CHAPTER 3

Pre- and Post-Revolutionary Situations.
Legitimation of Authority and of Social Change in the Perspective of Classical Sociological Theory: The Cases of Russia and France

Christopher Schlembach

Tocqueville is Looking Back

“The society of the modern world which I have sought to delineate, and which I seek to judge, has but just come into existence,” Alexis de Tocqueville (1862) remarked in the closing chapter of the second book on American democracy. He recognised that he was writing about and judging an ever changing world; descriptive languages and analytical schemes that were “hammered out” to find orientation within the new situation were still not available to a sufficient degree. This world was not ready because:

[t]ime has not yet shaped it into perfect forms: the great revolution by which it has been created is not yet over: and amidst the occurrences of our time, it is almost impossible to discern what will pass away with the revolution itself, and what will survive its close. The world which is rising into existence is still half encumbered by the remains of the world which is waning into decay; and amidst the vast perplexity of human affairs, none can say how much of ancient institutions and former manners will remain, none can say how much will completely disappear.

Tocqueville 1862: 396

When we look back some twenty years to the great revolutions in parts of the second world and observe the political entities that rose after the breakdown of the soviet empire, it is hard not to subscribe to Tocqueville's observation. The effects of these processes are still going on today. The dejected elements of what “remains of the world which is waning into decay” are not brought into a new complex of meaning, a “Geist” in the terminology of German idealism.

However, since the days of Tocqueville, a fully-fledged social science has emerged that responded exactly to this condition: to enable an analysis of the structure and process of societies that are part of what Tocqueville calls a
“modern world,” an analysis of the ways societies were evolving along certain historical patterns quite different from those described in medieval and ancient accounts on history and their frames of reference of the cosmic order or the order of salvation.

Recent work on the genesis of the social sciences (Gerhardt 2001, 2009) makes plausible that scientific analysis of the historical world was developed systematically in German idealism, inherited by Wilhelm Dilthey, Georg Simmel and Max Weber. They elaborated a methodology that was able to show how generalization was possible under modern conditions, which means the autonomy of history, its differentiation from cosmic and religious orders and its relativity which is mastered by the “use of heuristic constructs in conceptual schemes” (Gerhardt 2011: viii). If we go into the details of the sociological analysis of political change, not only closely following Max Weber but also Talcott Parsons, there is hope of grasping some analytical tools and some empirical generalizations for an understanding of the post-communist situation and post-revolutionary situations in general. Every post-revolutionary situation stands in specific relationships of continuity and discontinuity to an “ancien régime” which guide its future development in terms of the levels of political and social structure at which it is stabilised again.

Parsons’ work from *The Structure of Social Action* (1937) through *The System of Modern Societies* (1971) was concerned with how and under which conditions specifically modern societies emerged and, as the other side of the coin, under which conditions these modern societies broke down and regressed. Conceptualizing these two patterns of the historical process, Parsons distinguished in “Structure” between two conditions of society in the modern world: an integrated and an anomic condition. The anomic condition refers to the disorganization and loss of an integrated (legitimised) system of meaning as far as it is part of the moral order and produces high levels of insecurity with all its consequences of extreme nationalism, ethnic wars and irrationality. The anomic response was a kind of failure to integrate the actor’s orientation of action with the moral order that is common to the members of a community.

With Uta Gerhardt (2009) we can infer that these two conditions give way to the development of two types of societies that are possible under modern conditions and unfortunately look like twins: modern societies and anti-modern societies.

The concept of anti-modernity should be used from a strictly Weberian perspective—which is also the viewpoint of Parsons—in which industrialised or industrialising societies which are organised along charismatic and traditional lines of social action are addressed. The charismatic element implies some kind