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THE CONCEPT OF TRANSACTION: ITS ANALYTICAL SCOPE AND THE ASSUMPTIONS IT CONVEYS

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The notion of transaction was developed from observations of life. By daily life we mean a familiar universe within which everyone is called upon to move and in which the “here” and the “now” refer to an “elsewhere” in time and space. Daily life is full of events and problems that need to be solved. This is true regardless of the level taken into consideration, whether ambassador or teacher. It applies to various areas of activity: occupation, family and so on. Thus, one can speak of the daily life in the European Parliament just as one can speak of the daily life of an ordinary individual as Goffman analyses it. Each level has its type of competence. The ordinary individual may be all the more inventive if he is disadvantaged.

Viewed from this starting-point, initiative and invention constitute the original experience. This presupposes that everyone has a certain latitude, even if opportunities and skills are unequal. Apart from certain exceptions, situations in which the individual must react are semi-structured. They must therefore be compatible with several reactions. The reactions themselves are semi-random, given the specificity of the objectives of each individual and their inventive capacity. This is neither a game of chance nor a social machine made all the more effective by the strict interdependence of its elements. The sequence that will be established at the “end of the game” is only partially predictable. Bifurcations are possible, and evolutions may be marked by events emanating from a momentary random interference between a plurality of sequences. Moreover, as we are not in a game of chance, prediction is possible and useful to the extent that it affords perceptions the possible occurrence of certain developments. This will furthermore give meaning to the notion of “scenario” to which we will refer later.

Rejection of the hierarchy between macro-, meso- and micro-sociology

Forced innovation and modes of flexible interdependence presuppose a rejection of a strict hierarchy between macro, meso and micro, especially if these diverse scales are associated with directly identifiable empirical elements.

When this hierarchy is adopted and linked to empirical elements, the “micro”, for example daily life, introduces simple variants with regard to more global injunctions. We prefer to consider the interference between levels and scales of intervention from the perspective of the notion of situation and context. The situation takes account of the elements upon which the transaction has a direct hold. The context comprises the data that have an incidental effect on the problem to be resolved but upon which one does not have a direct hold. The two are distributed differently at each level of intervention. For example, a teacher defines the context with his class, as does the Ministry of Education, which sends him its directives. For this ministry, teachers are an element of the context whose evolution is not directly controlled. The perspectives are reversed according to the positions. If we consider a given issue, we find ourselves confronted by a network of transactions whose inductions are multilateral. The extension and duration of certain inductions must, however, be taken into account. Moreover, they must contend with material and quantitative facts. Thus, an analysis can be introduced which concerns the pace of transformation. For certain contextual elements their particularity is their slow rate of change. For instance, what makes language unique is that it is a tool of expression and communication resulting from the slow and gradual nature of the modifications it undergoes. In addition to the pace of transformation, there is also the spatial extension of certain effects. If in the current Belgian context, a reform of the judiciary arises from a complex action in which transaction and negotiation are intertwined, the results will have an impact whose extension and duration will contribute to redefining a context. The distinction between context and situation thus becomes more pertinent. We can now reintroduce the notion of micro, meso and macro, linking it to extension and duration while recognising the diverse origins of what has been produced.

Contribution to a sociology of innovation

The agent is a locus of arbitration, and interactions between agents generate a collective creativity that allows problems that arise to be resolved. The transactions are numerous. They may contribute to inventing either the rules of the game or to creating new orientations. They may have an impact of convergence or of imposition.

The significance of transactions is all the stronger when they bear upon conflicts of legitimacy or confront several realms of significance. It is at that point that the emotional and the rational intermingle, because the emergence of “common sense” presupposes the construction of a new model of intelligibi-

lity. This new model cannot be imposed by decree. It is generated moreover in temporal sequences in which creation and diffusion are interlocked. In moments of transition, transactional products such as new models of intelligibility will allow for the resumption of negotiations which were deadlocked because disagreement was too fundamental.

Coherence takes shape against an incoherent background

With regard to interference between the many levels that structure social existence, it is important to distinguish between conflicts and contradictions. Conflicts may be resolved, whereas contradictions persist. They result from tensions between incompatible demands. The method suggested presupposes that contradictory demands beyond conflicts of interest contribute towards an understanding of social reality. The basis upon which it is built is partially incoherent, even if adjustments are already manifestations of a propensity to equilibrium manifestations. The objective of sociology is not to discover a coherence already present which may be disrupted by actions at variance with its own volition. Whereas there are adjustments that take place virtually automatically, given a certain number of systemic demands, coherence is more a product than a pre-existing situation. Partial processes need to be explained in order to be able to abandon the sense of the game of chance. In view of these suppositions, we shall give preference to the Marxist notion of “social formation” rather than to the term “society”. The latter is characterized by the objectivism and territorial closure of the nation-state. Social formation, on the other hand, is of variable geometry. Coherence is a provisional result, whereas the term “society” suggests a unified entity. The existence of contradictions gives a particular significance to the initial hypothesis relating to semi-structured situations and semi-random reactions. Moreover, these situations are shot through by oppositional couples which must be taken into account. Issues are determined within these tensions, and for each issue there is a transitional network of reciprocal interference. Each has unequal effects on the convergences promoting overall movement.

Let us take the field of education: the classroom, with the daily interaction between teacher and pupils, may be considered an elementary unit, but it is part of the school, and that presupposes a shared direction. What happens at this level may in turn be analysed as a locus of transaction which is itself in relation with the Ministry. The educational field is part of a broader whole, such as the labour market, which impacts upon it. In other fields in which

relative status is more fluid, the effects of the networks may be more decisive because the induction points are less predetermined.

Anti-random processes and individuation

Transactional products participate in anti-random processes: disengaging from the game patterns of chance and developing patterns of predictability. All this enables every individual to build for his daily life causality models which may remain vague and implicit: what reaction will a given initiative trigger from whom and with what consequences for whom? How do these anti-random processes combine with an opening of the field of possibilities? This is the particularly relevant paradox in the current context, in which the transition from one type of equilibrium to another creates uncertainty about the future.

This question is all the more relevant when, as G. Simmel would say, current forms of social existence increase the degrees of liberty. Individuation promotes an expression of preferences which, if not realized, is perceived as a lack. This individuation is ambiguous because it allows both personal exploration and massification. It gives rise to both individualism and new forms of solidarity. Structuring as it does the contemporary context, this individuation lends transactions a special status. Significant sequences come about as in social negotiation in a semi-transparent game in which the partners are not denied information to which they are entitled. But they must know that they are not entitled to all information. This is a transposition of E. Goffman's paradigm of stage and backstage.

Thus, we arrive at a dual conclusion: the coherence of the social element is not a precondition, and the contemporary context favours individuation. How do transactions, as anti-random processes, intervene in the creation of a social formation? Here we shall distinguish how transaction operates both in a readiness to cooperate and in the invention of means of coordination.

From constraint to a readiness to cooperate

Shared stakes may force an exchange but the readiness to cooperate may remain weak, given the differing ideas about the future. Given the constraint, no one has an interest in abandoning the exchange. But transactions that lead to the emergence of a project enable the zones of interaction to be broadened on the basis of confidence. This results in assessment criteria which facilitate conflict

management through negotiation. But even after complicity is established, it remains unstable, because the shared project can always be disrupted by alternative projects. Consequently, the confidence/mistrust regime is central to an understanding of the evolution of the sequence from which a large number of transactional games results. With the notion of sequence, processes are at the core of the analysis and therefore also time and movement. Inertia or standstill means decomposition and death.

Conflicts of legitimacy are a central issue. Their settlement, even partial, is not founded in explicit negotiations based on reciprocal concessions. The challenge is of a different nature: the invention of a new orientation through the confrontation of points of view each of which claiming legitimacy.

The readiness to cooperate gives rise to the search for and introduction of coordination procedures.

Complementarity and tension between coordination and cooperation

Coordination procedures are particularly important in that the system of exchange is complex on account of the objectives and the enlargement of relations. This is reinforced when these relations comprise the personal and the interpersonal. The coordination of multiple actions may be based on two different processes: formalization or measurement. Formalization gives rise to the codification of behaviour, in the way that codes of courtesy made it possible to propose adequate reactions and limit the unexpected. This codification was applicable in various areas, such as the exercise of family roles, and it served as a model for an entire conception of law. Thus, it is possible to propose an equivalent treatment for everyone, bearing in mind field and position.

The coordination that derives from formalization presupposes social closure. The effect is different when coordination is based on the creation of measurement instruments. As with money, such instruments enable heterogeneous goods to be compared and some degree of reciprocity in an exchange to be achieved. If money is the parameter that allows the subject to be explained, the measurements can be numerous. For example, a couple will invent measurements of equivalence in an exchange in which the contributions of the partners are heterogeneous. These principles are the basis for a sense of fairness in a context in which there is a deformalization of male and female roles. Many decentralized exchanges can proliferate without causing social coordination to deteriorate, provided that certain measurement modes are adopted as a shared

assessment reference. These measurements assume more prominence in so far as the object of the exchange implies technical and economic interdependency.

Cooperation and coordination are complementary. But once coordination is established, it can raise demands which have adverse effects on the project originally inspiring cooperation. These tensions between two types of complementary developments have led us to distinguish an intentional logic which is driven by the motivation for projects and an objective logic which produces its effects independently of the meaning experienced. This results in dissonances which are managed in transactional sequences. They give rise either to forms of reappropriation or to compromises defining an acceptable minimum.

Tension between integration and social cohesion

When coordination through measurement acquires considerable weight, its autonomy increases. Thus, tension may arise between social integration and cohesion, to cite the illuminating distinction proposed by O. Tschannen. From this point of view, integration is not defined in the sense of the "assimilation" of different cultures and communities. It results from a coordination that enables social formations to function. Techno-economic measurements are then sufficient to regulate interdependencies. This mode of coordination is compatible with a growth of individuation and the proliferation of identification criteria. Such a dual development may lead to a decomposition of more global projects, which can then threaten social cohesion. This last implies the adoption of a coordination project as the foundation of a moral order. This is particularly risky because such a mode of coordination imposes constraints that must be controlled, notably by politics, and sometimes to the detriment of social solidarity.

The hypothesis advanced presupposes that today the two processes can be dissociated. Thus, we are caught up by a dual requirement: coordination founded upon equivalency measurements minimally based on a moral order, and cooperation necessary for a cohesion which presupposes a well-established moral order. In this way of linking action and structuration, the transactional networks constitute the setting for the invention of an acceptable intestine. To do so, there must be reactions at several levels.

These developments help show the current relevance of a transaction approach. The same holds true for understanding how, in diverse social contexts, permanent innovation takes shape.

Transaction and the complexity of the social coordinate

Sociology must provide the tools for understanding the complexity of the social dimension. To that end, it is appropriate to draw up a matrix with several entry points. Entry on the basis of transaction as proposed here is particularly relevant for a sociology which addresses various types of intervention in social existence. Transaction is characterized as a form of sociability in the way Simmel uses the term. This form arises as a structuration of social practice deriving from the necessity to articulate opposing and mutually blocking demands and responds to a permanent challenge at the root of a vital dynamism. This perspective is the opposite of the utopian spirit which has haunted the West since the 16th century and which is based on an imaginary notion of hope. The utopian spirit cherishes the dream of an age in which contradictions have been overcome and the ideal and final society has dawned.

Transaction might be regarded as a social form to the extent that it articulates individuation and socialization, confidence and distrust, and conflict and solidarity. Through it, mediation is constructed between the formal and the informal, between the latent and the manifest. Consequently, transaction is not unilateral, as when a single pole is evoked, such as conflict or fusion. In a sense, it is close to negotiation, but in many respects, it differs from it. For although transaction, like negotiation, presupposes the invention of acceptable means of exchange, innovation is not based primarily on reciprocal concessions.

Transaction: from a heuristic notion to a methodological paradigm

A number of researchers interested in this type of approach have been meeting for the past four or five years. A research committee has been set up in the framework of the A.I.S.L.F. (Association internationale des sociologues de langue française – International Association of French-speaking Sociologists). These exchanges have resulted in several publications. The purpose has been to compare analyses in which transaction has served as a guiding reference. Starting from different terrains and issues, the point is to move progressively from a heuristic notion to the construction of a methodological paradigm which organizes a matrix of questions as Merton did for functional analysis. Also, by identifying similarities between certain fields, comparisons should make it progressively possible to construct model situations around which probable development scenarios could be identified. In a certain sense, this is akin to the approaches used in the English-speaking world that are based on “social scripts”. Whether at the methodological level or at the level of

partial theories, these encounters seek to accumulate a foundation of knowledge on the basis of the results.

This text presents an approach that began with fieldwork which has progressively attracted a network of researchers. Authors with similar viewpoints have not been cited but clearly a debate in this regard could be useful.

For a more comprehensive presentation of these ideas several works are suggested in which the reader can learn more about their origin and development.

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