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## GERMAN SOCIOLOGY AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 90S \*

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### 1. The Event

An attempt to delineate major trends and tendencies in German sociology has to deal with the decisive event of the past decade: *November 9, 1989*, the fall of the wall in Berlin, the breakdown of the Second World with its communist regimes and the unique experiment in Germany of the reunion of a capitalist and a socialist society in one nation. Ever since this event took place nothing has remained the same – neither in politics, nor in society, nor, with a certain time-lag, in sociology. This transformation suddenly interrupted the cosy, calm and easy-going days of postmodernism when the busy administration of the “void” brought history back in, and – as becomes gradually visible – is changing the entire agenda of sociological discourse. This report, therefore, has a strong historical bent. It looks back (not without nostalgia) to a period of “normal social science” (Kuhn) in the 1980s featuring major debates and substantive research being undertaken. My remarks are restricted in two ways: historically, they cover the period up to November 9, 1989 and, geographically, they focus exclusively upon West German sociology. The decisive developments since that date will be dealt with in a series of forthcoming articles focusing on issues such as the reconstruction of sociology at East German universities, the changes in social structure, social inequality and the wide array of social problems which are accompanying the transformation process.

In ordering my remarks, I rely upon certain selection principles developed by observers from abroad, namely, German sociologists working in Canada. In editing an anthology on “Modern German Sociology”, Volker Meja et al. (1987) tried to characterize our national tradition by three traits: 1. “the importance of theory”; 2. “the critique of contemporary society (especially of German society)” (ix); 3. the persistence of a “critical self-reflection” of sociology, sometimes taking “the form of inhibiting self-doubt and scrupulousness, of an obsessive preoccupation with oneself.” (3) Although susceptible to a stereotyped image (cf. Müller, 1989), theory, critique and self-reflection still are the

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\* This article was written in English by the author. The text was revised from the point of view of language by Ms. Martha Baker, sociologist, Munich.

established trademarks of sociology “made in Germany”. In adopting these three traits as a formal frame of reference, I will first look at the theoretical discourse and substantive research areas; then I decipher the predominant crisis rhetoric of this time and, finally, I close with some critical remarks on the emotional constitution (“emotionale Befindlichkeit”) of my fellow German sociologists.

## 2. Theoretical Debates and Substantive Research

The theoretical landscape of German sociology in the 1980s is not difficult to trace. What had begun in the 1970s with a controversy over the nature of sociology (“emancipatory” or “technocratic”, cf. Habermas and Luhmann, 1971) and its theoretical makeup – action or systems theory – matured in the 1980s: the hegemonic predominance of two strands of social thought. On the one hand, Jürgen Habermas’ (1981) “theory of communicative action” and, on the other hand, Niklas Luhmann’s (1984) autopoietic theory of “social systems.”

In his influential book, Habermas tried to lay a new foundation for a critical theory of society. In doing so, he developed a concept of communicative rationality in contrast to a concept of pure instrumental rationality which, according to him, seems to prevail in systems theory and rational choice theory alike; secondly, he outlined a two-step concept of society comprising system and lifeworld as well as the modes of their relationships; and, thirdly, based upon communicative rationality and system and lifeworld, he provided a theory of modernity. This theory focuses upon the social pathologies of modern societies. In his abstract diagnosis of the times, he tries to show that formally organized systems more and more invade the communicatively structured lifeworld. To characterize this ongoing process of mediation, he coins the now famous metaphor of “the colonization of the lifeworld” by the systems of economy, state and the law. The concept of communicative rationality, the twin pair of system and lifeworld and his diagnosis of the pathology of “colonisation” have stirred a massive debate (cf. Honneth and Joas, 1986) which has swept over the Atlantic and is nowadays being continued in the United States. If one takes a closer look at the construction of this theory, three characteristics are noteworthy: 1. the selection of reference theories: Marx is absent and with the grandfather of critical theory the entire tradition of political economy and the critique of capitalism is missing; equally absent is Georg Simmel whose “philosophy of money” would have lent Habermas’ colonization thesis much more substance; on the other hand, Mead, Durkheim and Parsons have a significant impact on the paradigmatic switch from instrumental to

communicative rationality and on the macrosociological grounding of the concept of society; the key role, however, is played by Max Weber in a double (if not triple) sense: for the harsh critique of early critical theory from Lukàcs to Adorno and Horkheimer as well as for the adoption of Weber's theory of differentiated value-spheres and lifeorders for his own approach, thereby using a Parsonian language (the media of communication); 2. the strategy of the theoretical argumentation: Habermas tries hard to transcend the micro-macro-split and the void between action and structure by incorporating many elements of systems theory; but – as a consequence of his normative claim – he is pressed to consider the consequent differentiation and autonomization of social systems as a pathological process which hurts the communicative infrastructure of the lifeworld; 3. his diagnosis of the times owes much to Weber again: the "iron cage" of a highly rationalized society seems inevitably to entail the loss of meaning and freedom. Habermas shares Weber's fears and in this sense, then, we all sit today in "the iron cage of a colonized lifeworld." It is not easy to measure Habermas' influence in Germany sociology today. He surely is the most prominent sociologist we have; but most of the intricate theoretical problems of his approach are now discussed in philosophy. His visibility today seems to be more due to his status as a critical intellectual commenting on hot public issues like the "Historikerstreit" or the reunion of the two Germanys than as the leading sociological theorist. The declining influence of his critical theory owes much to the change of the intellectual climate from the 1970s to the 1980s, i. e. from a highly politicized age to a deideologized decade. A deeper-seated reason, however, may be the lack of "connectibility" ("Anschlußfähigkeit", to use a term of Luhmann) of his theory to empirical research. Up to now, no one has been able to demonstrate empirically the alleged "colonization of the lifeworld."

Whereas Habermas' theoretical influence seems to shrink, Luhmann's impact on the theoretical discourse and on empirical research constantly grew in the 1980s. His theoretical masterpiece, "Soziale Systeme" (1984), met with wide sociological attention (cf. Haferkamp and Schmid, 1987). The theory of autopoietic systems, despite its highly abstract makeup, seems to be better suited to typical sociological questions. A closer look at the edifice of his systems theory reveals the higher degree of "connectibility." His research program has three dimensions: the historical dimension refers to the semantic history of central concepts like state, politics, individualism etc.; the evolutionary dimension employs the developmental sequence of three forms of differentiation: segmentation in archaic societies, stratification in traditional societies and functional differentiation in modern societies; consequently, the systems theoretical dimension works out in greater detail the functional differentiation of self-referential, "autopoietic" systems with their peculiar code, functions,

performances and media of communication in modern society. In the last years, Luhmann has begun to analyze one system after the other: the polity (1990a), the economy (1988), science (1990b), etc. At the same time, he has commented upon current debates, for instance, the discourse on ecology and social movements (1986). Linking actual discussions with his approach, he himself has contributed to the incorporation of systems theoretical arguments into ongoing research.

Despite the hegemonical predominance of Habermas and Luhmann, the theoretical landscape was opened up in the mid 1980s as a result of two movements. First of all, the younger generation started to look across the German border for new theoretical inspiration. What they found were three theoretical developments: Neo-Parsonianism, structuration theory and rational choice theory. The 1980s saw a remarkable renaissance of Parsons and Neo-Parsonianism. Richard Münch's (1982, 1984, 1988) works on the theory of action, the structure and culture of modernity in Germany and Jeffrey C. Alexander's (1982) voluminous books on the "Theoretical Logic in Sociology" in the United States gave ample evidence of the theoretical fruitfulness of the Parsonian approach. In their wake, Parsons was again widely read in theory courses in Germany and the consciousness for the complexities of social life as well as the intricacies in analytically modelling it were considerably heightened. I remember vividly conferences where we tried to follow the multiplicity of references to be constantly held in mind, which Richard Münch traced according to the logic of Parsons' AGIL in four, sixteen, thirty-two and even sixty-four celled schemata. But this excessive analytical complexity soon caused considerable frustration and the theoretical discourse eventually found itself trapped into the "iron cage of analytical overload." It seems as if the wave of enthusiasm Neo-Parsonianism caused at the beginning of the 1980s has gradually faded away at the end of the past decade. But it remains true that Parsons is back in theoretical reasoning, whereas it is probably too early to assess the impact Münch's and Alexander's Neo-Parsonianism made on the younger generation of sociologists.

Equal, if not more important than Neo-Parsonianism, was the influence of structuration theory. The works of Pierre Bourdieu (1982) and Anthony Giddens (1984) in particular attracted a number of scholars in different sociological fields and in diverse disciplines. Theoretically, this was due to the possibility of bridging the gap between action theory (Habermas) and systems theory (Luhmann); empirically, Bourdieu's "Distinction" and Giddens (1979) early book on "Class Structure" nicely fit into a debate on the end of class society, the pluralization of lifestyles and processes of individualization (Beck, 1986; Müller, 1992).



Rational choice theory found its entrance into German discourse primarily via the works of Gary Becker, Raymond Boudon, James Coleman, Mancur Olson and Jon Elster. Soon, a faction in the theory section of the German Sociological Society was founded and triggered the reception of the RC approach in Germany. Sociologists like Siegwart Lindenberg, Reinhard Wippler, Erich Weede, Harmut Esser and Karl Dieter Opp, to name but a few, very soon coordinated their own work within the international community of RC theorists. Although much stimulating theoretical and empirical research has been put forward, this group still lacks a pathbreaking work transcending the state of the art of RC theory in the Anglo-American world. The RC approach gained additional legitimacy and experienced a wider dissemination by political scientists like Claus Offe who, as a former leftist political economist, began to use the language of RC without sharing the methodological premises of this approach.

In conclusion, one is tempted to say that sociological theorizing in Germany particularly benefitted from the reopening of the theoretical landscape and that the dualism of action and systems theory was transcended in favor of a multiplicity of theoretical perspectives. This impression is fostered by the second movement that began at the outset of the 1980s: the internationalization of theoretical discourse due to the intense cooperation of the German and American theory sections and a series of American-German conferences on current theoretical issues like "The Micro-Macro Link" (Alexander et al., 1987), "Social Change and Evolution", "Social Structure and Culture" (Haferkamp, 1990) etc. The second movement in particular opened the theoretical field in Germany and helped to establish a loosely coupled network of international cooperation on theoretical affairs.

Given this long review of the theoretical developments in the 1980s the initial image representing German sociology as above all theoretical armchair reasoning seems to be readily confirmed. But this is only one part of the picture we have to paint. The other part has to reveal the empirical research which was done in this period. As in other countries, research is more and more "contracted out" of the university and concentrated in research units like the Max Planck institutes. And looking at this body of empirical work, it becomes clear that sociology in Germany today is not much different from the state of the art in other countries. It is a well established discipline with a high degree of differentiation, specialization, professionalization and internationalization. Given this, the following picture will be far from complete. The traditional centers of empirical research in Germany are Cologne and Mannheim. In Mannheim Peter Flora and his colleagues recently founded the Center for European Research which will focus on developments in Western and Eastern European countries alike. Flora began his historical-empirical work in

the 1970s with a highly valuable data handbook on the comparative development of Western European Welfare States in the 19th and 20th centuries. Quite recently he has begun to edit the first volumes on this topic, and they will also be an indispensable source for everyone working in this field. "Growth to Limits" (Flora, 1986) traces the developments of Western European Welfare States since World War II in the spirit of Stein Rokkan, covering for instance the countries of Austria, Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

Walter Müller and Karl Ulrich Mayer (now head of the Max Planck Institute for Educational Research in Berlin) started out in the 1970s with their work on stratification and mobility. Karl Ulrich Mayer in particular focused upon patterns of individual career mobility by studying different age cohorts within an approach concentrating on the individual life course. Mayer (1990) considerably enriched our knowledge on the structural, institutional and individual characteristics of the mobility process of different status groups and cohorts.

In Cologne, Renate Mayntz has established the Max Planck Institute of Societal Research. Mayntz (1988), who began her career with conventional studies on stratification in communities, organization and state administration draws upon systems and differentiation theory in order to analyze diverse social systems and their institutional infrastructure. Mayntz' approach is a good example for a fruitful yet independent application of Luhmann's theory of autopoietic systems. She lays much more emphasis on individual and collective actors, stresses frictions and conflicts in the process of implementation of decisions and programs, and highlights systems traditionally overlooked by sociologists. For instance, she has studied "large technical systems" (Mayntz and Higes, 1988), "policy networks" (Marin and Mayntz, 1991), telecommunication, and the system of research and health care systems. Her institute is a successful pioneer in relating sophisticated systems and differentiation theory with vital empirical research in areas hitherto neglected by sociology.

Whereas the empirical work on welfare states, stratification and social systems represents the traditional macroscopic domain of sociology, much research has been conducted focusing on the mesoscopic and microscopic levels. The beginning of the 1980s envisaged a massive sweep of "new social movements" (such as the peace movement, the women's movement, the ecology movement, etc.) which seemed to deviate from the well-known patterns of older movements like the workers' and student movement. Studying these apparently new types of collective action (cf. Brand et al., 1986; Eder, 1986; Roth and Rucht, 1987), much time and energy was invested to carve out the distinctive traits of new social movements. Although much empirical knowledge was accumulated on the inner structure and functioning of the movements,

their different strategies and tactics of mobilization, the relationship of movements, political parties and mass media, the alignment process of movements and potential allies and the dynamics of political protest in general, it seems that a proper theoretical model to conceptualize this new type of collective action in a coherent way has not yet been accomplished (cf. Rucht, 1991).

If one looks at social movements not from the public side but from the private angle, one could regard them as attempts to probe into new forms and styles of life. Since new ways and styles of life aroused much sociological interest in the 1980s, the family as the conventional location of life-styles earned considerable empirical attention. Alarmed by shrinking birth rates, rising divorce rates and the decline of the traditional nuclear family as the predominant form of life, sociologists and politicians tried to find out whatever had happened to the family. Valuable research in this field has come out of the "German Youth Institute", one of the largest research units in Germany to focus on family life, women and youth. Two projects are particularly worth mentioning: on the one hand, Hans Bertram established a data bank gathering aggregate data on family life at the federal, regional and community level. This data bank allows tracing of the various forms of life in Germany according to regional, rural and municipal variations in a truly Durkheimian vein. Whereas the regional data bank draws a macrosociological picture of family life in Germany, a concomitant representative survey on German families (cf. Bertram, 1991) accumulated individual data representing a microsociological picture of the inner infrastructure of family life including, for instance, the networks of the family, the distribution of roles and the division of labor between spouses, the situation of children and many more facets. Equally important are the social reports on the situation of youth (cf. Bertram, 1989) which present a complete picture of the prospects and problems of the younger generations.

The ideal image of the social sciences tells us that theory and empirical research intensively collaborate and that theoretically deduced hypotheses – to recall the methodological lessons Karl Popper once taught us – are empirically corroborated or refuted. This short overview of theoretical debates and substantive research in German sociology in the 1980s tells a different story. The gap between theoretical reflection and empirical studies seems to be growing and this holds true – even at an accelerated speed – for the decade under consideration. It is not that empirical investigation can do without any theoretical inspiration. And, as we have seen, some preeminent empirical sociologists hold on dearly to certain theoretical ideas: Peter Flora follows Stein Rokkan's research program, Renate Mayntz applies an actor-oriented systems theory derived from Parsons and Luhmann, while Hans Bertram carries out a Durkheimian approach to family life. But the hot theoretical debates on "micro" and "macro" reasoning,



the link between “action” and “structure”, to name just some pending theoretical issues, seem to make not even the faintest imprint on current empirical research. And, vice versa, empirical results apparently are not fed into the process of theoretical reasoning. Sharpening this point with some exaggeration, one is tempted to state that theory and empirical research are almost two different “cultures” (Snow) and the “Verstehen” between theoretical and empirical culture is severely disturbed. On the other hand, without belaboring the point further, this state of affairs might well be the unintended result of the process of sociological specialization. Whoever starts his sociological career studying the classics will hardly end up doing multilinear modelling, and vice versa. But perhaps the second trait we consider to characterize German sociology might provide a common denominator and reference point for theory and empirical research? Therefore, let us take a look at the crisis rhetoric.

### **3. The Predominant Crisis Rhetoric: From the impasse of “working society” (Arbeitsgesellschaft) to the uncertainty of risk society**

“Every decade gives birth to its own crisis!” This seems to be the “iron law” of German sociology since the Second World War. And, in fact, a historian of this discipline could very well organize the chapters of his book according to prevailing diagnoses of the time which stated in one way or the other some sort of “crisis” once in a decade. In the 1950s, it began with Helmut Schelsky’s thesis of a leveled middle-class society. Although he posited the end of class conflict and the creation of wealth on a broad scale as well as the end of ideology and the “depolitization” of German society, he noted the perils of this process of “Americanization”: the fierce status competition and status anxiety, the prevailing materialistic orientations and the concomitant loss of cultural values and retreat from the public to the private sphere with unknown consequences for democracy. In the 1960s, we envisaged the horror scenario of a totally planned technocratic society with an omnipotent state apparatus administering the technological imperatives of the capitalist economy and a “culture industry” (Adorno) arbitrarily manipulating the societal consciousness. In the 1970s, we had an alleged legitimation and governability crisis with a state unable to steer the economy, fulfill the constantly rising wants and expectations of its populace and meet the growing need for “meaning” in society. It goes without saying that the sociological crisis rhetoric flowered in the midst of the most stable period of German history. But what is the corresponding candidate for a crisis in the 1980s? Actually, we have two candidates: the crisis of “working society” (Arbeitsgesellschaft) and the perils of risk society.

The background for the crisis of working society was a decade of unprecedented mass unemployment which definitively showed that the labor market was unable to provide jobs for the entire working population. According to the main protagonists (cf. Offe, 1984; Bonß and Heinze, 1984) the crisis was the consequence of two processes: the objective failure of the labor market to supply jobs; and the subjective change in the value of work, i. e. the transformation of a puritan work ethic into a hedonistic job ethic. The research that followed in the wake of this debate on working society once again and, as it looks, for the last time demonstrated the importance of traditional special sociologies like the sociology of industry, work and occupation. Since then, the paradigm of working society based upon Marxian and Weberian premises, focusing upon technological development and the division of labor, looking at the formation of classes, concentrating upon the institutional site of the labor process, factory and corporation, and investigating the patterns of work, occupation and professions itself got into trouble. Not the "working society" per se, but the paradigm of the working society underwent a deep crisis. Not society, but sociology was in need of a "catharsis." The labor market soon recovered in the second half of the 1980s, but the paradigm of working society definitively eroded.

Interestingly enough, the impasse of the paradigm of working society paved the way for a new paradigmatic attempt and the second diagnosis of the 1980s: the advent of a risk society. Ulrich Beck's (1986) book attracted overwhelming attention. The reaction, however, was split: in the wider political public, the message was well received and ever since Schelsky and Habermas, probably no German sociologist was so widely discussed as Ulrich Beck. But the sociological public met this book with a great deal of reservation. Why? And what is the message of this book? To begin with the message, Beck covers under the category of risk society three very loosely coupled tendencies. First of all, the traditional class conflict of capital and labor loses its significance in light of the new dangers and risks caused by big technologies such as nuclear plants. One should not forget that this book was published soon after the nuclear accident in Chernobyl which appeared to confirm Beck's thesis upon first analysis. Secondly, our societies envisage a massive individualization process eroding class milieus, differentiating formerly class-based lifestyles and opening the path for an autonomous planning of one's own biography. Finally, the process of "reflexive modernization" analyzes the mediating processes of economy, politics and science in order to show that the responsibility for far-reaching decisions and technological programs has been fragmented with the effect that no one is ever responsible for anything – above all, not for the unintended negative results – and that, therefore, the borders between profit, power and truth are definitively blurred. Given these three tendencies that

should convince us to live in a risk society, the theorem of individualization was hotly debated in sociological circles. And apart from Beck's feuilletonistic prose, it was this theorem that prompted sociologists to have reservations. The term "individualization" covers three different meanings which may, but do not necessarily have to go together – a point which Beck seems to suggest. First, the individualization in the sense of a process of the pluralization of life situations and life-styles; second, privatization in the sense of the dissolution of social milieus which may but does not necessarily have to end up in atomization and the loss of community; third, individualization which may, but again does not necessarily have to go together with a gain in individual autonomy.

Trying to evaluate the sociological crises scenarios, one can note at least three positive effects: sociology found its way back into the public with an influential diagnosis of the time; this diagnosis in turn sharpened the awareness of the inherent risks of big technologies, above all the dangers of East European nuclear plants with a very low safety standard; in addition, it fostered a debate on ecological dangers; and, finally, it provided a bridge between sociological theory and empirical research in directing attention to the theorem of individualization, even if in a highly critical vein.

#### **4. The end of postmodernity and the return of history**

This short overview of German sociology in the 1980s has demonstrated two trends. On the one hand, sociology is a well-established social science with a considerable degree of professionalization, specialization, depolitization and internationalization; yet, sociology in this country still bears the old trademarks of "German-ness": the predilection for theory; the critique of society and the tendency toward critical self-reflection. On the other hand, sociology had only a limited impact on politics and public discourse. In the 1980s, sociology lost its former discourse leadership in favor of philosophy, as the debate on postmodernity showed, and in favor of history, as the strange "Historikerstreit" revealed. Like François Chazel (1992) noted for French sociology, German sociology does no longer exhibit the attractiveness for students, politicians and the public alike which the discipline once enjoyed in the late 1960s and 1970s. In adopting the attitude of critical self-reflection one has to admit the declining prestige of this science. Yet, is this state of affairs a reason for another well-known crisis lament, the crisis of sociology? According to the overwhelming consensus of my German colleagues, one is tempted to give an affirmative answer. Celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the journal "Soziale Welt", its editor, Ulrich Beck (1989), asked prominent sociologists to reflect upon the

state of German sociology. The unanimous result can be summarized in one formula: the end of sociology. Sociology in a state of anomie (Dahrendorf), why sociology at all (Giesen), the decline of sociological method (Esser), the rise of a feuilletonistic sociology (Mayer), sociology – a questionable profession (Fürstenberg), etc. Here, we have in a nutshell “the form of inhibiting self-doubt and scrupulousness of a preoccupation with oneself,” that Meja et al. (1987) have lucidly observed. And, it is a fact and a recurrent phenomenon that sociology produced its own anti-sociologists. But, it should have become clear that despite intrinsic problems such as the split between theory and research, German sociology in the 1980s is able to come up with major theoretical and empirical accomplishments. Not sociology in Germany, but German sociologists are in a crisis. They have grown old and they should relax, because the generational change is fully under way. A new generation and massive societal problems to focus upon at the outset of the 1990s should give us some reason for a cautious optimism.

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