increasing “individualization” of the discipline and de-theorization of its basic concept, which is that of society. A return to some of the original ideas developed by classics of sociology allows to see that both the notions of individual and society were conceptualized by them merely as abstractions from social processes. The meaning and consequences of this statement are examined in three subsequent chapters (2–4), where we also offer our own perspective on socializing mechanisms, i.e. mechanisms that turn individual behavior into streams of coordinated collective actions. This allows us to develop a view of society different than the one currently prevailing in sociology. It ceases to appear as the epiphenomenon of state, politics, economy or culture, and becomes instead an abstract form encapsulated in coordinated actions, thus acquiring the status of a *sui generis* reality, just like Durkheim wanted.

Three further chapters (5–7) provide an empirical illustration to this model by adapting it to analyzes of socializing processes occurring in three different areas of social reality: family, labor, and the public sphere. Without attempting to summarize those processes, we just wanted to show how the concept of socializing processes can help to problematize anew analyzes made in these areas. This survey of historical changes in family, labor, and the public sphere also provides an empirical basis – one necessarily limited and fragmentary – for more general theses formulated in the last two chapters. They relate changes in three key contextual factors – population, environment, and collective representations, which provide the “environment” in which socializing processes can find expression – to changes in basic forms of sociality which remain central to the organization of social life.

Readers should be warned right away that this book does not do justice to contemporary sociology by emphasizing that there are also innovative and inspiring works in this discipline. For our intention was rather to focus on what sociologists – including ourselves – consider to be obvious, i.e. what forms a kind of “collective representation” of our scholarly environment. Producing such “representations” is unavoidable in the era of high specialization marked by a deluge of works offering analyzes of narrow aspects of social life. We argue, however, that once in a while they ought to be reflected upon in order to “deconstruct” the hidden assumptions which inform our discipline.

We do not regard this book to be a finished work but rather an introductory outline of an approach to the study of the social. Therefore, we are aware that more astute readers may find it to contain various shortcomings, and that some of our ideas may undergo vital modifications in the future. The present study

does not claim to be a “revelation of truth” but rather an invitation to participate in a debate that contemporary sociology seems to need today more than any time in the past.

The importance of such a debate dawned on us as we were working on this book. We began with certain reflections that each of us had collected in the course of individual reading, researching and teaching. Looking back from the perspective of a completed book, reflecting on the concepts and findings it contains, we are fully aware that neither of us could write it on her own. It would not be an exaggeration to say that – with the exception of the fifth chapter, largely based on Anna Giza’s work published after this book – this study does not contain even a single idea that, after being introduced by one of us as a topic for consideration, would escape being reworked, enriched and refined in the course of numerous discussions and debates with the other. In this sense, the book constitutes the intellectual property of both authors. The order of names on the title page does not reflect any imbalance in their actual input, but rather documents the fact that one of them took the pain to edit the book and give final form to joint reflections and various passages written at different stages in the book’s development.

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