

CHAPTER EIGHT. MECHANISMS OF GREAT TRANSFORMATIONS

*[...] every working social scientist must be his own
methodologist and his own theorist.*

*C. WRIGHT MILLS, *The Sociological Imagination**

Sociology is by definition a historical discipline insofar as its basic object of study is society, which is understood as forms and constellations of human relations subject to a constant change. This does not necessarily mean that sociology cannot be a strictly theoretical discipline, nor that it is doomed to rely in its inquiries on accounts of individual cases. Nevertheless, the opposition between theory and description, between nomothetic and idiographic sciences, which lies at the foundation of the development of modern sociology and seems to motivate it to this day, is widespread to the extent that requires closer examination.

The above opposition has inspired attempts to either make sociology more “scientific,” following the classical model of natural sciences, or conversely (though to a much lesser degree) – give it the status of a unique discipline employing in its research an original and highly specific mode of understanding. These tendencies themselves showcase the historical character of social phenomena, which naturally include the development of all sciences. However, it seems even more important that they are rooted in nineteenth-century dilemmas³⁶³ and fail to account for real changes occurring in science.³⁶⁴

363 This is yet another argument in favor of the thesis formulated in Chapter One, namely that the major directions of development in modern sociology have been determined by the vision of society produced by nineteenth-century sociologists and then taken for granted as universal.

364 This was emphasized by Edmund Mokrzycki, who wrote that at the foundation of contemporary sociology we find the methodological model that was adopted in the 1930s as the only scientific one; however, “it had been already deemed inadequate and abandoned by the discipline that formulated it, namely the philosophy of science” (1980, 8).

The nineteenth century was, on the one hand, a time when classical science triumphed, culminating in Newtonian mechanics, and on the other – a period when this vision of reality encountered strong opposition, when voices were raised against the view of the world as passive, lifeless and governed by universal laws of causation that operate regardless of the objects they affect. In the domain of culture, this opposition manifested in the form of the Romantic rejection of Enlightenment rationalist ideals, while in the humanities – as an emphasis on the ineradicable difference between the world of nature and the world of humanity. It is the underlining of that difference that gave rise to the many variants of “interpretive sociology,” which assumes – as Wilhelm Dilthey does – that “man creates a world of history within the world of nature, an empire within an empire, one in which values take precedence over causes, freedom over necessity” (Szacki 2002, 415).

However, neither Dilthey nor Rickert – or Weber, the “founding father” of “interpretive” or “humanistic” sociology – would place their own methods in opposition to the methods of natural sciences, treating the former rather as complementing the latter. One could put it even more strongly and argue that the philosophy of science to which these thinkers subscribed, especially with regard to its role in explaining both organic and inorganic matter, was basically identical with the theories dominating in natural sciences, while “interpretation” was meant to introduce a certain “additional value” constituting “a procedure of revealing what is hiding under the surface of phenomena observable thanks to methods employed by natural sciences” (Szacki 2002, 423). It was to be a procedure of furnishing these phenomena with historically changing meanings.

From this perspective, the work of those who founded “humanistic” sociology was part of more general efforts made by researchers in that period, including those operating in the natural sciences. After all, the opposition to the vision of the world established by classical science did not regard its methods but rather *assumptions* lying at the foundation of its theorems. Among them a fundamental role was played by the conviction that “at some level *the world is simple* and is governed by time-reversible fundamental laws” (Prigogine & Stengers 1984, 7; emphasis preserved). This, in turn, led to the formulation of the belief – one widespread today not only among amateurs but also among some social researchers – that the aim of science is “discovering the unique truth about the world, the one language that will decipher the whole of nature [...] the *fundamental level of description* from which everything in existence can be deduced” (52; emphasis preserved).

As Prigogine and Stengers have demonstrated, the major achievement of modern science was to overrule these assumptions.³⁶⁵ The world of today's natural sciences is a complex one in which the irreversibility of certain processes "lies at the origin of most processes of self-organization" (1984, 8) and is a rule rather than exception. It is a world where randomness and fluctuation are more frequent than cases of determinism. This shift in assumptions did not stem from any arbitrary decision. "In physics it was forced upon us by new discoveries no one could have foreseen. Who would have expected that most (and perhaps all) elementary particles would prove to be unstable? Who would have expected that with the experimental confirmation of an expanding universe we could conceive of the history of the world as a whole?" (8–9). These discoveries did not annul past ones, but revealed their limitations, demonstrating that apart from reversible processes independent from the direction in which time flows, which were the main subject of enquiry in classical science, there do exist irreversible processes that are dependent on that direction.³⁶⁶

Let us dwell for a moment upon this distinction, as it carries vital consequences, also for the way we conceive of social phenomena. To understand this distinction, it becomes crucial to grasp the difference between processes occurring in the state of equilibrium and those occurring otherwise, which are designated by the term "dissipative processes."³⁶⁷ "Matter near equilibrium behaves in a 'repetitive' way. On the other hand, far from equilibrium there appears a variety of mechanisms corresponding to the possibility of occurrence of various types of dissipative structures" (13). In other words, lack of equilibrium does not necessarily entail a state of chaos, but is rather the kind of a dynamic state of matter that reflects mutual influences between system and environment. The emerging structures of order are created as a result of "communication" between individual

365 It seems characteristic that Prigogine and Stengers consider nineteenth-century sociology to be a discipline whose emphasis on processes of becoming, and focus on increasing complexity contributed to the creation of conditions favoring the change of paradigm in classical science (1984, 12).

366 The role of the criterion allowing for differentiation between the two kinds of processes was given to the concept of entropy since the only reason for an increase in entropy is the operation of irreversible processes.

367 Ilya Prigogine, co-author of the book referenced here, was awarded the 1977 Nobel Prize in chemistry for work on dissipative structures created as a result of non-linear processes in far-from-equilibrium systems.

elements in the system. “In addition, the type of dissipative structure depends critically on the conditions in which the structure is formed” (14).³⁶⁸

Reading such statements, one could only repeat after the quoted authors that “[t]he analogy with social phenomena, even with history, is inescapable. Far from opposing ‘chance’ and ‘necessity,’ we now see both aspects as essential in the description of non-linear systems far from equilibrium” (14). Paradoxically, however, that which may be obvious to representatives of natural sciences or philosophy of science proves difficult to accept in the contemporary sociology. The acknowledging of the historical character of social phenomena still bears associations with nineteenth-century historicism, incidentally interpreted in terms entirely contradicting the intentions of its representatives.³⁶⁹ As a theoretical ideal, this approach posits a set of universal laws describing linear dependencies unaffected by the passage of time.

It is easy to demonstrate (as has been often done) that this kind of a “sociological frame of mind” was shaped under the influence of neo-positivist vision of science. However, it remains much more difficult to answer the question why this particular influence has held sway to this day.³⁷⁰ One of the reasons could be – as was aptly noted once by Edmund Mokrzycki – that sociological practice

368 One of the more interesting moments in the creation of dissipative structures is the reaching of the so-called point of bifurcation, where systems begin to undergo considerable fluctuations. “Such systems seem to ‘hesitate’ among various possible directions of evolution, and the famous law of large numbers in its usual sense breaks down. A small fluctuation may start an entirely new evolution that will drastically change the whole behavior of the macroscopic system” (14). The concept of bifurcation resembles – in its general outline – the well-known psychological theory of the conflict between pursuit and evasion, formulated by Neal E. Miller (1959).

369 The existence of so-called historical sociology (cf. Morawska 2002) in no way disqualifies this statement. First, this approach so far constitutes only a margin of sociological research. Second, many works assumed to represent this current simply utilize all assumptions made in modern sociology to analyze phenomena or societies only slightly removed from us in time. Sociological mainstream was never impacted by the assumptions that lie at the foundation of this approach. This is confirmed by the distanced (if not indifferent) respect with which scholars regard works by Norbert Elias, one of the creators of this approach, who is often quoted (just like other classics) but rarely treated as a source of inspiration.

370 To see that sociological thinking is still shaped by this vision of science it suffices to take a look at introductions to handbooks of methodology. For example, the one by Chava Frankfort-Nachmias and David Nachmias argues: “The most basic assumption of the scientific approach is that there is a recognizable regularity and order in the natural world; *events do not just occur*” (2008, 5; emphasis added).

is “based on a tripartite division of the discipline into methodology, theory, and empirical research” (1980, 269), with the three dimensions rarely, if ever, communicating with each other. Thus, sociology would lack the kind of positive feedback between theory and actual research that caused physics to move from classical mechanics to contemporary theories. Regardless of the causes, however, it is true that sociology has been facing a growing crisis since the 1960s, as it has kept encountering more and more obstacles in explaining social processes given the increasing pace of changes that deeply transform contemporary society.

As we have demonstrated earlier, one of the symptoms of this crisis is the de-theorization of the very concept of society. Meanwhile, as we wish to argue, it is the study of the historical changeability of forms taken by human relationships that plays a crucial role in grasping what society is. At this point of the present discussion, it is necessary to search for a more general model that would, on the one hand, help provide a more adequate description of the very process of historical changeability, and on the other – make it possible to answer the question about the distinctive features of that form of society which is currently emerging from these transformations (if it in fact does). We do not seek to find one universal cause or principle governing the development of human societies.³⁷¹ The point would be rather to isolate those components that could be considered – from the perspective of a theoretical model proposed in earlier chapters – as factors that perhaps may not be directly causing but at least significantly contribute to the *historical* changeability of the subsequent forms of social organization.

8.1 Dynamics of change

At the foundation of sociological differentiation between various kinds of societies, we find the question of the mode of organization specific to a given social order, or in other words: the dominant principle of coordinating collective actions. As we have indicated, this question – one that established sociology as a distinct scientific discipline – emerges at the moment of transition from the traditional order to the modern one as a reaction to the accompanying breakdown of former norms of behavior and the consequent disorganization of social

371 Such an approach to explaining the changeability of human societies is explicitly contained in a strong claim made by Giddens, who argues that “the search for a theory of social change [...] is a doomed one,” simultaneously adding that “‘theory’ means in this instance explaining social change by reference to *a single set of mechanism*, such as the old evolutionary favorites of adaptation and differential selection” (1986, xxviii; emphasis added).

life at all its levels. A direct expression of such a reaction is the assessment made by Durkheim, who concludes his discussion of two types of social solidarity by writing about the society of his time: "Our beliefs have been disturbed. Tradition has lost its sway. Individual judgement has thrown off the yoke of the collective judgement. On the other hand, the functions that have been disrupted in this period of trial have had no time to adjust to one another. The new life that all of a sudden has arisen has not been able to organize itself thoroughly. Above all, it has not been organized so as to satisfy the need for justice that has been aroused even more passionately in our hearts" (2013, 317–318).

Taking into account what has been already said about the transformations of human societies since the moment of "foundational holism," one could argue that this "disruption of functions" characterizes all periods of transition from one form of sociality to another. As we have shown, the very act of "foundational holism" can be interpreted as a specific reaction to the upsetting of actions previously controlled by biologically conditioned habits, which was caused by the emergence of early human psycho-culture. Similarly, the period of a specific "anomie" or the domination of "direct regulation" based on physical force, as Norbert Elias calls it (2000), occupies the place between the post-tribal form of sociality, and the one characteristic for a fully-developed system of European feudalism. Finally, it was not only Durkheim but also a majority of intellectuals of his time who emphasized the sense of being lost or disorientated that accompanied the transition to modernity. Karl Marx put it in similar terms: "Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All freed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned" (1988, 212).

These periods of transition are usually linked to the change of "production forces" or tools used by people in their efforts to secure means of living. It is not only Marx who emphasizes the significance of this factor for the alteration of forms that organize social life. Most contemporary theories of social change do the same, whether they are formulated in sociology, anthropology or economy. One of the more frequently used categorizations – i.e. one distinguishing agrarian, industrial and post-industrial societies – owe its popularity not only to a renewed interest in technological changes after the publishing of the study by Daniel Bell (1973), which proclaimed the arrival of post-industrial society, but also to the universally shared conviction that changes of this kind have had the broadest influence on other realms of social life. It is in this spirit

that Manuel Castells justifies the significance of information technologies for the transformations occurring in contemporary world (2001ab). He emphasizes that they affect changes of social structures, relations of power, transformations of family, experiences of individuals etc., simultaneously contributing to the formation of a new kind of social order and a new type of culture.

Castells rejects the accusation of “technological determinism:” after all, as he aptly observes, to point out the impact of the transformation of tools on the transformation of forms of social organization is not necessarily to negate other factors contributing to these processes (cf. 2001a, 5–13). He uses the example of China, which already in the fourteenth century had at its disposal, in a working form, all the inventions whose application later triggered the Industrial Revolution in the West.³⁷² That this revolution never happened in China was – in his view – the result of a strong-state policy. However, the fact that Japan played a key role in the IT revolution of the twentieth century was also, as Castells emphasizes, the effect of actions taken by the state. Therefore, his acknowledgement of the role played in each case by the state boils down to the argument that, depending on historical conditions, the state either holds back or stimulates social transformations. It is difficult to accept this as a satisfying explanation.

The case of China is one of many examples that clearly illustrate the Eurocentrism of various theories of social change, i.e. their disregard, discernible already in their fundamental assumptions, of the “evolutionary” dissimilarity of non-European societies. Another example is provided by various concepts of modernization developed since the 1950s. They usually assume that the transfer of technologies and patterns of production from more developed countries to “backward” ones would cause desirable changes in the latter’s organization of social life, turning them into fully developed societies.³⁷³ One of the

372 “Thus, around 1400, when European Renaissance was planting the intellectual seeds of technological change that would dominate the world three centuries later, China was the most advanced technological civilization in the world” (Castells 2001a, 7). Castells refers to analyzes by Joel Mokyr contained in the 1990 study *The Lever of Riches: Technological Creativity and Economic Progress* (New York: Oxford University Press).

373 This assumption is found at the basis of the communist experiment, which – generally speaking – constituted an attempt at accelerated modernization of a country located on the peripheries of the modern world. Clearly, Lenin’s famous slogan (“communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country”) can be considered a synthetic (and, as it later turned out, not fully adequate) rephrasing of two key elements of modernity: technological progress and democratization of social life.

reasons for the inadequacy of such theories is certainly the fact that – as Jürgen Habermas rightly observes (1998) – “[t]he theory of modernization performs two abstractions on Weber’s concept of ‘modernity.’ It dissociates ‘modernity’ from its modern European origins and stylizes it into a spatio-temporally neutral model for processes of social development in general” (2).

It is also possible to argue that the emphasis on technological changes as the driving force of the evolution of human societies is supported by the turbulence and a specific “total character” of two technological revolutions, of which the first (Industrial) has formed the modern kind of social order that prevails in Western countries, while the second (Information) is currently transforming that order. It is also not without merit that the expansion of Western countries, which began in the seventeenth century, entailed imposing on other states the kinds of lifestyles and modes of social organization that are characteristic for industrial civilization. However, regardless of the reasons for highlighting technological transformations, the emphasis placed on the development of tools makes it hard to see that periods of transition from one form organizing social life to another are characterized by a co-occurrence of many interdependent processes whose unique combinations could yield similar or entirely dissimilar effects depending on social conditions.

Naturally, we are unable to thoroughly analyze these dependencies. Still, we wish to draw attention to several of them – ones that seem to accompany most periods of transition predating the emergence of those distinct forms of social order that have been identified in social sciences, and whose existence is referred to in more or less systematic way in the present work. Let us note at this point that we take into account five such forms: tribal societies, whose characteristic feature is the dispersion of power and the flattening of social differentiation; ancient empires or “agrarian bureaucracies” characterized by centralized power, poorly developed land ownership and an elaborate system of redistribution; feudal societies, typically exemplified by mediaeval Europe;³⁷⁴ modern societies identified with that kind of social organization which found clearest form in nineteenth-century Western Europe; and finally, the postmodern society – a term that refers to imprecisely defined peculiarities of the currently emerging organization of social life. In all of the above cases, during periods of transition

374 As we have already mentioned, the first three slightly different forms organizing social life are usually referred to with the term “traditional order.” We shall return to this term further on, but here – due to examples we shall use – we retain this differentiation for the sake of convenience.

from one social form to another, there emerge several factors that fuel the process of change.

The first factor is linked to large-scale movement of people, either between populations or within them, that causes locals to mix with migrants. The rise of ancient empires was correlated with the influx of slaves from conquered territories.³⁷⁵ The emergence of the feudal society was preceded by large-scale barbarian migrations that completely rearranged the ethnic map of Europe and large parts of Asia. The growth of the modern society was accompanied by a relatively massive migration from the countryside into urban areas. Today, as we are more and more frequently speaking of the development of a postmodern society, we witness an intensified migration from South to North, which some scholars call the new Great Migration of people.

The second factor is linked to the fact that movements of people were tied to the relative exhaustion of resources in habitats that constituted the former dwelling place of migrants. According to current hypotheses, the factor that triggered the barbarian migration was the abandoning of their former habitat by Mongolian tribes, which was caused by the depletion of pastures in Far Eastern Asia. The sequence of westward movements initiated in this way not only put an end to the rule of Rome but also gave rise to the development of European feudal society, which thus emerged directly from tribal organization.³⁷⁶ Migration from the countryside to urban areas in the period preceding the Industrial Revolution was caused by a radical decline in the capability of rural communities to feed their population, which resulted from repeating periods of poverty and hunger as well as the opening of new possibilities in the growing cities. At the foundation of currently observable migrations, we also find a similar process: populations from poorer regions of the so-called South are drawn by the immensely richer countries of the North.³⁷⁷

375 In the case of empires, the flow of people, though certainly less intense, would also occur in the other direction, e.g. from the center towards the peripheries, as necessitated by the establishing of garrisons and trade outposts on conquered territories.

376 The specific Eurocentrism of history, especially its popular version, has caused the popular imagination (from which most sociologists also derive their notions of historical processes) to usually conceive of European feudalism in terms of an "heir" to the Roman Empire rather than to the tribal form of social organization. The latter's impact on processes that led to the rise of feudal organization is emphasized by Norbert Elias (2000). More recently, it has been underlined by Modzelewski (2004).

377 However, as Jacek Kochanowicz has brought to our attention, today's China witnesses the complete inverse of this pattern of migration, which is related to the fact that the wealthiest regions of this state are located in the south.

The third factor is that periods of transition are also preceded – in strict connection with the growth of population – by the exhaustion of the sources of social power, i.e. those resources whose use constitutes the basis for the expansion of a given form of social order. In the case of tribal and imperial societies, it was territory. Its expansion, however, ultimately had to meet with resistance from neighboring populations. In feudalism, this resource was land, granting of which set up a specific relation between the sovereign and vassals. Finally, the functioning of the modern order, in which economy is based primarily on the mining and food-processing industries, depends on access to natural resources.³⁷⁸

As Norbert Elias accentuates in his analysis of the functioning of the European feudal system, “[t]he smaller society’s possibilities of expansion became, the larger grew the reserve army from all strata, including the upper stratum” (2000, 238). On the one hand, this stimulated a search for new career paths, which began to modify – as if from the inside – the system’s modes of functioning, as in the case of the concentration of knights around courts, development of trade, and the growth of state bureaucracy. On the other hand, it favored seeking out and accepting those “technological” solutions whose application would either contravene the system’s logic of functioning, or significantly contribute to its change.³⁷⁹

This leads to the fourth factor, namely the emergence and consolidation of groups whose existence within a given social order was not legitimized by its main principle of organization, and whose functioning would not be regulated in the same way as other categories of population. In traditional societies, this group was comprised by city-dwellers, while in the modern one – by the so-called intelligentsia.³⁸⁰ It is not an accident that these groups played a leading role in the transition to the new kind of social order. Already Max Weber indicated

378 One crucial factor in the consolidation of this kind of social order in Europe was the conquest of overseas territories, which not only extended access to resources, but also provided an additional career path for representatives of various social groups whose development was previously thwarted.

379 The use of new, electronic means of communication facilitates the transfer of production to those regions of the world where workforce is cheaper, although this simultaneously undermines the logic of the modern social order, which relies on the concept of competing states.

380 This pattern is less clearly visible in transitions related to the traditional order, although one can observe that there are no distinct *groups* of priests in tribal communities though there are people performing religious tasks. These groups began to play a key role only in ancient empires and in the feudal society.

that “major forerunners of the modern, specifically Western form of capitalism are to be found in the organized urban communes of Europe with their particular type of relatively rational administration” (1978, 240–241). On a similar basis, one could demonstrate that the role ascribed in the postmodern society to “experts” (Giddens 2006) or “symbolic analysts”³⁸¹ (Reich 1992) has its roots in the functions (not fully crystallized back then) performed in the modern society by the intelligentsia.

Each of those factors alone contributes to the destabilization of a given form of social order, but their joint occurrence has to lead to the complete dissolution of its network of connections. Let us note that the above phenomena, discernible in transition periods, share one feature, namely – they introduce significant, large-scale and *illegitimate* modifications to interactions occurring at various levels of social life. They are illegitimate for three possible reasons. First, they constitute the effect of collisions between actions inspired by extremely dissimilar visions of reality. Second, they introduce new, incompatible elements into these visions as a result of individual- or group-led quest for new means of expansion. Third, they express different lifestyles developed by groups that were hitherto marginal in a given social order. All of this causes the destruction of not only the former “repeated assemblies,” which distinguished a given type of social order, but also its collective representations that lay at the heart of its characteristic form of sociality.

At the same time, the very similarity of factors operating in transition periods suggests the existence of three more general processes forming a basis for the evolution of human societies.

The first process is related to the *numerical growth of population*, which started when people adopted a settled lifestyle. We are far from subscribing here to some new version of Malthusian theory, but merely wish to draw attention to the fact that population growth in individual societies – regardless of whether it would occur through biological reproduction or by “co-opting” people from other countries or territories as a result of conquests or migrations – is a factor that autonomously leads to their differentiation and enforces changes in the organization of social life. These include, on the one hand, political transformations

381 Other names have been coined too. For example, Peter F. Drucker (1994) uses the term “knowledge workers,” while Manuel Castells calls them “innovators.” The latter term ties the significance of this group to the transition from post-industrialism to the “information era,” i.e. the system in which processing information is the economy’s key aspect.

stemming from the necessity to solve problems arising from the “management” of growing populations, and from contacts with neighboring collectives, leading to the emergence of separate groups and institutions performing specific tasks linked to the above issues, first within communities and later on higher levels of social integration. On the other hand, these include economic changes arising from the fact that the emergence of these kinds of groups and institutions either leads to or results from the fact that they accumulate a major portion of those resources available to the collectivity which determine its power in contacts with other communities.³⁸²

The differentiation of a given collectivity has consequences of a strictly social character as well, because it leads to the emergence of new types of groups: no longer “natural communities” (ones tied with blood bonds) but ones produced by certain features of social position, which create a community of interests, lifestyles or values. A classic example of such communities is provided by the estates of the feudal society or the classes of the modern society. Let us note, however, that the community of interests can be also established on different grounds than a similarity of lifestyles or relations to means of production. It can stem from the exchange of “services,” as in the case of ties linking feudal lords and their peasants (“I defend you and you feed me”) or paternalistic relations between factory owners and their workers (“I give you work and you work for me”). It can also emerge from alliances formed in the face of danger posed by a shared enemy (real or imagined), or from combining resources necessary for expansion, either in terms of territory or capital. Finally, it can be created on the basis of a shared ethos (chivalry, guilds, professional associations) or shared views (parties, scientific schools), which surely does not preclude more pragmatic actions.

Those new kinds of “communities,” which correspond to Tönnies’ *Gesellschaft* (society), obviously differ from older communities based on blood bonds, at least because – as he puts it – its members “live peacefully alongside one another, but in this case without being essentially united – indeed, on the contrary, they are here essentially detached” (2001, 52). In other words, members of “arbitrary communities” are tied with much weaker bonds that become – as we have already demonstrated in Chapter Four – “cooled” through the process of reflexivity. Nevertheless, there is also something that makes communities of this kind similar to “natural” ones. After all, both create some form of collective representation, which becomes the source of social

382 We discuss both types of transformations at length in Chapters Six and Seven.

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identity. As a result, both allow recognizing a formerly “alien” individual as “one of us.”

It is worth recalling here that insofar as natural communities rely on direct acquaintance or documented kinship as the basis for such recognition, in the case of arbitrary communities this is achieved, on the one hand, by the use of a formal proof of membership (e.g. party or union membership card, certificate of baptism etc.), and on the other – by forms of behavior whose main function is to create and sustain social distinctions (Elias 2000; Bourdieu 1979). The latter acquire special significance in the process of the transition to modern and contemporary societies, in which the weakening of social divisions and the blurring of the boundaries separating particular social categories make it easier for communities to be infiltrated by “aliens” – people whose presence would further endanger the already weakened bonds.

This leads to the second important process at the foundation of transformations of forms of sociality, namely the *intensification of interpersonal communication*. This process is certainly determined by technological progress – from the invention of the wheel and the domestication of draught animals to contemporary proliferation of electronic mass media. However, it is important to stress that the emergence of subsequent, ever more advanced means of communication is inseparably tied to both the above-mentioned social transformations, which extend the circle of potential interpersonal contacts, and to changes of social representations. In other words, new means of communication demand new kinds of users and new types of messages to be conveyed.

As far as the new users are concerned, we mean here not only changes in sensibility and ways of “decoding” messages, as discussed by McLuhan in his famous 1962 book *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, where they are treated as an outcome of the transition from oral communication to writing, print, and later to radio and contemporary electronic means. They certainly crucially affected the development of human intellect, as we indicate in Chapter Three. However, we also wish to point to those changes in the realm of praxis which homogenize the position of potential recipients, making them more susceptible to specific kinds of messages. The operation of such processes was indicated by Zygmunt Bauman, who emphasizes in his analysis of social conditions related to the rise of mass communication that it could emerge only in a society which embraced “universalization – supra-regional, supra-ecological and supra-class – of the essential components of the social situation” (1972, 65).³⁸³

383 Among those “essential components” at the basis of mass communication, Bauman
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Although Bauman treats the phenomenon of universalization as characteristic of mass communication exclusively, it is worth underlining that it can be also discerned in basic modes of social communication developed in earlier historical periods of human societies, with one caveat, namely that the components determining social situation would be different. As we note in the previous chapter, what homogenized the situation of most people living in ancient societies was their dependence on the natural environment, which used to be a much bigger factor than it is today. The great “agrarian bureaucracies” constituted systems whose functioning and existing depended on rivers carrying fertile silts (Egypt), canals irrigating desert-like areas (Mesopotamia and Persia) and maintenance of elaborate irrigation systems (China). Along the same lines, it is possible to indicate that the factor homogenizing the social situation in the early Middle Ages was the specific “universalism” of recurring epidemics as well as of wars and robberies. The dissimilarity of factors homogenizing the social situation has particular significance for forms assumed by social representations – we shall return to this soon. At this point, it is only necessary to note that at the basis of such homogenization we find the transformations of the sources of social strength as well as changes in the structure of power and wealth, which are consequences of the former.

The concept of social strength could be defined in more formal terms as referring to “the capability or opportunity to implement one’s own will, to realize one’s goals” (Giza-Poleszczuk 1991b, 86). It invariably constitutes a combination of individual characteristics (physical strength, intellectual capability, etc.) and resources available to individuals, which are derivatives of socially acknowledged forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986).³⁸⁴ Transformations of the sources of social strength understood in this way constitute a component of the third process that lies at the foundation of the evolution of human societies, namely the *transformations of habitat*. It is the kind of process that often inclines sociologists

enumerates: the dependence on the market, which we enter as ones who sell their skills or labor; the dependence on organizations that turn most people (regardless of their position) into officials of formal institutions; and finally, the dependence on technology, whose increasing complexity breeds disorientation and anxiety.

384 This concept is similar to that of social power, which appears in Elias’s discussions, where he indicates that “the social power potential of a man in feudal society was exactly equal to the size and productivity of the land and the labor force he controlled,” adding at the same time that “[i]n the feudal warrior society considerable strength was an indispensable element in social power” (2000, 234). Elias also emphasizes that social power “varies in its structure as much as does society itself” (234).

to adopt the position of “technological determinism,” which manifests itself in clear preference for those explanations that argue the development of tools (resulting from special properties of the human mind) to be a facilitator of social development which finds expression in the transition from traditional society to the postmodern one. However, the transformations of habitat can be also regarded from a different perspective as a process which, on the one hand, is conditioned by searching for new “ecological niches” for human collectivities, while on the other – by a system of social forces within those collectivities. In both cases, the existence of appropriate tools is separated from their use; therefore, the development of technology ceases to be the cause of social transformations.³⁸⁵

As we have already made clear, one of the factors that accompany periods of transition is the relative exhaustion of the habitat’s resources, whose use serves as the basis for the expansion of a given form of social order. Such exhaustion can entail two fundamental consequences: either the society could face stagnation (or even decline), or its members could begin experimenting with new forms of behavior, typically turning to already existing patterns that have so far remained on the margin of social activity.

In those collectivities where the defenders of the *status quo* were for many reasons weakened, experimentation with new forms of behavior could lead to the transformation of that which constituted the individuals’ main resource in their expansion in social space. The introduction of imitation processes on a large-scale would simultaneously entail changing the main factors that structure society. In this light, the transition from agrarian civilizations to industry- and information-based ones could be treated as a consequence of the search for subsequent “ecological niches” that would facilitate increase of social strength and expansion in social space, both for individuals and entire communities.

One could generally say that humankind has been transforming its habitat since adopting a settled lifestyle.³⁸⁶ The habitat, in turn, influences the changes of forms organizing social life through the consequences of our acting upon it. One

385 Naturally, this does not mean that it plays an insignificant role in these transformations. We only mean to underscore that accepting technological changes depends on social transformations and not other way round.

386 Obviously, it ought to be said that the process of transforming the habitat began not just when people adopted a settled lifestyle, but when they invented tools. However, as we have demonstrated in Chapter Two, the very fact of using tools is not specific to humans; moreover, those hunter-gatherer tribes that have survived to historical times were transforming their habitat to such a low degree that they were able to retain a relative “ecological” balance.

of the most important consequences is population growth, which leads – on the one hand – to the intensification of communication, and on the other – to the exhaustion of those resources that are particularly intensely exploited within a given type of social order. This leads, in turn, to a search for new solutions, which also contributes to the upsetting of the social order.

8.2 Transformations of the processes of socializing human actions

The dynamics of social change described above allows to argue that the fundamental consequence of processes lying at the foundation of periods of transition from one type of social organization to another is the accumulation of such actions that not only fail to fit in the dominant form of sociality but also come into conflict with those patterns of interaction that this form sanctions. This causes the transition periods to abound in views expressing “world’s rottenness” or “crisis” as new behavioral strategies violate the normative tissue binding the collectivity and, by the same token, undermine the principal “idea of society,” which integrates the actions of its members.

This “idea of society” could be regarded as reminiscent of Kuhn’s concept of “paradigm,” which defines both the content of scientific problems and the ways of solving them. It was Kuhn who first drew attention – while accounting for the functioning of “normal science” – that it “does not aim at novelties of fact or theory” (1996, 52), but primarily strives to examine facts that are important from the perspective of currently prevailing theory, to confront them with that theory’s statements, and to make more detailed findings. If scientific discoveries are made nonetheless, and new theories begin to be formulated, this happens as a result of a complex process in which various anomalies amass in the course of scientific praxis. Key stages of this process include the introduction of new terms and conceptual schemes, which is followed by the development of new theories and research procedures, ultimately giving rise to a new paradigm.

Following this analogy, one could say that the significance of processes discussed above – ones accompanying periods of transition from one form of social organization to another – is primarily related to the fact that they contribute to a particular increase of “anomalies,” i.e. actions departing from that model of social praxis which establishes the identity of a given type of social order. This is further augmented by both the loosening of social control over individuals uprooted from their original communities as well as by the novelty of the situation in which they are forced to act, and by the intensification of communication with people subjected to different forms of sociality. The influence of

such factors was underlined by Norbert Elias who emphasized – while analyzing the first phase of the development of the feudal system – that the settlement on conquered lands by warriors was accompanied by the loss of support provided by their original tribes. “Single families,” he argues, became “ensconced in their estates and castles and often separated by long distances” (2000, 232). Similar consequences are carried by the migration from the countryside to cities. As Max Weber remarks, “[e]verywhere, [...] the city arose from a confluence and settling together of *outsiders*” (1978, 1237; emphasis added).

Let us note that although the emergence of various kinds of “anomalies” is a constant feature of social life, they are usually either incorporated into existing collective representations, or rejected, perhaps marginalized, so as to prevent them from distorting the prevailing image of reality.³⁸⁷ Thus, from an individual perspective, the essence of social life would be continuation rather than change. This is best illustrated by primal communities, which – as Lévi-Strauss notes – have a tremendous ability to reproduce themselves and may be thus “considered as systems where entropy is unknown or exists only in a very weak form” (Charbonnier 1969, 38). Even in contemporary societies characterized, as theoreticians of postmodernity unanimously claim, by an intensified pace of changes, individual lives may contain elements of dramatic turns or revolutions, but in most cases typically take a predictable course. The rhythm is set by daily routines, cycles of workdays and weekends, state and religious holidays, sales in shopping centers, flus in winter and vacations in summer as well as rites of passage (various initiation ceremonies, Communion, confirmation, Bar Mitzvah etc.) and weddings of grown-up children.

As is demonstrated in psychological research as well as in sociological or historical analyzes, even provided with easy access to the most sophisticated “peripheral tools” that are part of our cultural resources, the human mind is – out of its nature – “lazy.” It does not seek optimum solutions, but is satisfied with the first ones that offer an acceptable approximation. It does not strive to

387 David Riesman provides a good example of the first strategy by demonstrating that in primitive societies potential deviants were matched with certain institutional roles, e.g. those of a shaman or sorcerer. In his view, a similar role was performed by mediaeval monasteries (1969, 12). The second strategy is exemplified by the Church’s campaign against usury in the Middle Ages. As Le Goff shows, the propagated representations of usurers would be meant to forge associations between unfairly earned money and oral or anal sex. Because the latter were separately condemned, the link was supposed to reinforce the negative assessment of the practice of lending money at an interest rate (1990, 34).

grasp the “essence of things,” but settles for a sense of obviousness. It puts new information in old forms, and when this is impossible, it rejects or ignores it. In everyday life, most people follow stereotypes, clichés and preformatted schemas of action, which are not individually derived from resources of human culture, but are copied from the repositories of social representations, assembled and maintained by the group (Moscovici 1981; 1983).

Periods of transition from one form of social organization to another upset this “laziness” not only by shattering the established order of things but also by confronting individuals with other representations of reality as well as new situations and problems, which require individual creativity to be solved. This causes behavioral “anomalies” to appear on a mass scale. Individuals *must* begin to behave in ways different from those that prevailed before not because they are driven to do so by some “inborn, human-specific” hunger for knowledge or curiosity about the world, but primarily because they wish to survive and use any opportunities to strengthen their position, adapting to the expectations of others. And since the most crucial feature of periods of transition from one form of social organization to another is the *mass uprooting* of individuals from their former communities, this entails freeing their experience from the cognitive frameworks constituted by community-produced collective representations.

One could thus say that the emergence of a new kind of social order is preceded by the shattering of the old, and a gradual construction of a *new vision of reality* embedding higher levels of interactions in lower ones and legitimizing higher-level products on lower levels. This is because, in periods of transition, interactions initiated by people as part of dyads or teams not only cease to be structured by images of reality sanctioned at the overarching level of the community but are also specifically curbed since – due to the dominance of direct regulations in collective life – individuals try to protect themselves from entering into undesirable contacts with others, especially unknown people, preferring to enclose themselves in more efficiently safeguarded small territorial communities created on the basis of various criteria.³⁸⁸ In order for these interactions to extend beyond the boundaries of those small “communities of experience,” reality has to be interpreted in a new language, providing it with meaning and legitimization, which simultaneously turns certain types of behavior into anomalies or

388 This function was played in ancient cities by city walls. A similar role was taken in the Middle Ages by walls of castles, which offered refuge to people living in settlements outside the castle. Today, gated communities seem to have a similar task – ones protected by private security firms or at least by intercoms.

“deviations,” allowing for a marginalization of those people who exhibit such behaviors from the broader collectivity, or even their penalization.³⁸⁹

In other words, one inseparable element of periods of transition is the creation of a *new form of “foundational holism.”*³⁹⁰ This calls for producing anew the kind of common knowledge that subordinates the striving of individuals to a superior whole, and designates a new basis for coordination of actions, now adapted to new forms of social strength created in the period of transition, as well as to new modes of communication and institutions of power. Obviously, processes of this kind do not take a smooth and peaceful course. As we have demonstrated in Chapter Four, images of reality produced within communities legitimize not only particular kinds of behavior undertaken as part of interactions among individuals but also the entire social reality, including the character of relations between individual communities within the larger collectivity, or – to employ classical terminology – the form assumed by the social structure and the places which individuals occupy within this structure. Their change therefore endangers the interests of existing communities, causing the periods of transition to be the kinds of historical moments during which we observe a particular intensification of ideological conflicts.

The content of these conflicts is to a large extent determined by the nature of processes that set the direction of changes in this fundamental vision of reality, which constituted foundation of processes of socializing human actions and had a religious character. According to Marcel Gauchet (1999), the basic function of every religion is to establish a specific relation between individuals, community and the environment. The essence of a religious vision of reality is the belief that the world in which human communities exist has been determined by an authority that is independent from them. This belief lends the religious view of reality the potential to stabilize the community. Indeed, it suppresses

389 Once again, we encounter here a significant analogy with transformations of scientific paradigms. As Kuhn observes, “discovering a new phenomenon is necessarily a complex event, one which involves recognizing both *that* something is and *what* it is” (1996, 55; emphasis preserved).

390 Naturally, in its basic form the act of “foundational holism” occurred only once in the history of human societies, although it was multiplied by its parallel occurrence in separate collectivities (we mean here the process analyzed in Chapter Two). All its other instances, its “renewals” or attempts to establish it anew in periods of transition from one form of sociality to another would involve participation of individuals who had already been somewhat socialized, and would occur in the course of struggle with individual habits as well as collective images of the world.

reflexivity by imposing on people the view that the world order and the place they occupy within it are obvious. Finally, by foregrounding the belief that reality is completely determined, it thwarts any desire to change the world.

As Gauchet points out, the above characteristics of religious thinking were most fully realized in denominations that are unfairly called “primitive.”³⁹¹ They would conceive of the world as a unity that is fully determined by its mythical past. Neither people nor even any of the numerous semi-deities could challenge this kind of determinism. Man’s religious dispossession of the possibility to shape reality “means becoming part of the living universe, being physically integrated into the heavenly cycles and into the supposedly permanent organization of the elements and the species. The potential antagonism embedded in humans’ relation to nature is neutralized by substituting a symbolic attitude of belonging for one of confrontation” (1999, 26–27). The radical antagonism of individuals, inscribed in bonds that mutually tie them, is neutralized in a similar fashion. After all, “if the customary modes of human coexistence are accepted as wholly predefined, then no conflict arises between social actors about the content and forms of collective relations” (27).

The revolutionary change in this vision of reality is linked to the rise of monotheistic religions. They introduce the distinction between earthly, visible reality and divine, invisible one. As Gauchet claims, ascribing full power over reality to one, omnipotent God was the first step towards freeing people from the tyranny of pre-existing and unchanging conditions. After all, God would operate in the present and was not subject to any limitations established in the mythical past. Moreover, people could contact Him and negotiate. The separation of the eternal order from the earthly one, as well as the recognition of the fact that individual people can actually establish direct contact with God, who is responsible for the shape of the universe, made it possible to question the principle of community’s complete dominance over all its individual members – the principle that was still in force in ancient Greece. This also caused people to note the fundamental difference between themselves and nature, thus opening the possibility of exploiting the latter.

However, before people regained, or rather gained the right to self-determination, which is the benefit of modernity, religious visions of the world still ordered

391 At the foundation of Gauchet’s theory, we find the thesis that the great monotheistic religions, whose elaborate symbolism and complex organization have led many to regard them as representing a higher stage in the development of religion, were actually the first to pave the way for the process of secularization.

and sanctioned human thoughts and actions, though on a different basis than it happened in primitive religions. The first outcome of the division of reality into *incompatible* orders – earthly and divine – was the attempt to degrade the former to the position of a second-grade component of life, one fully subordinated to the religious order. As Gauchet notes, since Israelites were a society that fell under the domination of a foreign power, they were the first to call into existence a God who would not just disobey earthly authorities, but clearly oppose them. It needs to be remembered, however, that Judaism established a clearly defined boundary of its earthly community as an association based on both faith *and* origin (Morris 1996) – in this sense, it has remained a quasi-tribal religion despite its opposition to secular authorities.³⁹²

Christianity went much further in establishing the division between earthly and divine orders. As discussed in the previous chapter, in the first period of its development Christianity would “extract” individuals from the earthly order, subjecting their actions to a strictly religious one. In the period of decadence of the Roman Empire, Christianity acquired the status of state religion, which stopped this process, assigning to the Church the role of mediator³⁹³ between the material world subjected to secular power and the invisible world subjected to the will of God. At the same time, however, it supported the limiting of the monopoly enjoyed by authorities ruling the earthly world, thus establishing a source of potential conflict between two organizations – secular and religious – each of which would aspire, with the passage of time, to rule over the entire Christian world.

What seems even more important, after the failure to rebuild the Roman Empire, and a long period of fragmentation of secular organization, the mediæval Church became the only universal authority that not only created a general

392 The later Jewish diaspora had to consolidate this communal character of social organization because it precluded the emergence of its own political order separate from the social one.

393 Let us note here that it was Christianity, or more precisely Protestantism, that questioned the necessity of the existence of any such mediating institution (this is one of the reasons why Gauchet considers Christianity to be the first step towards secularization). If – as Christian doctrine would have it – God does not occupy the highest place in earthly hierarchy, but remains outside it, the existence of an earthly instance mediating between God and people seems dubious. Nevertheless, the Church would successfully defend its mediating position for many centuries (until it was openly attacked during the Reformation), presenting itself as Christ’s heir and thus as an institution that is not entirely of this world.

vision of the world and integrated a supra-state community of believers but also developed models of life in accordance with the universal, i.e. divine order of things. However, these models did not have the same kind of power to regulate human actions as in primitive religions. One could, after all, negotiate with God – and especially with the Church that represents Him on earth – with regard to such matters as the absolution of sins and obtaining forgiveness (by repenting in a proper way) for actions that would stand in complete opposition to the dominant vision of the world.

The increase of the significance of secular power, which began in the fifteenth century, was not achieved by extending the area over which it had control³⁹⁴ but by tightening its grip on the current territory, i.e. by consolidating power over the actions of all members of state organization. The sovereignty of the ruler in relation to the Church began to be tied to representing (“personifying”) the community of subjects and satisfying its needs, e.g. by guaranteeing safety. According to Gauchet, it was this secular concept of sovereignty (fully developed in absolutist monarchies) that became the foundation for the rise of modern democracy. The transition to this form of political organization demanded, Gauchet argues, that the ruler, as guarantor of the community’s existence, be replaced by impersonal concepts of “nation” and “state.” Both ideas transcend their particular realizations and, in this sense, do not belong to the order of the material world, at the same time remaining independent from any power positioned outside the human community. This means that they also do not belong to that order of the world which is subordinated to God.

However, it is easy to demonstrate – as we have done in the previous chapter – that whereas the concept of the nation really established a new kind of community, the idea of the democratic state rather involves a group of specific institutions performing their tasks in the name of that community. Their development was preceded by a period of struggle with the absolutist state, which Gauchet does not address.³⁹⁵ This battle was fought under the banners of civil society – a concept opposing both the aspirations of the Church, and the striving

394 It can be argued, however, that the establishing of the Anglican Church was an attempt at incorporating religion into the sphere subjected to secular authority.

395 Gauchet’s silence about the significance of liberal and republican civic movements may stem from the fact that his argumentation – as the very title of his book demonstrates – is subordinated to displaying mechanisms that lie at the foundation of secularization processes. That is why he concentrates primarily on the sole fact of the separation of earthly power from its divine counterpart, without discussing historical details that conditioned the transformations of the former.

of rulers to gain control over the earthly lives of their subjects.³⁹⁶ The concept of civil society actually vanished from public discourse in the nineteenth century, but this was because the battle was already won and former subjects became citizens of a modern state which exercised government in their name. At the same time, they would become members of a single nation, or at least attempts would be made to impose such an identity on them.

It was the state that “used the concept of nation for its own purposes – i.e. to advance its power and prestige – and greatly obscured this idea, which was still rather clear in the eighteenth century” (Żelazny 2004, 69; cf. also Anderson 2006). Initially, the term would refer to the common origin of an ethnic group distinguished on the basis of using the same language. States, whose creation and territories depended on a tangle of complex historical factors, would encompass within their territories many “nations” understood in this way, i.e. as ethnic groups. Ultimately, it was not the “will of peoples” but the effort of politicians that “has led to the equation of state and nation in an attempt to convince everyone that states are created by nations, not the other way round, and that there are no other entities of this kind on earth” (73). In this way, the ideology of nation as a socio-political community carried inside it – from the very beginning – an inherent component that would dismantle it from within during the twentieth century since it also brought to life the concept of national minority.

The nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth were a period of intense efforts undertaken in European and North American countries in order to create a single community out of many, more or less dissimilar ethnic components.³⁹⁷ These also included other dissimilarities within the community such as distinct interests stemming from social differentiation. The new entity would be guided in its actions by the kind of a vision of the world in which the interest of the state constitutes the common good, with regulations introduced by this body offering the basis for individual and collective actions. This goal was achieved in many countries. From the middle of the twentieth century, however, it began to be clear that this blending process was rather superficial. The national community began to crumble not only under a pressure from its

396 The development of the concept of civil society in England and France occurred parallel not only to the strengthening of the “third estate” but also, first, to processes of breaking the power of aristocratic families, and second, to the monopolization of power by monarchs.

397 The meaning of these efforts is best reflected by the term “melting pot,” used with regard to the USA, which creates a vision of various base ingredients fusing so as to create a single homogenized “product.”

increasingly multi-cultural character augmented by intense migrations, or the suddenly awakened national consciousness of groups that formerly seemed to be integrated within the political and cultural framework of the nation state, but also because of various kinds of cultural, sexual and physical differences that people began using to gain a minority status within the society (e.g. women, homosexuals, disabled people etc.). The place of national identity, acquired by the very fact of being born in a particular state, often began to be replaced by social identity adopted through individual choice.

As Claus Offe shows, towards the end of the twentieth century “the politics of identity-based differences is an increasingly prominent feature of increasing segments of the contemporary world, developed and developing alike” (1998, 122). It has also become increasingly common to use symbols of social identity in an instrumental way after they gained more significance due to the basic properties of the democratic political order. Offe draws attention to the fact that in Western constitutional democracies social conflicts would be often alleviated by granting special group rights to certain unjustly oppressed structural minorities. In contemporary Western societies, the instrumental use of social identity is fostered by the fact that the scope of the term “oppressed minority” is easily blurred. A large majority of the society, basically “everyone but relatively well-off, relatively young, able-bodied, heterosexual white male” – as Kymlicka writes (1995, 145) – can convincingly claim to represent some “oppressed minority” or consider themselves part of it in good faith.

The battle for equal rights, fought under the banners of social justice, becomes in this context not only a symptom of the crisis of nation state as a political and cultural community but also a testimony to the rejection of that mode of organizing social order which was characteristic for the modern society. Paradoxically, however, it also leads to what Gauchet has called elsewhere “the complete triumph of the state which enables the manifest triumph of the liberal individual” (2000, 32). As he demonstrates, the collapse of that principle of integration which lies at the base of the collective “We” characteristic of the modern society is related to processes of the state capturing the “social bonds” created in various communities, as we signaled in the last three chapters.³⁹⁸ Along with the “privatization of the family” – as Gauchet observes, arguing that the family has become primarily a psychological relation, thus ceasing to perform the function

398 Gauchet writes about “the appropriation of the social bond by the state; we might even say that the modern state is born in and through this appropriation, and that the latter serves to establish the very concept of the state” (2000, 29).

of a social institution – “we are witnessing the final phase of the concentration of the social bond in the state” (29). One effect of such “nationalization” of social bonds is the spread of the belief that these bonds exist solely by the fact that we are Poles, Frenchmen or Americans, i.e. representatives of the same nation. “We are the inheritors;” Gauchet writes, “we enter an already constituted world which includes not only unsurpassable canons in thought and in art but equally is ordered around preregulated forms of coexistence with others” (33).

“The implicit production of the social bond by the state,” Gauchet concludes, “means that the explicit social bond is experienced only as a global effect of the aggregation of actions where each person considers only his own advantages and interests, with the outcome that the social bond appears as a result and not a *responsibility*” (32; emphasis preserved). The dissolution of bonds, documented in many studies, appears therefore as a consequence of an overly optimistic belief in the power of national bonds. Just like any other kind of bonds, they are nevertheless doomed to lose significance because, along with the psychologization of the family, individuals have ceased to be subjected to the kind of socializing training that would be linked to the creation of a moral universe.³⁹⁹ Therefore, “[t]he fundamental characteristic of the contemporary personality” would consist in the fact of today’s average person being “unaware that the basis of his being is not organized by the precedence of the social and by embeddedness within a collectivity, with all that this implied for thousands of years regarding the feeling of obligation and the sense of debt” (36). Most activities have been subordinated to individual desires and preferences, which are limited only by the efficiency of law.⁴⁰⁰

Thus, the only factor that allows people to share actions and visions of the world – at least in the Western sphere of influence – is now the knowledge of experts, to which individuals resort both when they want to “manage” their

399 The overtaking of the function of “the family as social institution” by the state was already emphasized by Ulrich Beck (1992), who regarded it as one of the key reasons for the structural individualization observable in contemporary society. Karin Knorr-Cetina (1997), in turn, draws attention to the fact that in contemporary Western society individuals cease to be socialized to fit the community and are increasingly often socialized to fit objects, “cooperating” with which becomes all the more important since they more and more frequently replace people in relations that are by definition of social character (e.g. online banking, helplines where one can obtain information about a given institution by telephone).

400 An extreme example of this is the question of lawsuits filed against parents by children in USA or Sweden.

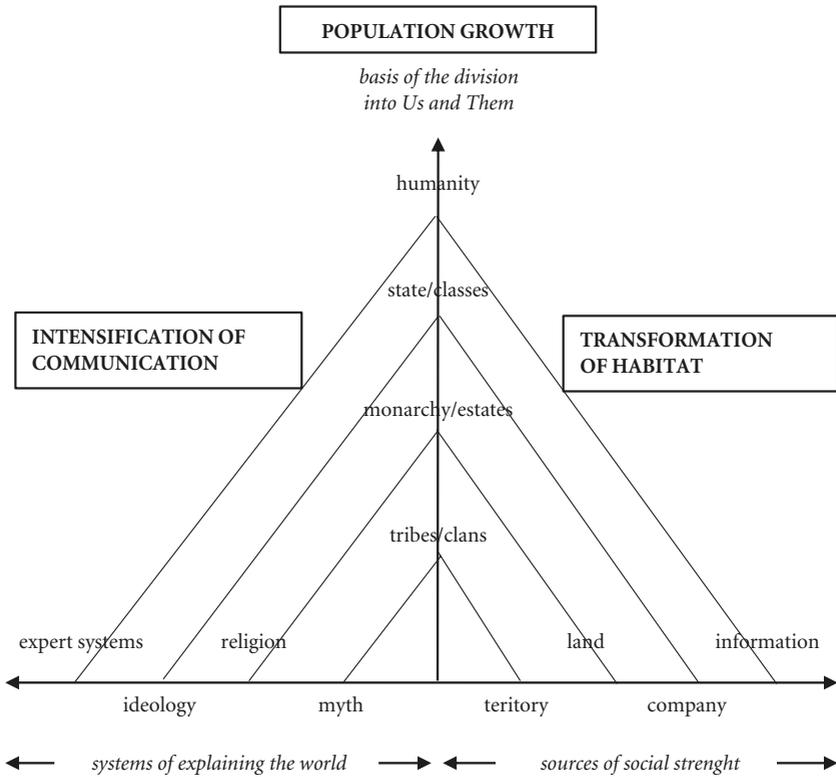


Fig. 8.1: Summary of changes occurring as part of “systemic transformations”

strivings more efficiently, and when they attempt to maximize the usefulness of social institutions and other people while trying to achieve their own goals. Strictly speaking, since that knowledge is also differentiated, the contemporary society offers its members *various* expert systems. It is by choosing from among them that individuals come to share their lifestyles and visions of reality. However, the development of such “internally referential systems,” which lie at the foundation of the “reflexive project of the self” (Giddens 2006, 231), is not supported by bonds existing between individuals, nor does it impose any moral obligations on them. In other words, it does not create a community.

A summary of relations between mechanisms and “products” of processes found at the foundation of transitions from one form of sociality to another is provided in fig. 8.1.

This figure requires two commentaries.

First, in case of all historically identified transitions from one form of social organization to another we deal with gradual processes of change that precede them. Such events as the “Hun invasion” (which was not a one-time event, but a prolonged movement of tribes) or “information revolution” constitute merely a sort of catalyst or “attractor” for these changes, which facilitates the creation of new “repeated assemblies.” After all, from the perspective of Braudel’s *longue durée* approach to history, processes of social life ought to be described in terms of periods of “transition,” extended in time and punctuated with short episodes when given types of social order would be stabilized, reaching their model form. In this sense, it turns out that the diagnosis about the processual character of social life, formulated by the theorists discussed in Chapter One, is in fact right. Processes modifying social orders occur in parallel to their crystallization.⁴⁰¹

At the same time, it is not hard to see that periods of stabilization or stagnation occurring in human history are related to the gaining of relative advantage by one of the factors in which all three basic mechanisms of change are rooted. It could be – as in the case of China – the existence of a strong social group capable of curbing the spread of unlegitimized actions. It could be – as in the case of those hunter-gatherer societies that have survived to this day – an unfavorable, poor habitat that does not offer many possibilities of experimenting with the environment. Finally, it could be – as in the case of ancient Egypt – an unusually coherent image of reality based on the cult of ancestors, one that regulates the behavior of individuals and relations between groups in a particularly detailed manner. In all other cases, the mechanism of change functioned almost automatically because it would be related to processes of interdependence set in motion by a series of positive feedback reactions.

Despite the fundamentally processual character of social life, the fact that sociology has adopted the habit of analyzing processes of change in terms of transitions from one form of social organization to another does seem to be justified, at least due to two different circumstances. The first is related to the fact that both types of social order identified so far (whose existence is universally acknowledged in social sciences) – i.e. the traditional order and the modern

401 Durkheim and Marx’s descriptions of nineteenth-century society as formless and full of anomie (quoted above) concern that stage in the development of the modern order which we consider today as classical. However, we can see now that this stage contained all the elements that have later led to the transition creating the postmodern order. One could thus say that, paradoxically, a given type of social order achieves its clearest form at the moment preceding its fundamental change.

one – are clearly characterized by different modes of organizing collective actions at the four configuration levels of interaction distinguished earlier (cf. Chapter 4): modes that are relatively stable in longer stretches of time. The shattering of the previous mode of social organization, which occurs during a transition period, and the process of replacing it with a new one is thus the second factor justifying the analysis of social change in terms of basically distinct types of social order following each other.

Second, it is necessary to address the question of the place occupied by the postmodern order in the proposed outline of the evolution of fundamental forms organizing social life. The changes in systems of explaining the world as well as shifts in sources of social power and transformations of the “Us/Them” divisions (see fig. 8.1.) suggest that we consider the postmodern order as distinct from others. At the same time, however, earlier accounts of processes leading to the change of the dominant form of sociality would suggest that what we have come to call postmodernity displays all features that are characteristic to periods of transition or dissolution rather than to some new, already crystallized form organizing social life. Therefore, we need to finally confront the question posed at the beginning of this book – one about the status of currently observable changes – and to clearly answer whether they indicate the emergence of a new type of social organization.