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WORLD SOCIOLOGY : ANOTHER REPLY TO JEFFREY ALEXANDER

Is there a “new theoretical movement” in sociology ? This question was discussed by Jeffrey Alexander (University of California, Los Angeles) in a previous issue of this journal¹. Alain Touraine was first to react². We have pleasure in publishing here another reply to Jeffrey Alexander by Helga Nowotny (University of Vienna).

1 Jeffrey Alexander, Recent Sociology between Agency and Social Structure, *Schweiz. Z. Sociol./Rev. suisse sociol.*, 18 (1), 7-11.

2 Alain Touraine, La théorie sociologique entre l'acteur et les structures, *Schweiz. Z. Sociol./Rev. suisse sociol.*, 18 (3).

SOCIOLOGY AS A DISCOURSE SYSTEM: THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS UPON SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIZING*

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As sociologists we should be especially careful not to overrate our claims to new insights regarding the present state of society. First of all, we do not hold any explanatory monopoly – whatever such claims we might have clung to in the past due to our status within academia, they are rapidly being eroded by more fierce and open competition on the marketplace of ideas, books and exposition in the media. Secondly, for a discipline that aspires to a higher degree of “reflexivity” than many others, hyperbole can easily become a trap for collective illusion. On these grounds I object to Jeffrey Alexander’s labelling present theorizing as constituting “the new theoretical movement” in sociology. He draws our attention to efforts that actually are quite “normal” in the ongoing development of any scientific discipline, namely that theorists take notice of each other’s work and occasionally even talk to each other. The same holds for the fact that the micro-macro-link constitutes a central, if not *the* central cognitive problem for any discipline. Sociologists are therefore complimented for exhibiting behaviour that is considered quite normal in other scientific disciplines. As I will argue, what Alexander proposes as constituting a “new theoretical movement” in sociology, is far from new. Rather, the more interesting new conceptual developments in the discipline reflect largely, though not exclusively, the impact of social movements upon theorizing. Jeffrey Alexander is completely right, however, in raising the question to what extent the influence of the present societal discourse centered on social movements is being “reflexively reflected” by sociologists.

I will therefore concentrate my comments upon the third set of misgivings that Alexander raises about the current emphasis on agency. The first misgiving he has, namely that there is a confusion between “agency” and “actors” would need much more careful analysis of the usage of these terms (see, for instance, the recent attempt by Sewell, 1992) and an inquiry into the extent to which Giddens’s concept of structuration can overcome this confusion. His second misgiving about culture being separated from actors would need even more lengthy comment. The third misgiving, however, that the concept of agency

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has been associated with a naively positive ideological tone, is a correct observation, but needs to be taken at least one step further than Alexander does.

Although Jeffrey Alexander does not cite any empirical evidence, most readers will probably agree that a positive revaluation has taken place with regard to both actors and agency. Especially when compared with the previous waves of theorizing in sociology, there have been two opposite images: one being the system without actors that dominated the years following 1968, and the other being composed of actors without system, that came to be prevalent in the 80s (Touraine, 1992). In the first instance, individuals either had disappeared completely or had been reduced to passive victims, at most to an impotent as well as powerless mass, where individual men and women were confronted with an anonymous, all powerful "system" whose abstract logic could be "learned" only through complete submission to it. The other image, that of actors without system, was initiated, at least in the US, by what Alexander calls the "brilliant generation of anti-Parsonian microsociologists". Yet, it would have remained precisely that – an intellectual reaction to a previously dominant theoretical mode (in this case US structural functionalism, while in Europe it offered an antithesis to various strands of Marxism), had it not been for the strong theoretical and practical interaction with another societal discourse: the one initiated and represented by social movements. This is nothing new in itself. Time and again, sociological theorizing redefined social problems that first were problematized by social movements, thus framing and transforming them into a more systematic, academic discourse (Nowotny, 1980). My present argument states that in order to understand how the positive revaluation of the individual actors and of the concept of agency has come about, it is not sufficient to remain within sociological theorizing and to analyze how the micro and macro-link has been reconceptualized. Without the strong interaction with other societal discourses, theorizing in sociology probably would not have taken on the positive, "ideological" connotations that came through a certain empathy with social movements. How much this empathy impedes sociological reflexivity is another question, one to which I shall return below.

The empowerment of the individual in society, reflected theoretically as empowerment of "actors" and "agency", goes in parallel. There has indeed been a decisive shift in social and political life as well as in theorizing. At least in Europe, this co-evolutionary process is strongly linked to the emergence of social movements. They occurred in multiple forms, ranging from the micro-micro level, such as the constitution of self-help groups, to the more familiar and politically articulate forms of the ecological, peace and women's movement. The underlying common assumptions were a critical assertion of their rights vis-à-vis the established powers, the right to be concerned and to articulate

their alternative vision of society, an insistence upon the upgrading of everyday life processes and the wish to occupy a more democratized, public space that fuses with the qualities and aspects of everyday life and daily concerns. But it is equally important to see that the unfolding of these social movements and their concrete manifestations as well as theoretical writings – particularly articulate in the case of the feminist movement – occurred within more profound as well as wide-spread societal changes. These in turn are related to a dramatically altered role of the State, especially in Europe. Receding from its historically culminating era in the 70s as the all-providing, all-caring Welfare State, new opportunities and the necessity for “agency” were created *de facto* throughout the societal fabric. Instead of the State regulating economic life, a wave of deregulatory activities set in, also in Europe. Instead of all-encompassing welfare provisions, a new “welfare mix” of private and public services was heavily propagated. Tendencies towards more market-like behaviour set in in practically all domains. Scientific knowledge, including social science knowledge, came under pressure towards privatization (Nowotny, 1992). Wherever individuals expressed themselves, they now did so as “citizens” and as “consumers”, as “clients” and as “co-producers” who have a multitude of “choices” to make. While these “choices” were partly disguised as new cynic euphorisms for the growing inequalities that manifestly widen in all European societies, they also opened up novel space for individuals to assert their preferences, to adopt a more market-like behaviour, and to express and “realize” themselves. Perhaps this is no more evident than in the growing importance of a concept like life-style. While the heterogeneity of current life-styles serves to mask social inequalities, it also signals an ongoing process of individualization as well as the necessity and opportunity for the continuous “production of social identity”. What is truly remarkable about these and similar changes presently occurring is their built-in polyvalence: both as social phenomena and as concepts used to describe them, they refuse to fall into a scheme of either-or, a clear-cut ideology of good or bad, of right or left. They are polyvalent, like couplings that are open towards many sides and for future bifurcations. They are contingent concepts. Nor is it a mere coincidence that similar conceptions of open networks, of decentralization and the newly empowered role of individuals can be found in ever new, but temporary configurations in the discourse of management literature (Crozier, 1992) or of technological innovation. As “symbolic analysts”, some of these individuals have even been portrayed as the future global elite (Reich, 1991).

Far from having “solved” the micro-macro-link in sociological theorizing, the current societal developments throw open a whole range of new and challenging problems. I agree with Jeffrey Alexander that a “distinctive evaluative tone to these conflationary discussions of agency” has crept into some

sociological writings, making them “celebratory and often heroic” (Alexander, 1992: 11). An added dose of critical reflexivity is needed, if sociology is to avoid another wave of ideological commitment. But it is not only the same old ideological blindness or sheer lack of reflexivity, of which the sociological enterprise has so often been guilty in the past, that is to be blamed. Sociological theorizing participates in, borrows from, and ultimately transforms other societal discourses (Evers and Nowotny, 1987). This has to be clearly recognized by sociological theorizing, as well as the fact that sociology itself, just as any other scientific discipline, also constitutes a discourse system in its own right, using its own rhetoric and images. The task ahead is therefore twofold: to be reflexive about societal discourse as well as about one’s own transformed discourse. Moreover, discourses on society as well as sociological discourse tend to be highly uneven and dissimilar, committed to local, regional or national contingencies as well as to cultural and linguistic ones. Hence, the high degree of fragmentation we find in sociology. But this need not remain so. To view sociology as a discourse system whose core content is discourses on society (Wagner, Wittrock, Whitley, 1991) also offers new perspectives. They might help us mediate between the two goals that Jeffrey Alexander still sees as exclusive opposites: “to deconstruct discourse as an ideology of action rather than to rationalize it as an explanation”, as he puts it (Alexander, 1992: 11). In my view, sociology will have to do both: to continue in its critical, demystifying and deconstructive task, while at the same time offering explanations – however temporary, deconstructed and demystified they will have to be. For this is, indeed, the Janus-faced nature of sociology which is in itself an expression of the evolution of our complex societies. One part is facing backwards – it looks at society already made and societal discourse already produced. The other part looks forward – it seeks to understand society and societal discourse in the making, while being invited to fully participate in it.

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