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SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY IN THE TENSION BETWEEN GLOBALISATION AND LOCALISATION: THE MÜNCH – ALEXANDER DEBATE

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Since its inception in Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century, the discipline of sociology has been, often implicitly, situated in a theoretical and political tension between a science of the institutions of particular nation states and a science of global or universal social processes. This tension should not be surprising to sociologists, given our commitment to a sociology of knowledge program which in its strong version suggests that ideas, both scientific and popular, are the products of underlying social processes. In its weak version this argument suggests that scientific beliefs are at least related or relevant to social circumstances (Turner, 1995). Sociology has been both a science with a focus on the specific political and cultural context of the processes of industrialisation and modernisation within given nation states and a science of industrial society in general with an intellectual focus on processes of modernisation and universal industrialisation. In short, sociology reflected from its origins a dualistic focus on local and global processes.

It would be unusual if sociological beliefs were not subject to social processes and therefore in practice sociology typically developed as a set of explanations and understandings of local or national issues and concerns. For example we can identify these "two faces of sociology" (Turner, 1990) in the work of writers like Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon who both argued for the importance of a general belief system (*Nouveau Christianisme*) and reflected the specific political conditions of revolutionary France. While sociology was subject to the general influence of the French Revolution and the industrial revolution (Nisbet, 1967), it evolved in terms of national traditions, giving rise to a variety of sociological approaches (Levine, 1995). For example, while Max Weber's famous general theory of power (in the distinction between class, status and party) was an attempt to provide a general framework for sociological theory, his substantive sociological questions were a direct response to the peculiar configuration of social classes in late nineteenth-century Germany, where he attempted to develop a specific understanding of the peculiarities of the Junkers, the politically marginal middle class and the reformist working class. In similar fashion Herbert Spencer's reflection on the relationship between

the individual and society was a direct product of the problems of individualism in English liberalism.

Although sociology as a perspective on modernisation processes had its origins in European societies, specifically in France and Germany, it is well known that the professionalisation of sociology as a university discipline depended significantly on institutional developments in North America, particularly in the University of Chicago. While in Europe the development of sociology as a perspective on industrial societies had been influenced significantly by the nature of social class struggle, the development of American sociology was more influenced by the problems of an ethically diverse urban environment, by questions therefore of migration, and by a social pragmatism which was committed to the reform of a racist society (Smith, 1988). From those somewhat different starting points, European and North American sociology have been separated not only by different perspectives on substantive political and social issues but also by significantly different theoretical styles. North American sociology has been generally characterised by a concern for large scale empirical surveys using survey data analysis, and European sociology has been more concerned with philosophical, conceptual and theoretical issues. Although this simplistic contrast between empiricism and theoretical sociology should not be exaggerated, it nevertheless indicates an important difference between North American and European traditions. These tensions and ambiguities were clearly illustrated by the role of German intellectuals as migrant intellectuals in North America during the Nazi period. The debates about facism and mass society served to emphasise the ambiguity of radical European theorists in relation to American empiricism in a context of democratic struggles against fascist authoritarianism (Lowenthal, 1987: 201–215).

Against the background of these trans-Atlantic conflicts, American sociology came to dominate world sociology through its professionalisation, the development of applied social research, and university support for sociology departments. Within this context, the sociological theories of Talcott Parsons came to play a crucial role as a mediation between the classical sociology of Weber, Durkheim and Simmel, and American social reformism. Parsonian sociology, while a dominant element in American professional sociology, was nevertheless internally criticised by conflict theory, by symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology and exchange theory (Alexander, 1987). The intellectual conflict between European and North American sociology has in recent years often hinged around conflicting interpretations of both Weber and Parsons. Within this framework one can see the rise of neo-functionalism (Alexander, 1985) as an attempt to reassert the vitality of North American sociology through new interpretations of structural functionalism against its European critics

(Robertson and Turner, 1991). In this struggle over the legacies of Weber and Parsons the question of sociology's relationship to fascism has been a major if submerged issue. Recent interpretations of Parsons have underlined his involvement in progressive democratic politics and have rejected the idea of Parsons as merely a Cold War warrior, a spokesperson for capitalist hegemony (Gerhardt, 1993). By contrast, the view of Weber as a defender of nationalist and authoritarian politics remains entrenched, given for example Weber's views on migrant labour east of the Elb, his views on the Russian Revolution and his commitment to a strong German state (Weber, 1995).

This historic struggle between American and European sociology for intellectual leadership developed into a new stage with the collapse of organised Communism in Eastern Europe, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the first stages of German reunification. Richard Münch's critical views on American sociology can be seen as a call to a renewal of the leadership of German sociology in world sociology, and as a reflection of the growing political and economic significance of Germany not only within Europe but within the global economy. There is no need here to repeat the debate which has taken place between Richard Münch, Jeffrey Alexander and Donald Levine in the pages of *Theory,* The Newsletter of the Research Committee on Social Theory of the International Sociological Association (reprinted in the *Swiss Journal of Sociology*, 3, 1995). Münch's views on "Anglo-American cultural imperialism" (Münch, 1993: 61) are only too well known and understood. These views to some extent reinforced and repeated earlier arguments (Münch, 1991).

Some aspects of Münch's position are expressed elsewhere in contemporary German sociology, specifically with respect to the interpretation of Weber's sociology. Post-war debates between American and European scholars over the legacy of Weber can be dated from the historic encounter in Heidelberg in 1964 to celebrate the hundredth year of Weber's birth. For Mommsen (1989: 185) this event "signified a revitalised interest in the Federal Republic in Max Weber's work and a willingness to take-up the running where American scholarship had left off." Once more, Talcott Parsons became an object of criticism because of his allegedly false interpretations of Weber, specifically over the question of the translation of the word *Herrschaft*, which Parsons naively rendered as "leadership". In recent years this critique of Parsons has been re-established by Wilhelm Hennis who is quite explicit in his exegetical reappropriation of the German quality of Weber's sociology. He argues "Weber was a *German* thinker, from the land of 'Doctor Faustus'" (Hennis, 1988: 195); the novels of Thomas Mann are regarded as the best literary approach to the intellectual environment of Weber. Second, the misunderstanding of the Weber thesis regarding Protestantism and capitalism, which is so common

apparently amongst the followers of Parsons, "no longer happens among German scholars" (Hennis, 1988: 26) with the single exception of Jürgen Habermas, who turns Weber's primary interest in the theory of communicative action "on its head" (Hennis, 1998: 201). In these intellectual developments we see not only an attempt to reassert the intellectual leadership of German sociologists but to claim that the exegesis of German sociology has to be left to German speakers. This interpretation is fully in line with Münch's view about language and so-called American imperialism.

These nationalistic struggles over intellectual leadership in the world of sociology have a number of negative consequences. First there is a tendency to exaggerate the homogeneity of national sociology traditions and their dominant intellectual interests. For example within both North America and Germany one can find an extreme variation in types of sociology and therefore there is always an exaggeration in the notion of "American sociology" or "German sociology". In short, nationalist struggles suppress the inherent heterogeneity of forms of sociological thinking within a nation state context. Secondly, these nationalist confrontations will further fragment sociology both as a discipline and as a professional grouping, leading to further difficulties in securing theoretical cumulation in sociological theory (Turner, 1989). Thirdly, it exposes sociological theory to the problem of *reductio ad absurdum.* If the concept of German sociology is viable, why not Westphalian sociology or Bavarian sociology. Fourthly, it suppresses the obvious necessity for not only comparative sociology but for genuine international collaboration over common global problems and issues. For example, while research on Aboriginal society and culture is a topic of particular concern to Australian anthropologists and sociologists, the issues of aboriginality, otherness and native rights are issues of global concern in contemporary politics. Finally, we could see these conflicts between national and universal aspects of sociology as an inevitable outcome of the dialectic between the local and the global which has been observed by a variety of contemporary sociologists (Featherstone, Lash and Robertson, 1995). These criticisms indicate that the current "nationalist" turn in European sociology will have distinctively negative consequences for the coherence and continuity of the discipline. In a context of increasing globalization, a nationalist or parochial orientation is literally reactionary as a platform for the development of sociology.

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