Changing Approaches in Postmodern Sociological Thought

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ABSTRACT

A number of crucial turning points in recent history have necessitated new approaches in sociological thought. The relevance of unpredictable events has led to the blurring of antinomies and the need for the reconceptualization of basic sociological categories. The new theoretical developments are pointing clearly to the importance of ontological explanations and a broader scientific understanding of the changing postmodern social life.

THE LAST DECADE of the twentieth century produced major unexpected events on all levels of social reality, events that requested a re-evaluation of the basic terms of social discourse and, thus, of intellectual history as a whole.

Contrary to the expectations and forecasts elaborated within the framework of conventional logic, the last decade did not emerge as an ordinary *fin de siècle* characterized by redundancy, deficiency of creative perspectives, and exhaustion of a rich fund of ideas, remaining, thus, without the capacity of renewal.

At least three crucial turning points influenced, or more exactly became, compulsory for the revising of social thought in this period. The political, economic, and social events which follow one after another in an unprecedented rhythm, defy all modern social theories, old and new, concerning the production and reproduction of social life, and demand a completely new approach to the category of unpredictability. As our history, even the most recent and immediate, seems less and less predictable, the dimension of contingency—of change—emerges as an invariant of social reality and moves towards a central position in social thought, and thus, towards significant sociological explanation. Speaking about this new conceptual attitude, Agnes Heller emphasizes "the appearance of contingency as the condition of the modern world" (Heller, 1988).

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This change in what is central and fundamental in social thought is accompanied by a series of consequences, or side effects, among which the most important perhaps is the dismissal of a social thought controlled basically by a dominantly deterministic conception. The removal of indeterminism from its marginal position—frequently regarded in a negative way—and its legitimation as a general and professional basic assumption brought back the possibility of treating major social problems and aspects of reality which, until recently, were ignored or remained unexplained by outdated positivist paradigms. Present sociology is making a firm statement in this direction with Boudon, among others: “The view that determinism is an essential postulate of scientific explanation may, in social sciences at least, inhibit rather than help explanation” (Boudon, Bourricaud, 1989, p. 115).

Unpredictable Events in Postmodern Society

Only on the grounds of this new perspective, are the social sciences, and particularly sociology, able to research such major unpredictable contemporary events which defy the ideas of the “end of history.” The tendency of developed states towards unification on one hand and the simultaneous outburst of nationalism on the other; the third technological revolution and the rise of religious movements—sometimes in fundamentalist forms; the extension of the communication system, and the emergence of new blockages in the capacity of human and social interrelations—these are only some of the unexpected facts which confronted the social sciences in their efforts to define and explain the postmodern society. And for this kind of explanation the conceptual apparatus of determinism, classic or neoclassic, reveals itself as an inoperative and irrelevant instrument.

It is worth remarking that the natural sciences, considered as the “scientific” model of the social sciences, underwent, maybe more slowly and silently, the same “revolutionary” change: in micro- and macro-physics or biology the concept of indeterminism became legitimized as an explanatory and even operational instrument (Hawking, 1988).

Another turning point of contemporary social thought, confronting the new events, is the change from a fragmentary, partial approach to a global point of view, more exactly, the pre-eminence of the totality against the particular or the different. This change of mind is possible only by exceeding rigid conceptual patterns which identified empiricism with objectivity and general theory with ideology. Emphasizing globality against variability does not mean the exclusion of either of them from sociological explanation but rather only a changing relation between these two terms. Micro or particular social phenomena get meaning and become intelligible in this perspective only if they are integrated in the totality of social aspects characteristic to an epoch or an area. Beyond the almost infinite diversity of political regimes, economic, social, and cultural structures of the present society, Wallerstein identifies a common factor which links together in an indestructible totality core states and