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THE SOCIAL TRANSACTION: THE ISSUES RAISED BY THIS ANALYTICAL METHOD

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As it is obviously difficult to present a conceptual view of life in society in just a few pages, this discussion of the perspectives developed by Jean Remy will draw not only on the paper published in the *Swiss Journal of Sociology* (1997, 15–22) but also, to dispel ambiguity or to broaden the scope of the discussion, on other articles by the same author in which an original “style” of sociology is discernible.

Jean Remy presents us with a method of sociological analysis, or more precisely with a mode of entry into and conduct of analysis; but at the same time he seems to defend a philosophy of social action, whose nature we shall seek to specify. Although these two levels are, in our view, frequently interrelated in his thought, we shall focus for the time being on the former with a view to bringing to light certain characteristics.

The author reminds us that the notion of transaction was forged from empirical research into everyday life in an urban environment; but a reader coming across it for the first time in the article published in the *Swiss Journal of Sociology* would perhaps have found it difficult to form a precise idea of the concept. In this connection, Jean Remy’s contribution to the special issue of *Environnement et société* dealing with the social transaction (1996, 9–31) is a useful source of clarification: the transaction, as a category of relationship between actors, must be understood both in terms of *negotiation* and in terms of *exchange*. The importance of negotiation is due to the fact that it is a mode of conflict resolution and makes use of innovation. Exchange, which is not to be viewed in terms of a narrow market modality and which is fundamentally social, generates long-term relations of solidarity in informal processes through the establishment of deferred reciprocity. The transaction occurs, so to speak, at the meeting-point of negotiation and exchange: it is the many types of “hybridization” between negotiation and exchange which constitute the key object of transaction-based analysis.

We trust that these opening remarks will shed light on the “spirit” underlying this approach. It is a spirit which reflects, first and foremost, a rejection of or rather a reaction to the paradigms that dominated the French-language scene in the 1970s, which took the form of structuralism, determinism, “anti-humanism”

and holism.¹ Jean Remy has been very forthright in this regard in some of his writings²; and we may conclude from the fact that he was already expressing his interest in the transaction in the two volumes of *Produire ou reproduire?*, dating from 1978 and 1980 respectively, that he himself contributed to the reversal of the trend discernible during the 1980s.

The spirit of this approach is also expressed through positive principles, which we shall endeavour to present here systematically, grouping together what Jean Remy tends to divulge successively in the course of his papers in the *Swiss Journal of Sociology*. Transactions serve in point of fact to denote a category of phenomena which are relatively unstructured and involve an unforeseen element: attention is thus drawn primarily, as stressed by Jean Remy at the beginning of his paper, to “semi-structured” situations to which individuals react in a “semi-random” fashion.

In such a context, which allows only relative and partial prediction, a significant role must be accorded to the actor: we must discard the fallacious image of somebody who is purely and simply “subject to influence” and instead acknowledge the individual’s potential for initiative, expressed in the manner in which available leeway or scope for action, however fragmentary, is turned to account. Through this potential for initiative, and the way in which it is exercised, the actor may be reassessed – not to say rehabilitated – in his basic dimension as a project-bearer.

As the outcome of the situation considered here is not basically predetermined, save in exceptional cases, we must investigate the interplay of the processes involved in the interaction and explore the time sequences in order to be in a position to report on a particular result. Jean Remy is motivated by a constant concern to bring to light the dynamics of social life in terms of sequences of circumstances – which may even include paradox – to such an extent that this has become an integral feature of his analytical approach.

A final characteristic of this approach is the prominence given to the process of structuring, or what is happening, as opposed to the structured, or what is already there, in other words to what is still fluid and changing as opposed to crystallized forms. It is this preference which logically results in Jean Remy’s strong affirmation that, in the case of a social whole, cohesiveness should not be viewed as a “precondition” but, on the contrary, as a “product” and, even

1 At least these were the features that we highlighted at the beginning of our article for the *Swiss Journal of Sociology* (1992, 198).

2 Especially in the early pages of his article „Daily life and social transactions: micro or macro-sociological perspectives” (1992, 84 f.).

more appropriately, as a “provisional outcome”. It is actually constructed through sequences of interaction between the actors involved.

We feel that a conclusion should be drawn from the foregoing observations: the transaction-based theoretical approach, as defended and illustrated by Jean Remy, represents a *variant* of a rapidly developing paradigm, namely the paradigm of action (or, for those who prefer the scholarly language of Jean-Michel Berthelot, the “agential schema” (*schéma actanciel*)). Jean Remy himself stressed this crucial point when he wrote: “The transaction gives priority to analysis in terms of action” (1992, 111). We shall next offer our own comments on this assertion. Any analysis in terms of action must take agents as its *starting-point*. And this starting-point is meaningless unless the agents possess a certain measure of *competence*, at least in practical terms, which makes them real actors. Moreover, this competence has no scope unless there are spaces in which it can be exercised by the actor: hence the *autonomy*, although it may only be partial, which the actor enjoys is of vital importance. It is only through this combination of competence and autonomy that actors acquire the inventiveness that they are capable of displaying and which is a recurring theme in the work of Jean Remy. It is not surprising therefore that Maurice Blanc and Marc Mormont described the urge “to found a sociology of freedom” as the cornerstone of Jean Remy’s intellectual project (1996, 6). For our part, we shall merely note without undue emphasis that the development of a “sociology of autonomy”, which is manifestly a cherished ambition of Jean Remy, is perfectly consistent with an approach developed in the light of the paradigm of action; it is, so to speak, its culmination.

The connection with a generic paradigm should not, however, lead us to overlook the originality of the variant proposed by Jean Remy: while the transactional approach does justice to the individual by refusing to reduce his status to that of a “specification of a general category”, at the same time it tends to make *interaction* the elementary unit of analysis. The transaction gives rise to a sequence which occurs in time and the intelligibility of this sequence depends on an understanding of the processes of interaction which develop in that context. Interaction and action are closely interrelated in this sociological approach: is it going too far to add that the two will meet, so to speak, around the central figure of reciprocal action?

The transaction, as a form of interaction, must be understood, first and foremost, through the processes of which it is composed; but it must also be viewed from the angle of the results that it produces. As a rule, it entails a relatively new definition of the situation which will reorient subsequent sequences of interaction in a particular direction. In this regard, it seems permissible, even if the expression is not, to our knowledge, used by Jean Remy, to speak of

transaction effects, which constitute a particular form of composition effects: we may include under this heading the development of rules of the game or the creation of new situations to which Jean Remy specifically refers in his text. If invention exists – or, to put it more modestly, if a measure of invention exists – in social life, it stems primarily, as we have noted, from the actors themselves; but it also results from the sequence of circumstances inherent in the interplay of processes: Jean Remy's analytical method demonstrates in this regard its incontestable originality by bringing out the *positive* dimension of unintentional effects, which cannot be defined solely in terms of the doubtless significant cases of “perverse effects” or counter-purpose. It is understandable in these circumstances that the Belgian sociologist had such a vivid sense of his “contribution to a sociology of innovation”.

The transactional approach has two additional assets which make it particularly attractive. On the one hand, Jean Remy applies it with genuine inventiveness, using it as a tool that enables him to move beyond onesided views that reflect only a single facet of social reality. He is constantly at pains to bring out the frequently ambivalent nature of the consequences: for example, the new freedoms offered to the individual are certainly conducive to an enrichment of personal life but also carry the risk of a kind of dilution in a mass environment. The reference to Simmel here is explicit; but it does not require such a direct reference for the Simmelian tone of the writings to be repeatedly discernible: the attention given to eluding the pitfalls of unilaterality is combined in this regard with the priority assigned to processes and the emphasis on reciprocal action. Jean Remy clearly acknowledges Simmel as one of his mentors; and what he derives from him above all, as might be expected, is a particular kind of sociological approach, perhaps even an “implicit methodology”, whose subtle structure he has endeavoured to dismantle in an article full of empathy and insight (1995, 149–176).

Furthermore, the transactional approach is accompanied by a kind of partiality for what Jean Remy calls “conflictual cooperation”; and it is here that the linkage occurs between his *analytical* tendency and his *normative* tendency, between the interpretative method and the philosophy of social action. This encounter has no doubt contributed to the success of the approach; and it certainly endows it with an additional attraction. For we thus find united and combined in a single vision the advantages of realism and optimism. Realism inasmuch as the existence of a consensus is not prematurely postulated: divergent principles may be held to be legitimate, depending on the areas of action and the form of involvement of agents; but effective cooperation is capable of being established on the basis of maintained differences. Optimism inasmuch as the transaction is basically perceived as a means of conflict settlement, a

source of provisional solutions: it is endowed, as Marie-Noëlle Schurmans puts it, with a “pacification function” (1994, 150). Here we seem to be linking up with a school of thought inaugurated by the Webbs, which places collective negotiation at the heart of democracy; it should be added, however, that, by virtue of their informal or even diffuse character, transactional processes, which do not necessarily involve an explicit concord of wills, are capable of producing outcomes unattainable through “traditional” negotiation.

This strictly normative usage does not in itself pose a problem; and the fact that the notion of transaction can entail two differentiated types of usage raises no particular objection. On the express condition, however, that the two registers are not confused. In our view, this principle has not always been respected and a number of contributions to the transactional approach display, if not wholesale confusion of the two levels, at least the superposition of strictly analytical usage and normative usage. One notes a tendency, for example, to separate the “good” from the “bad” transactions of which arrangements are supposed to form part; or else cases of successful transactions, or even opportunities for transaction, are, so to speak, welcomed in a manner that is incompatible with the distancing required of a sociologist. This first difficulty is compounded by a second stemming from a common pitfall, namely the tendency to be content with a simple retranslation of diverse phenomena into the sociological language of one’s choice: the transaction then runs the risk of becoming a mere dressing to cover the most disparate illustrations in the absence of any real progress towards an explanation.

At all events, whether as a consequence of the uncontrolled intrusion of the normative into analysis or as a result of its dispersion in an apparently unordered multiplicity of transactions, a fundamental question is generally avoided, even by Jean Remy himself: at what point does the proposed approach reach the limits of its relevance? In what contexts are transactions of any kind likely to prove impossible? Can we identify situations whose characteristics make the emergence of a transaction unlikely?

These questions are dictated first and foremost by the rules of epistemological and theoretical caution; but they can also arise in response to certain developments in sociological theory. For example, the sociology of collective mobilization has been instrumental in reminding us that there can be no compromise with identity: the more exclusive the defence of identity, the less the social movement launched in its defence is open to any kind of transaction. The transactional processes are no doubt likely to affect the identity of the participants and in some cases to set it on a new footing; but a collective identity which is perceived to be under threat cannot be the subject of a transaction, be it implicit or explicit, latent or manifest. Matter for reflection is also offered by conflict

theory and the notion developed after Simmel by Lewis Coser of “unrealistic conflicts”, whose specific parameters would tend to rule out recourse to transactions. These are just a few pointers which need, of course, to be explored in greater depth and expanded; but, whatever angle of attack is chosen, the underlying problem must be tackled head on: we await the establishment of a clear dividing-line between phenomena capable of being explained in terms of social transaction and those to which such an explanation is not applicable. The transactional analysis approach can only be strengthened by a clarification of this kind.

It is always tempting to propose a particular shift in the approach examined but suggestions of this nature generally reveal the preferences and priorities of the “critic” while failing to shed more light on the method or theory under discussion. This is why we have decided, as a matter of principle, to refrain from getting involved in this relatively futile game. At the same time, Jean Remy’s text itself invites us to bend this rule: the reference, on the one hand, to the “models of causality” devised by the individual in his daily life (18) and the allusion, on the other, to “the building of a new model of intelligibility” incorporating shared meanings (16) manifestly draw on the cognitive dimension of behaviour and interaction, so that one is prompted to draw attention to the additional light that could be shed on the transactional approach if it was systematically taken into consideration.

In conclusion, we wish to put one last question which is in some respects impertinent: is it appropriate and desirable to attempt to construct a paradigm from the notion of transaction? It should first be specified that any doubt that may exist does not relate to the method chosen: Jean Remy is fully justified in stressing the *methodological* character of such a paradigm; and we have ourselves referred in our paper to the Arlon seminar to the potential development of a matrix of questions, taking Merton’s formal paradigm by way of illustration. But efforts in this direction have hitherto been basically exploratory: there is no lack of strong intuition or original ideas for research but they have not – as yet – been really organized to form an integrated whole. One has the impression of dealing with varied applications of a method of analysis rather than the outline of a paradigm. But does that really matter so much? The analytical method has demonstrated its heuristic capability; and it is solidly underpinned, as we have seen, by a more general paradigm, that of action. We shall refrain, of course, from drawing any conclusion in this regard: it is for Jean Remy himself and his associates to make the final choice in the matter; but it is a question which should, in our view, be raised.

At all events, and to revert to the main point, the resources of the analytical method do not seem to have been exhausted; and, as Jean Remy appears to

wish, the ultimate test of its merit will consist in the scale of its contribution to the analysis of social change.

Translated by Patricia Deane

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