

HISTORY, MODERNITY AND GLOBAL IDENTITIES

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Abstract: The first stage of modern societies was defined in one part of the world by the establishment of a direct link between the sacred world and the human world: this is monotheism. In other parts, early stages were defined by empires or by categories of purity, such as castes in India. In the western world, as well as in places like Japan, a second stage links sacredness and political power, for which the paradigmatic political institutions were absolute monarchies. The third stage is what we call industrial society, which is defined by a massive increase in labor productivity, mechanization and class struggle at the social level. Now we are entering in a new “society of communication” which is no longer based neither on production nor on nation-states and cities, but rather on global systems. In this new type of society, the social actors must be “total”, that is they must be active in the cultural – mediatic – domain as well as in the political and economic fields. While in industrial societies the main actors were generally considered to be social classes, and the central notions were production and class conflict, in societies of communication the main actors represent more total categories, as those of “women” or “migrants” do in western countries today, and the central notion is subjectivation, which language is that of fundamental human rights.

Keywords: modernity, society of communication, social actors, subjectivation, human rights.

INTRODUCTION

We are no longer certain of the existence of sociology. In most cases, what is called sociology is actually re-analyzed as part of urban studies, economic history, studies of religious behavior and institutions, and so on. Economics and philosophy are embarrassingly stronger neighbors.

I myself must confess that during the first part of my professional life I was more aware of studying industrial societies than writing sociology per se. I was trained as a historian and I dealt mostly with oral testimony, surveys and interviews in particular, but without a clear image of what was specifically

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sociological in my work rather than social, economic or simply historical. Later on, when I spent a good number of years in Latin America, would I have said I was a Latin Americanist or a sociologist? Every time I tried to identify myself intellectually, I limited myself to being critical of the functionalist and structuralist tendencies in sociology, as well as of certain ideological political orientations in general.

It is only after 1973, when I became conscious that we were, in our part of the world, departing from industrial society and now living in an open market, that I became preoccupied with defining what sociology meant, that is to say, to define it as a body of analytical instruments for studying the relations between social actors.

ON SOCIETIES, PAST AND PRESENT

The basic components of modern societies are the following: *a*) a general type of relationship between societies and their environment (agriculture, trade, industry or communications); *b*) a general opposition between capital owners and dependent workers; *c*) the representation by each general type of society of its own creativity and of its members' basic rights. The main principle of sociology is the interdependence of these three basic elements.

It is true that each of these three basic elements seems to impose its own specific determinations on social actors. But, on the contrary, sociology exists as a demonstration of the interdependence of these three basic elements. I suggest that it is only in "non-modern" societies that the principle of structuralist anthropology can be used as the basic elements of social analysis. Modern societies are, in more practical terms, societies which devote a very large part of their investments to productive – scientific, technological or economic and social – activities. This is why I have always given a central place to the concept and defense of modernity in my work.

In a general sense, this has involved the identification of recognizable blocs of historicity in which certain components exist in necessary interdependence.

What we can call the “first” stage of modern societies was defined in one part of the world by the establishment of a direct link between the sacred world and the human world: this is monotheism. In other parts, early stages were defined by empires or by categories of purity, such as castes in India.

In the western world, as well as in places like Japan, a second stage links sacredness and political power, for which the paradigmatic political institutions were absolute monarchies (see Kantorowicz 1957). Political categories are central during this stage, which is also a period of discoveries and conquests.

The third stage is what we call industrial society, which is defined by a massive increase in labor productivity, mechanization and class struggle at the social level.

During the last 10 years I have published – in French – a series of books: *La fin des sociétés*, 2013; *Nous, Sujets humains*, 2015; *le nouveau siècle politique*, 2016; *Défense de la modernité*, 2018, all by Le Seuil; and my new book, *La société de communication et ses acteurs*, which was planned to be published in September 2020, will be postponed to spring 2021 as a consequence of the corona virus epidemic. It is in this book that I seek to provide an answer to the question of what kind of society are we entering now, beyond industrial society.

The primary characteristic of the new society is that it is a society of “communication” and no longer one of production. Particularly important for this definition is the work of Manuel Castells, the Spanish and American sociologist who spent the first decade of his career in Paris, and who is now minister of Universities in the Spanish government.

The second characteristic feature, on which there seems to be general agreement, is that this new society is not based on nation-states or cities, but rather on global systems. Today the United States and China are major global systems (India is now maybe becoming a third). Britain is trying now to become a more autonomous partner in the American global system. The European Union is ultimately also a member of this system, its weakening by Brexit and illiberal states notwithstanding. The systemic relationship between Russia and China is not yet clear. Among the most important contributions to the

understanding of this process of globalization is the work of the German sociologist, Ulrich Beck, from Munich and LSE.

The third characteristic of this new type of society is that its social actors must be “total”, not in the sense of “totalitarian” but in the sense of not only being active in the political and economic fields, like in industrial society, but also in the cultural – or more concretely, mediatic – domain. It is even more important for social actors to control and modify the attitudes, projects and representations held by people in societies of communication than to control the capital of a central bank or to parade its military power publicly.

In industrial societies the main actors were generally considered to be social classes. In distinction, in societies of communication, the main actors represent more total categories, as those of “women” or “migrants” do in western countries today.

A very important consequence of this shift is that the correspondence between systems and actors, as two sides of the same coin, no longer corresponds to our reality.

The definition of these main actors, combined with a definition of the basic elements of this society, is being the object of my forthcoming book.

THE TIME OF WOMEN

The modern world was built on Greek intellectual foundations, which were revived by the 17th century rationalism of such thinkers as the Italian Galileo, the Frenchman Descartes and the Englishman Newton. The main Greek idea was to separate and protect reason (*nôos*), as the basis of science, from courage (*thumos*) as the quality of warriors, and from human needs and passions (*epithumia*) of biological, emotional or sexual order. One of the main consequences of this was to give an inferior status to women, whose existence was seen as dominated by human needs such as reproduction, upbringing and care for the young and the elderly. For this reason, women were not citizens of the polis.

It was obviously impossible, five centuries before the common era, to demonstrate such claims as false. But today,

neuroscientists, with the help of experimental studies and brain imaging, can prove to us that male and female brains are not different due to the fact that a brain (male or female) is a fully integrated system. The well-known American neuroscientist of Portuguese origin, Antonio Damasio, in a now famous book, analyzed what he called *Descartes' error* (1994). This refers to the fact that, today, we know that the human brain does not separate reason from emotions and feelings – this is of fundamental importance if we consider that we live today in a “society of communication”, for which reason and feelings are in permanent association.

The passage from the objective of “rationalization” to that of “influence” not only imposes equality between men and women, but even gives a certain advantage to the latter. Not only do women spend statistically more years in study, but some economists have predicted that the countries where there is a proportionally significant part of scientific and technological studies being done by women, will one day lead world. In short, societies of communication will depend upon far more diversified types of workers and managers than industrial society, a space to be filled by women.

What sociologists should emphasize regarding women's liberation is that it is not something that can be “given” by men, but which must be conquered by the women themselves for the sake of the whole population, to bring our cultural representation of women into line with what we now know scientifically.

Women's experiences and demands are a central component of societies of communication for two main reasons which are intertwined to the point of inseparability. The entrance of women into the world of culture out of their historic relegation to the order of nature, represents an historic shift in the way in which societies conceive of the limit between society and its natural environment. This shift – in the western historical context – corresponds to the end of the ideal of rational production (the “one best way” of Taylor) as the dominant cultural interpretation of human activity, and the integration of rationality and feeling as necessary and unavoidable dimensions of communication.



When we pass from industrial societies to societies of communication, we enter into a type of society structured around communication, as opposed to production, and which represents a more advanced stage of modern social evolution.

SOVEREIGNISTS AND MIGRANTS

The second important actor, or more precisely object of social conflicts and political choices, is a category we generally refer to by the category of “migrants”. Their importance does not only come from their often-dramatic situation, for example around the small Italian island of Lampedusa, or on the Greek islands of the Aegean Sea, and forever immortalized in the image of the drowned child Alan Kurdi. In my opinion, the significance of this phenomenon does not only lie in the brutal fact that poor populations which have always been victims of destitution, negative discrimination and foreign domination, are now facing new extreme forms of social exclusion. Nor is it the fact that the relatively well-protected populations of Europe refuse to welcome them, especially in small countries, out of fear of losing their fragile identities. It is the fact that this question has become a central issue in political debate and decision-making. This is undeniably the case in the regimes that identify themselves as “illiberal”, a term which obscures the racism and xenophobia which underpin their discourse.

Such mobilizations against refugees and migrants were, during recent years, a real danger here in Italy, and are still strong both there and in other countries, such as France. These sovereigntists (or, in American parlance, “defenders of white sovereignty”) oppose, first of all, the formation of globalized empires or systems of domination, while concentrating their discourse and actions against migrants and foreign voices. Their calls can come from powerful presidents, or from poor populations which feel threatened by the cultural differences of some refugees.

What makes this problem important is that it has the potential to transform itself into the main debate and political

conflict in most European countries, as well as many other parts of the world. It is already one of the most aggressive features of the so-called far right-wing “populist” movements which have replaced the more politically and ideologically elaborated “social movements”, which were typical of industrial societies.

The refugees and the poor can easily and have always been used as scapegoats. The next round of national elections will be dominated by this opposition between sovereigntists and defenders of migrants.

REVOLUTION OR SUBJECTIVATION?

Modern societies have always been ambivalent about human creativity (refer to the story of Faust). Subjectivation, in short, is the capacity of humans for self-creation, of humans to consciously transform their own conditions of life and representation of themselves.

In industrial societies, cultural and economic optimism went along with social pessimism and aggressivity. “Class struggle” was the name of the division between the productive forces of industrial society and progress, and the exploitation of labor at its heart. In the 20th century, class conflict was transformed into people’s dictatorships. Today, we live in an anti-authoritarian but defensive political culture.

In societies of communication, we cannot rescue mankind without rescuing its natural environment, the “ecological crisis” risks forcing us into a purely negative vision.

In one sense, the ecological crisis reminds us of the wave of fear which covered Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries in response to the rise of epidemics, so brilliantly studied by my friend Jean Delumeau, who recently passed away, and which culminated in the period of the plague.

While some people may want to go back to pre-industrial and even to pre-Neolithic societies, the human sciences including sociology must on the contrary defend the environment as the set of necessary conditions of the existence of life *tout court*, and many different ways of life, here on earth. A

more global view of human life is indispensable. Ecology represents a fundamental stage in the process of the humanization of nature. The humanization of nature – by opposition to the naturalization of humans, which anti-modern ecology defends – refers to the recognition of nature as a condition of the survival of mankind. Protecting nature is important because of the fact that we, humans, depend upon it. To save the conditions of human life – our lives – means to mobilize other human beings in defense of the environment, and to do so they must be convinced that the environment does indeed represent the conditions of their own lives, indeed all lives. The danger is so present that we feel the necessity of controlling our own activities and patterns of consumption to be able to survive. But it is not a matter of controlling, but of creating new, conditions. Our fear is so intense that it penetrates all levels of our experience, individual, social and cultural.

While the central notions of industrial society were production and class conflict, the central notion of our society is subjectivation. Whilst in industrial society we defended our rights in social life, that is as workers, in the new societies of communication we defend our rights in all aspects of experience including the environment, as subjects, that is to say as carriers of human creativity and the capacity to transform our conditions of life and ourselves. The language of subjectivation in societies of communication – and this is a thesis that I have defended now for quite some time – is that of fundamental human rights.

It is for this reason that the humanization of nature which ecology proposes can only be articulated through the language of a universal respect for the fundamental rights of man: liberty, equality and dignity. Because each of us is threatened by death and because each of us must protect ourselves, as well as the world, the language of fundamental human rights is crucial.

This supposes the combination of universalism (the Enlightenment) and multiculturalism, instead of the two being opposed to protect the vestiges of the old decaying system of western domination. It also supposes not only the continued liberation of women, but the emergence of women liberators.

In societies of communication, politics will be founded on fundamental human rights, not the other way around. Ethics will prevail over politics.

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