Critical Theory, Radical Reform, and Planetary Sociology: Between Impossibility and Inevitability

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Introduction

The early twenty-first century is a time when many assumptions that used to inform the outlook of individuals, members of social groups, citizens, activists, scholars and researchers, and decision-makers at all levels of organizations and institutions, are requiring rather rapid and even radical reassessments and adjustments, in an equally rapidly changing societal context. Politics, culture, society, and especially the economy, are changing at a speed and according to patterns that are difficult to follow and discern, as are changes in constellations between these dimensions of life in global civilization. For many people, in societies that began to undergo modernization processes more than two centuries ago, and in societies in which those processes set in or were imposed much later, it is difficult to grasp just how much the world under the aegis of globalization is in flux, and how many and how much prevailing assumptions are being invalidated and revalidated in different forms ever more quickly. Moreover, changes are observable both as a direct consequence of globalization, in terms of globalization, as well as in reaction to globalization, especially the strengthening of right-wing movements and politics, in modern western societies and elsewhere, that many had assumed were a phenomenon of the past. For a growing segment of populations in modern societies that have been especially stable for decades, if not longer—such as the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Austria—the pace and extent of change appears to be reaching a critical mass that exceeds tolerable levels and the capacity and willingness to cope with experiences of cognitive dissonance, especially on the issue of migration and immigration, and the conspicuous

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2 To be sure, this pattern does not prevail everywhere equally, nor is it consistent or readily discernible. See Tony Smith, *Globalisation: A Systematic Marxist Account* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2009).
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inability of governments to meet proliferating challenges. Peculiarly, in societies that used to be at the forefront of social, political, cultural and economic progress, with regard to social justice, civil and political liberties, equality of opportunity, and similar markers of rights, entitlements, recognition, and success, more and more people are willing to react strongly, if not violently to what they see as forms of disenfranchisement in favor of “others”, especially immigrants, or those who traditionally were in structurally inferior positions or who had to conceal their identities and life choices, such as women, members of minorities, or individuals who do not adhere to traditional conceptions of gender and sex differences.

This also appears to be a time when the kind of perspectives that would provide a basis for confronting mounting challenges, particularly in the area of public policy and in ways that are constructive and consistent with stated standards and objectives, are increasingly difficult to sustain and advocate. It is becoming apparent that there is an absence of positions and practices which would translate into confronting effectively those challenges in ways that are consonant with their nature, respectively. With each crisis and set-back, it would appear, the inability or refusal on the part of different, often conflicting types of actors and decision-makers to anticipate unintended and unexpected consequences resulting from the established constellations of business, labor and government, as well as from efforts to better the latter, is becoming more glaringly apparent, with the resolve to face facts more directly, weakening further.  

In this context, the kind of perspectives that have been advocated and developed in the tradition of critical theory since the 1930s, along with a notion of radical reform that would foster the conception of practical alternatives to the well-established and counterproductive opposition between systems-stabilizing reforms and radical revolutions, and an understanding of planetary sociology as a discipline charged with illuminating global rather than national society, are urgently needed. Yet, during the post-war era, and especially since the 1980s, critical theory has become more concerned with efforts to reconcile with mainstream and liberal traditions of philosophy, social and sociological theory, than with scrutinizing the inner workings of modern society. 

Furthermore, whereas the concept of radical reform has been suggested more

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