The Waning Sociological Image of Social Life

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Introduction

THERE ARE TWO TYPES OF SOCIOLOGISTS: those who believe that a sociology of the crisis is possible and those who believe in the crisis of sociology. I belong to the second category. At first sight, it seems that this second group has a more limited view of the crisis, that they worry only about themselves as if the rest of society was not endangered, while the first group has a more dramatic vision of the present situation, calling sociologists to concentrate their work on a general crisis of our societies and maybe of the whole world. Nevertheless, the contrary is true, the second category takes crisis more seriously: a crisis cannot be complete if at least one point remains firm, sociological knowledge and, as this one is not particularly "hard," if it remains firm, many more elements of social life are likely to be firm too. On the contrary, it is a deeper and more dramatic definition of crisis to say that it reaches analysis as much as behaviour and that it questions the intellectual tools through which we build our experience.

To speak of a crisis of sociology cannot be limited to describing the difficulties of a profession. The sociological representation of social life is nothing but an abstract expression of social behaviour itself. Marx, Weber, Durkheim or Parsons are inventors of social life as much as physicists, chemists or biologists build "states of nature" as Serge Moscovici says. Both groups of intellectuals produce a culture, that is, build a type of relationships between human groups and their environment.

To speak of a crisis of sociology goes beyond all of the definitions of a crisis of society. To speak of a crisis still supposes that we refer to a stable situation, in the same way as we spontaneously conceive of illness as a breakdown of a state of health. On the contrary, if sociology is in crisis, it is because the whole of a cultural and social system is transforming itself and calling for new notions to shape and explain it. The crisis of sociology cannot be conceived of without accepting the hypothesis of a complete mutation which leads us from one set of practices and representations to another one.

The Classical Model

The hypothesis presented here is that sociology is a specific pattern of representation of social life, whose historical existence can be defined in a
precise way and which is losing its explanatory capacity today. This pattern of representation of social life has been built as a solution to a central and precise problem which has been formulated by all main classical sociologists and most clearly by Durkheim. If modernity is change, how is it possible for a stable, modern society to exist? If modernization is passage from particularism to universalism and especially from beliefs to science, how can particular societies exist with particular beliefs, values and norms?

So the first basic element of the sociological representation of social life is the idea of modernity and the evolutionist view which it implies. It is clearly different from other types of representation and especially from the previously dominant type of social thought, for which, in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the central problem was to understand how order can be imposed upon disorder, upon private interest and aggressivity. What we call sociology introduced, especially with Auguste Comte, the novel idea that modern society has no longer any specific content, is “positive,” is defined by its own capacity to apply reason as a universal principle to all particular situations. Modern society is open and free but, at the same time, can become an absolute order imposed by a power which identifies itself with science and natural laws of historical evolution. When sociologists speak of a growing density of interactions, of organic solidarity, of development of productive forces, of capitalism or of passage from community to society, they define modern social life by its movement, its modernity more than by its content. Modern painting and literature from Manet and Baudelaire on followed a parallel evolution. Talcott Parsons’ pattern variables express in a very clear and systematic way this definition of modernity. Sociology—should we say classical sociology?—is based on the idea that social life in modern societies is no longer defined by principles but by movement; to explain a social fact means first of all to locate it in the process which leads from tradition to modernity, from a closed to an open society.

Most social scientists developed this view to its extreme consequences. For Marx, historical evolution and social struggles had to lead to a post-social type of life where use value, pleasure and polymorphous development of individual personality should be substituted for rules and domination. Earlier, Comte conceived of a positive society as scientific; the so-called modern functionalists refer to a universal model of modern societies and describe most countries by the obstacles which make them lagging behind this model, which is best expressed by the most advanced Western societies.

This evolutionist view has had an extraordinary strength and has acted as one of the main basis of the Western hegemony over the whole world. Modern countries were supposed not to defend any particular interest; they were supposed to be via, veritas and vita. Even today, when the social thought of self-defined modern countries considers the rest of the world, it divides it into countries of late capitalism, underdeveloped countries and finally countries which, in spite of being communist, will finally converge with modern Western countries, so that the universalism of the model can be maintained, in spite, of the