

Sociology Upside Down: From Systems to Subjects

New Cultural Frontiers

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Abstract

Historically, sociology was developed in industrial capitalist societies in the 19th century. Marked by this period, sociology has been concerned with 'systems', especially political systems within the confines of the national State. Dominant functionalist and Marxist approaches to sociology both understood the social world as strongly integrated, economically, politically and culturally, either into an organic whole or into a class-divided capitalist system. More recent approaches similarly focus on the 'system' understood as a set of dependencies, above and beyond the power exercised by any particular social actors. Yet, none of these traditional approaches is adequate to understanding the world today, which is marked by globalization processes and movements, which are more cultural than 'social'. In a world of new communications technologies, in which markets are fundamentally beyond the control of what used to be seen as national 'societies' and actors, a new sociology is needed, focused on the subject rather than the system. Normatively, this new sociology of the subject, emphasizing the roles of actors endowed with universal rights, is required, bringing in a new concern for values that are the ultimate warrants of successful societies, characterized by a high degree of free participation in public life.

Keywords: sociology; subjects; globalization; culture; communications technologies

Resumé

Historiquement, la sociologie s'est développée dans les sociétés industrielles capitalistes au 19^{ème} siècle. Marquée par cette période, la sociologie s'intéresse aux 'systèmes', et tout particulièrement aux systèmes politiques dans le cadre de l'État-nation. Les approches dominantes fonctionnaliste et marxiste considéraient toutes deux que le monde social était fortement intégré, économiquement, politiquement et culturellement, au sein d'un tout organique ou d'un système capitaliste divisé en classes. Des approches plus récentes se focalisent sur le « système » au-delà des positions de pouvoir de tel ou tel acteur individuel. Toutefois, ces approches traditionnelles ne suffisent pas à comprendre le monde contemporain, marqué par des processus et des mouvements de mondialisation, qui sont plus culturels que sociaux. Dans un monde de nouvelles technologies de communication, dans lequel les marchés sont fondamentalement hors du contrôle des sociétés et acteurs nationaux, une nouvelle sociologie est nécessaire, centrée sur le sujet plutôt que le système. Sur le plan normatif, cette nouvelle sociologie du sujet, qui souligne le rôle d'acteurs dotés de droits universels, apporte une attention nouvelle aux valeurs qui sont les garanties ultimes des sociétés caractérisées par un degré élevé de participation libre à la vie publique.

Mot-Clés: sociologie; sujets; mondialisation; culture; technologies de communication

Resumen

Históricamente, la sociología se ha desarrollado en las sociedades capitalistas industriales del siglo XIX. Marcada por este periodo, la sociología se ha preocupado por los "sistemas", especialmente por los sistemas políticos enmarcados en el Estado-nación. Los enfoques funcionalista y marxista

dominantes interpretaron el mundo social como profundamente integrado, económicamente, políticamente y culturalmente, ya sea en un todo orgánico o en un sistema capitalista dividido en clases. Enfoques más recientes también siguen centrándose en el “sistema”, por encima y más allá del poder ejercido por cualquier actor social. No obstante, ninguno de esos enfoques tradicionales resulta suficiente para interpretar el mundo de hoy, marcado por procesos de globalización y movimientos que son más culturales que “sociales”. En un mundo de nuevas tecnologías de la comunicación, en el que los mercados están fuera del control de lo que solía ser considerado como actores y “sociedades” nacionales, una nueva sociología es necesaria, centrada en el sujeto y no en el sistema. En un plano normativo, esta nueva sociología del sujeto, que enfatiza los roles de los actores dotados de derechos universales, trae una nueva preocupación por los valores que son las mayores garantías de sociedades caracterizadas por un alto grado de participación libre en la vida pública.

Palabras-claves: *sociología; sujetos; globalización; cultura; tecnologías de comunicación*

What are the main changes that have occurred during the last half century or so, transforming everybody’s personal and collective life? Most people would mention technological innovations and especially communication networks, but at the same level the fall of the Berlin wall and of the Soviet Empire, the growing importance of open conflicts between the USA and the Muslim world, the endless strife between Israel and Palestinians, the acceleration in growth of the Chinese economy or the spread of AIDS which, after a first shock, seems to be controlled in rich countries but continues to spread in many poor countries, especially in Africa. The first comment which must be made about this list is that it does not include any sociological categories or problems, even if some sociological elements can be found in each item. By way of consequence we are driven to the conclusion that ‘Society’ as a sociological concept has disappeared or, at least, has lost a significant part of its importance.

Traditionally, ‘Society’ meant either a nationally created set of institutions and processes that combine integration and change or, more generally, an ideal type such as *industrial society* or even *emergent countries*. Thus, historically, the idea of ‘Society’ was dominated by the idea of politics, particularly politics institutionalized in the form of the Nation-State as the only holder of legal violence and the guarantee of social order. The welfare State, Developing countries, the industrial Nation-State are thus different forms of ‘Society’ as traditionally conceived. At other times, ‘Society’ has been understood in a broader sense as referring to an underlying socio-economic unity beyond the State, a unity that integrates all aspects of life, economic, political, social, cultural and so on. In other words, ‘Society’ is constitutive, creating social order, within or beyond the Nation-State, and simultaneously new kinds of social actors, relationships and institutions.

This view of 'Society' is shared by functionalists and by critical sociologists. Functionalists describe different institutional roles and how they diversify and change within any concrete social setting understood as an organic whole. Critical sociologists, including Marxists and feminists, but more recently also postmodernists, emphasize that the integrating function of 'Society' is a threatening expression of systemic domination. This domination is not simply in hands of powerful groups, like classes or others organized social groups, but in hands of general not organized categories, like "men". It can as well act at the level of the 'system', for example, by capitalism or patriarchal culture. At the beginning of the 21st century, the reality of the Nation-State and the exercise of domination within political systems -- and the problems associated with them -- still exist, but we all feel that they no longer are sufficient for understanding the whole of our experience. The sociological idea of 'Society' that arose to cope with industrial, capitalist societies are no longer adequate for explaining social life and our experiences today.

The reason for this is that the most important phenomenon is now globalization, not only of productive activities and of financial networks but in mass consumption as well and in the world-wide diffusion of technological appliances, especially computers and internet, or electronic games and cameras. The World Trade Organization deserves its name since China has joined it. In a parallel way, English is the only language which is used in international communication. It is indispensable for major companies which operate in several countries or continents and for scientific communication. But, this institutional and linguistic standardization above and beyond the Nation-State co-exists with a fragmentation and mixing of cultural processes and identities that precisely reject all efforts of homogenization. This includes both the mobilization of various minorities around the protection of their culture, but also the growth of communitarian and xenophobic "counter-movements".

By the processes of globalization, market logics spread world-wide against integrative forces of political order, repelling initiatives to regulate and discipline capitalist markets. The contemporary world is characterized by fundamentally unstable markets and unpredictable processes of social change. The most recent economic crisis is an illustration of the ways in which economy has been separated from social life, because it operates above and beyond the capacity of any social actor to regulate it, especially in the case of financial markets. At the same time, our world defined by rapid technological change and the spread of worldwide communication media that tend to create a "popular culture" which eliminates cultural

differences, but that ultimately fail to achieve this function. In particular we witness a radical questioning, of Western universalistic *Weltanschauung* developed by the “Enlightenment” philosophers.

We no longer live in industrial capitalist societies, societies in which both capitalists and workers were united in their shared conviction of the positive value of work, of technological innovation and of productivity as necessary instruments for securing greater wellbeing. This kind of integrated, shared basis for social life has disintegrated. We have now entered late-modern structures, dominated by communications and the exchange of informations, by uncontrolled economic processes at the global level and by fragmented cultural identities at the local level. All these processes tend to diminish the integrating unifying function that the Nation-State used to play. In contemporary late-modernity, personal and collective experiences are shaped by cultural processes and identities, not by social ones, and certainly not by social relations of production in the sense that marxist thinkers gave to that expression.

No major process of change can be now formulated in terms of social action, social relations or social conflicts. Our world appears to be a highly differentiated system but without autonomous and self-oriented action. This contrasts with the previous half-century when, on the contrary, every book mentioned as major transformations the growth of industrial labour and of its productivity, the extension of industrial conflicts, imperialism, socialism or entrepreneurship and the Keynesian revolution. It was impossible to think outside the central territory of analysis which was occupied by notions like class struggle, socialism, liberalism and so on.

Sociology itself was generally considered as industrial society’s self-analysis and Marxism was primarily interested in building theory and practice characteristic of this type of society. Today, not only are sociological categories seldom mentioned, but sociology itself is often marginalized, on the one hand by economic studies and on the other by philosophical interpretations. We are all of us aware of the strong influence of new economics, rational choice theorists who claim to explain not only the functioning of markets but also human behavior much more broadly, so that Gary Becker calls himself a social, not simply economic, theorist. Economists like Becker now claim to explain what used to be the care of sociology, including relationships like marriage and the family, which are understood as the outcome of rational utility-maximizing individuals. In a different vein, sociology is likewise marginalized by postmodern philosophers, some of whom emphasize that the idea of individual personhood

– the ‘author’, for example – must be substituted by the internal logic of a text. For marxist scholars, individual actors are the end products of a system of domination that creates specific categories of human beings. Social actors, as value-driven subjects, are illusions and are simply the end-products of the system’s internal logic. Between these two views, the economic and the philosophical ones, sociology has become marginalized and the subject has become limited to rational action (as in the economic model) or has disappeared (especially with postmodernists). Moreover, there is the sense of a growing opinion that sociology has been historically overtaken, because it was conceptually bound up with the dynamics of industrial capitalist national societies that have been dissolved and fragmented by globalization processes.

We are at the end of the era of certainties and there is a general questioning of the liberal, social models of the post-war period, models that have lost their efficiency. Sociology was an old “representation” of an industrial capitalist world that no longer exists, which is under attack, and is no longer able to account for current social experiences. Social welfare institutions, as they were created after the Second World War in state-controlled economies, have been losing ground since the beginning of the 1970’s when international competition became more aggressive in a world of open economy. Twenty years after the fall of the USSR, not only is it clear that the Communist Parties no longer have any bright future, but also that especially in European countries – and in others as well - our social democratic systems are faced with very serious difficulties, in particular because new industrial and emergent countries offer lower prices as a consequence of lower wages. In some countries the national health system has taken measures which are contrary to the spirit of solidarity that infused integrated national societies, particularly of the Welfare State type, for example, by refusing to accept expensive medical treatment for elderly people.

Almost everywhere, the programs for health, education and welfare are restricted and in some cases social inequality is increasing. In France, the public school system, which, from the Third Republic period, was a very efficient instrument of upward mobility, no longer creates better opportunities for the poor. More recently, the school system has even probably been a major obstacle for offering better opportunities for the immigrants and the poor in general. And we know that the richest and most powerful nation of the world today has left tens of millions of people out of the health-care system which is more oriented to the middle-

classes than involved in actively campaigning against poverty (so that if President Obama extends health insurance to the whole population it will be a major victory).

This is a matter for sociological analysis but at the same time, these dilemmas introduce political problems. In particular, is there no solution, intellectually and politically speaking, other than global liberalism, leaving the control of the main economic decisions to the market and accepting the negative consequences of this absolute power of the market over poor people, marginalized categories and developing countries? Is there no way of resisting this global capitalism and its negative consequences? To answer this question, we must recognize that the problems which were central in industrial societies are no longer central in our societies. Conflicts between organized labour and owners of capital or managers have lost their importance everywhere, unions are declining and the expression 'working class' no longer corresponds to real objective and subjective categories. A clear cut separation between right-wing and left-wing parties has been blurred as these social categories, specific to a particular historical form of industrial capitalism, have been fragmented. Indeed, at the broadest level, the economy has separated from the social, has become global, free-floating and beyond the ability of any organized actors to regulate it for democratically selected ends. In this globalized world, the 'old' social categories and institutions, like classes and nations, no longer exist as central subjective and objective experiences.

Nevertheless, I must introduce the idea that this weakening of social categories, this separation between economic history and social problems can be positive for the creation of new actors and new types of conflicts and even of political interventions. The separation of economic and social categories and even more the elimination of many mixed social-economic nations make possible – and even necessary – the formation of a new sociology, able to resist the pressure of a market-oriented or war-oriented economic and social analyses.

It may be convenient here to present in a few words the history of sociology from the 1950's of the last century to the beginning of the 21st century. This history can be interpreted as a complex process of transformation of sociology from the study of social systems to an analysis of social actors and of their interactions with other social actors. This process has been complex and difficult because of the major role of Marxism in social analysis, mainly in Western Europe and in Latin America. Functionalist theory was violently attacked by the assumption that the main features of a social structure could be interpreted as forms of social domination. This intellectual orientation joined forces with some non-Marxist analysts, such

as Michel Foucault, who defended the idea that social organization and social representations were new forms of domination. This Marxist sociology reached its final point when sociology itself was conceptualized as an ideology that hides capitalist domination. So the role of Marxism was first positive as a valid critique of the so-called functional-structural sociology, but in a second period, it became negative because of its radical critique of all forms of action which are just, according to it, ‘false consciousness’ in the face of global capitalism. It makes necessary, after the destruction of functionalist and Marxist sociologies, to discover new kinds of actors, social relations and social conflicts.

In societies which no longer believe in religion or traditional principles of legitimation, in societies which are increasingly mass moving societies, in which economic activities are rapidly changing and where informations are imposed by mass media or by State propaganda and in which people are no longer incorporated into communities by face-to-face social relationships, the individual can identify and defend himself only by his right to be an individual – that means that individuals are transformed into subjects which give them “the right to have rights”. These rights are clearly defined in political, social and cultural terms. These rights are superior to social norms in the same way as a constitution is superior to ordinary laws. That explains the basic importance of what British thinkers like I. Berlin have named negative freedom – that is the right to be protected against the decisions taken by all centers of power. Citizens’ rights cannot be identified with political institutions or with political leaders because these institutions tend very often to impose their own power in the name of citizens’ rights. Nonetheless, this notion of the rights of individuals is of central importance.

Many sociologists support very different ideas and underline the relation between personal freedom and personal self-esteem. For them, personal self-esteem cannot be separated from the integration into a real community. In this view, self-esteem is based on mutual good relations with neighbours. According to this important school of thought all basis for identification has been destroyed by mass society. This is the reason why it is necessary to reconstruct social bonds (many say ‘*bindung*’). In this theory, the most important task before us is to recreate shared social values within small groups, since it is no longer possible at the level of, say, the Nation-State. But, this theory is less convincing than expected. First, the autonomy of ‘small groups’ is weaker and weaker in an open ‘society’ because general trends or deep crises transform the life of small groups more profoundly and more easily than in

more stable and traditional societies. A theory that emphasizes the strong integration of individuals into local communities fits better with the “small town” tradition than in new urban situations in Mexico City, New York City or Cairo. Moreover, the emphasis put on integration leads easily to a xenophobic logic emphasizing the protection of a community from outsiders and minority groups.

In contrast, the point of view I am defending here emphasizes the transformation of personal rights into subjects who are conscious of everybody’s rights and first of all of one’s own rights as an individual. This consciousness represents a force of resistance to arbitrary decisions which are bigger and more dangerous than the customs of small communities which are either marginal or involved in more global trends and processes. The logic of personal subjectivation, where the starting point really is the individual and not simply the well-integrated individual, must be defended against processes of socialization, which can destroy individual projects and rights. Moreover, in more immediate political terms, a group of free, strong and creative individuals is more able to reject external and internal attacks than integrated and homogeneous communities. Social psychologists have demonstrated that a minority with strong beliefs can overcome the majority’s spontaneous preferences. It is necessary to strengthen “bottom-up” political processes by supporting individual who are able to defend their own rights, being conscious that by defending their own rights, they defend the same universal rights for everybody. Such people are able to take part in an effort for reconstructing a ‘public space’, a space in which every individual has rights and everyone has the ability to struggle for those rights against experiences and feelings of domination and humiliation.

Such a general conclusion leads to a critique of the privilege which is bestowed on school and family. Too often, institutions are seen as central to ‘socializing’ individuals in a modern mass society. My view is opposite; it considers that everywhere socialization should be subordinated to individuation, that is, to subjectivation. We know that in the present situation a large number of young and even very young people who commit crimes cannot be “cured” by being integrated into a strong family or a small community but, on the contrary, by helping them to transform an external authority into an internal authority and by being conscious of their own rights. It is certainly difficult but it appears to be an innovative way to deal with those problems, which are fundamentally problems about people who are not conscious to the possibility of being social actors, who do not experience themselves in their own lives as

subjects who possess rights and live with others subjects who have the same rights. In a global economic system which is no longer controlled by social and political institutions, a general process of disintegration can only be rejected by everybody's strongest possible mobilization against impersonal and violent power. This includes a reaffirmation of rights, like the right to health care, which can lead to a feeling of solidarity across generations, between the young and the elderly, between those in good health and those who are ill or handicapped. But, the starting point is the individual with strong consciousness of his individual rights, not the 'socialized' individual strongly integrated into a local community.

This conclusion is a direct response to the general consciousness of the destruction of active social life increasingly threatened by globalization. I have already mentioned that this nostalgia includes the Nation-State as an integrating institution because States have created social institutions to help workers in all aspects of their life. In today's world, the main conflict is between the social and cultural disintegration, resulting from globalization on one hand and struggle for subjectivation on the other. These are the main sources of tension and conflict in our social life, they play the same important role as class conflict in industrial society. Formal political compromises are unable to overcome this fundamental conflict. There is no middle solution. We must choose between rebuilding basic elements of social interaction and integration and, on the other side, strengthening individuals and giving them the capacity to defend and reinforce their creative freedom even at the risk of their own life. A sociology based on the concept of subject leads clearly to suppositions in favor of personal responsible action rather than to methods of social reintegration.

But this formulation cannot be upheld before we have considered several possible objections against this new sociological orientation. If I speak of the end of social facts and of society itself, does it mean that nothing is left but personal interests? Does it mean that it is meaningless to speak of social problems, social conflicts and social movements? Should I remind my readers that all my intellectual life and almost all my books have defended a completely different orientation? It is true that, in my opinion, the central concept is now the personal subject and no longer social integration. At the same time, social situations and especially class and power relations still exist and still have direct and fundamental effects on the process of subjectivation. I said at the beginning that class and power still matter, but they are no longer central in our personal experience. Sociological analysis must begin with the notion of subject, that is of individuals or groups who are conscious to have universal rights.

We must consider that political status affects the process of individuation, especially as it may be encouraged in schools, families and other settings. Sociology must follow the transformation of personal rights into new types of social systems. Reciprocally, all aspects of the social system have effects, positive or negative, on subjectivation.

Another question that arises is: can everyone potentially be a subject? Is it true that financial tycoons, industrial entrepreneurs, dependant workers can all become subjects? In particular, does the presence of a process of subjectivation in an individual depend on his relation to power and wealth? Is subjectivation reserved to an elite? My answer is that people who are powerful and rich are tempted to identify themselves with their power or money, while on the contrary, poor and powerless people can only base their opposition to power and social domination on their own capacity to defend their freedom and general principles of equality and of justice. Rich and powerful people like to use an impersonal saying for example that an increase in productivity will increase resources which are divided amongst all members of society so that everybody, from rich to poor, will receive positive results from the concentration of economy and from technological investments. On the contrary, poor and powerless people have a different view of their situation and of their possibilities of action. They are conscious to be constantly threatened in their roles by elite members and their privileges. This conflict between the people who believe that markets and other impersonal processes should dominate social life and people who assert their right, to conquer a certain degree of control over their own life, is probably the deepest one in our societies.

It is not accidental that religions in general remind us of the negative visions of the wealthy and powerful people; tympan of cathedrals show us princes, bishops and rich merchants condemned to Hell by God and at the same time, poor people selected to enter Heaven for ever. People whose aims are only to become richer and more powerful or who are ready to kill their enemies to reach their aims are not acting as individual subjects but only as utilitarian people that identify themselves with power and fortune. On the contrary, people who defend their interest with reference to universalist principles, especially poor people who defend their interests by referring to their rights as universal rights, act as subjects even if they are too weak to reach their target.

At the same time, I should distinguish my conception of the subject from a hedonistic vision. We must remember that in the pre-Freudian era people suffered mainly from having their pulsions and desires repressed by a super-ego which represented the law, an impersonal

principle of physical and social life. We are now in a quite different situation. Few pulsions are still repressed into the unconscious world. On the contrary consumption and competition give a free rein to direct expression of pulsions. At the same time, I would not say that the super-ego is repressed, but that the id as such is no longer repressed. Now our main preoccupation is not to strengthen ourselves as individuals but to transform ourselves into persons who have universal rights to defend, by maintaining a capacity to control their own life. Our culture and especially mass culture represent a much more dangerous attack on the subject than religious faith which did not condemn all kinds of pulsions but on the contrary tried to transform these pulsions into *amor dei* by calling upon the autonomy and the consciousness of individual persons.

I am not hereby implying that we should return to pre- Freudian times and to religiously oriented societies. But I refuse the idea that the ‘liberation’ of pulsions and desires is able alone to increase human freedom and the capacity of human beings to be responsible for their lives, opinions and preferences. The most efficient way to destroy a process of subjectivation is to attract people to a “flat” view of their lives to eliminate universal values. Rich societies are tempted by this kind of trend to free all desires and frustrations. These types of ‘modernism’ lead to the elimination of all religions or moral principles as pre-rational or even anti-rational. But it is difficult to oppose such a view which is so attractive for material as well as psychological reasons. But one of the results we observe is a growing gap between value-oriented behaviour and all kinds of behavior which are oriented towards more money, more power, and more pleasure for everybody.

The other danger is to argue that in today’s world, there are only victims and no subjects. Some forms of Marxist and postmodern sociology tend to view the world this way, seeing victims everywhere and losing sight of struggles of social actors to express themselves as individuals with rights, with responsibilities and refusing to be dominated and humiliated. Of course, we must recognize that very many people live and die as ‘victims’. But we must emphasize that eliminating domination, injustice and violence is less impossible when a certain number of victims transform themselves as agents of liberation. There is no reason to lose confidence in the capacity of human beings to construct, destroy and re-construct their conditions of living individually and collectively. Women’s movements, environmental movements and the movements of various religious minorities, for example, are good examples of how individuals are struggling to assert themselves, claiming individual rights as

a way to reject the domination by global market forces. Of course, they do so not on social grounds, but in the name of their own rights. There is no reason to think that they are interested only in material advantages. There is no reason to accept an unrealistic philosophy of history which tries to convince us that we have progressed from religion to science and that science or a theory of rational choice will solve our problems. On the contrary, when subjects claim their rights in the name of values, such claims may take a wide variety of forms, including those that some ideologists would dismiss as irrational.

Sociology needs to start with the concept of personal subject that is of the dual nature of individuals. Insofar as it is successful, this sociology which is focused on the subject may play an important role in transforming not just sociology but the social world. Societies which maintain and defend a high degree of free participation of all in public affairs are not more powerful than others. Rather, societies that create democratic public spaces are those that accept and defend the idea that social norms and rules must be subordinated to the protection of individual rights, which are universal in nature. These societies may lose part of their power, but they are the most likely to survive.

We have before us a choice as sociologists, but also as human beings who are actors in a world that is no longer characterized by strongly integrated Nation-States which were defined as 'societies' driven by conflicts between social classes. We are living in a global world characterized by unstable, unpredictable economic processes on the one hand, and fragmented local identities on the other. Successfully rejecting dehumanizing liberal market processes at the global level means upholding values that belong not to local, strongly integrated communities, but to creative individuals empowered with rights, operating in a world where other subjects are equally conscious of their rights. If sociology can go forward, it is by rejecting the long-dominant notion of 'system' to look anew at human individuals and groups.