

Viewpoint

Sociology and postmodernity

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Most current concepts of postmodernity refer solely to intellectual phenomena. In some cases, they focus narrowly on arts. In some others, they spill over to include a wider spectrum of cultural forms and precepts. In a few cases they reach deeper, into the fundamental preconceptions of contemporary consciousness. Rarely, if at all, they step beyond the boundary of the spiritual, into the changing social figuration which the artistic, cultural and cognitive developments, bracketed as postmodern, may reflect.

Such a self-limitation of the postmodernity discourse, and its legitimacy, is of crucial importance for the future of sociology. Indeed, if postmodernity means what the current concepts imply: a reform of culture, of world-perception, of the intellectual stance – then sociology faces the task of an essentially strategical adjustment. It must make itself resonant with new, postmodern culture, and break its links with the ontological and epistemological premises of modernity. It must transform itself into a postmodern sociology. In particular, it must follow other elements of postmodern culture by accepting (in theory as much as in practice) the self-containment and the self-grounding of the production and reproduction of meanings. It must abandon its traditional identity of a discourse characterised by an attempt to decode such meanings as products, reflections, aspects or rationalisations of social figurations and their dynamics. If, on the other hand, the self-containment of contemporary culture, and the associated implosion of vision, signal processes which reach beyond the realm of culture proper, (if they accompany transformations in, say, principles of systematic organisation or power arrangements) – then it is not the traditional strategy of sociology which calls for revision, but a new focus of inquiry is needed, and a new set of categories geared to the changed social reality. In this case –

without resigning its formative questions – sociology must develop into a sociology of postmodernity. In particular, it must accept the distinctiveness of the postmodern figuration, instead of treating it as a diseased or degraded form of modern society.

Contemporary art as the paradigm of postmodernity

The most salient feature of the contemporary art is its defiance of order. To portray this quality, Deleuze and Guattari deployed the metaphor of rhizome: that peculiar rootstock which resists the regulating pressure of tropisms, and thus seems to possess no sense of privileged direction, expanding instead sideways, upwards and backwards with the same frequency and without detectable regularity which would enable a prediction of the next move. New stems arise in spots impossible to locate in advance.

Contemporary art, it is said, knows of no synchronic order. In a sharp opposition to the modern period of art history (or, indeed, to any other period), there are today no clearly recognizable dominant schools or styles which tend to subordinate the whole field of artistic activity, and force any unorthodox artistic act to justify itself in reference to it. Moreover, in the absence of an obligatory canon the very meaning of 'heresy' (as much as the 'orthodoxy' itself) turns elusive and virtually escapes operative definition. The field of art is populated instead by creators of most diverse and aesthetically incompatible styles. Contemporary art knows of no diachronic order either. No more can one conceive of the history of art as a succession of ruling schools and styles. Moreover, the imagery of evolution has lost its grip on the reality of art's stasis (i.e. movement without change; change without direction). Later periods of artistic activity reveal little relation to the preceding stages, they do not seem to 'result' from them (in the sense of developing further their achievements, or resolving their unsolved problems, or offering alternative responses to the questions they asked or inadvertently brought forth). New phenomena in art appear to surface at random and apparently bear no relation to everything which went on before. It appears that the changes do not anymore constitute development.

And yet certain predilections seem to be common to contemporary art.¹ One of them is the artistic form of pastiche – the conscious or unconscious invoking, alluding to, emulating past or distant moods, styles, techniques, devices. Concepts like borrowing,

eclecticism, even plagiarism, have lost their once starkly derogatory meaning. To be more precise, they lost all meaning: contemporary art has transformed history and ethnography of art into a pool of extemporal and exterritorial, permanently usable resources, which can be picked at will and at random. Another is the use of collage – an artistic form which does the same to the single work of art as the pastiche has done to the art history. Collage denies the traditional principle of stylistical (and often compositional) unity, and practises instead the equivalence and non-contriety of artistic genres, styles or techniques. That plurality which the pastiche substitutes for the temporal order of art styles, collage incorporates into the style itself, thereby invalidating the notion of style (at least in its received sense). One more peculiarity of contemporary art is its self-referentiality – ostentatious rejection of the programme of mimesis. The challenge to the intention and the practice of ‘reality-representation’ goes in the case of contemporary art much further than in the ‘high modernity’ era. Indeed, in the light of the present practice, that era looks utterly ‘representationalist’. What the modernist art defied was the naive, superficial perception which could not distinguish anymore between pristine experience and the conventional figurational images. Modernism struggled to penetrate the ‘deeper’ reality, to represent what has been made invisible for the convention-bound eye. To attain such ‘better’, correct, true representation, they sought the guidance of science: that recognized authority on what reality is really like. Thus the impressionists took inspiration (and legitimation for their practices) from optics, cubists from the relativity theory, surrealists from psychoanalysis.² Contemporary artists, on the contrary, would overtly abandon all pretention, and denigrate all intention, of representation. They would aspire to represent nothing but their own practice: the canvas, its flatness, the media and their inherent qualities. The very notion of representation will be difficult to define in terms meaningful inside contemporary art (that is, if it is considered in relation to non-artistic reality) – as it is no more clear what reality is ‘objectively’, whether it is predicated with objective existence, and can thus provide ontological grounding for the measurement of representational accuracy.

Marcel Duchamp’s insolent act of entering a urinal for an art salon was seen at the time as the genuine beginning of a radically new era in art – breaking free from the straightjacket imposed by the aesthetic theory. In retrospect, Duchamp’s iconoclastic venture looks more like an ultimate triumph of modernism: that artistic

game the rules of which required most brazen acts of impudence to be legitimized by a theory – a logical and internally consistent theory, however wayward and irreverent to its predecessors. Duchamp did supply his urinal with shocking, yet congruent definition of art (something chosen by the artist), theory of artwork (cutting off an object from its mundane context), method of artistic creation (infusing the object with a new meaning).³ Most present-day artists would bother with none of these. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that Duchamp's defiant gesture was aimed at art-critics and academic theorists. It was an attempt to wrest the power of definition, distinction and evaluation of art from the hands of those who drew their authority from the expertise in aesthetic discourse rather than the artistic practice (and do it in a fight conducted according to the rules they themselves ostensibly promoted). For the present-day artists, such people constitute only a minor threat. Forces and factors which discriminate between art (i.e. something fit for display and selling it in art galleries) and non-art, between good (i.e. successful in the above terms) and bad art, are only in a small part affected by their activities. This is why contemporary art displays its striking immunity to theorizing, programming, argument, principal validation. But in the absence of theory (or, rather, with the growing irrelevance and dwindling authority of theory), 'both the rhetoric of destruction and that of novelty have lost any trace of heroic appeal'.⁴ 'The possibility that a given school can present itself with the claim to universal validity'⁵ has been thereby effectively dashed.

The combined effect of all these departures from the axioms and canons of modern art is the overall impression of disorientation and chaos. It is this impression which, more than anything else, is conveyed by the characterization of contemporary art as postmodern ('postmodernity' being a semantically negative notion, defined entirely by absences – by the disappearance of something which was there before – the evanescence of synchronic and diachronic order, as well as of directionality of change, count among its most decisive defining features).

And yet one can make sense out of this apparent chaos – on condition one accepts the irreducibility and permanence of the plurality of human worlds, something which modern philosophy refused to admit, and modernist art refused to resign itself to. Dick Higgins wrote ten years ago of the passage from cognitive questions asked by the twentieth century artists till about 1958:

How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it? – to the postcognitive questions: Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?,⁶ ‘Postcognitive questions’ capture well the ontological, rather than epistemological, preoccupations of postmodern artists (according to Brian McHale, ontology constitutes the dominant of postmodern writing). For the art called postmodern, the central question is how to locate, identify, set apart a particular world, knowing well that this world is merely one of the many possible and co-existing, and that the exploration of this world, however profound, is unlikely to bring us any closer to universally binding truth, or findings able to rightfully claim either general, or exclusive validity.

If this is the case, then the notorious lack of interest in the accuracy of representation, even the emphatic rejection of the very idea of the derivative, reflective status of art regarding reality – can be seen as an updated version of mimesis, resonant with the postmodern perception of the world as incurably pluralistic. Far from abandoning the role of the *speculum mundi*, the postmodern art ‘does hold the mirror up to reality; but that reality, now more than ever before, is plural’.⁷ The postmodern artist’s insistence that the ‘project of truth’ is ontologically flawed and hence impossible to achieve and unworthy of pursuing, conveys the truth about contemporary reality. Through its own plurality and abrogation of hierarchies, postmodern art represents existential modality of the extra-artistic world.

I suggest that we can go beyond McHale and observe that the mimetic function of postmodern art is not exhausted by its inner plurality and its ‘rhizomic’ growth. Postmodern art imitates reality also in its exposition of the essentially under-determined character of action, as well as of feeble grounding of reality as something which results from on-going motivated action, from exercise of freedom and choice. More than ever before, the work of art is now blatantly and emphatically construed. It has no authority to invoke in order to legitimize and validate itself, except the decision of its author. It has no ecumenically dominant, or ecumenically ambitious code to refer to, in order to reveal its meaning; instead, it has to construct and deploy its own explanatory potential. In the absence of all wider referential frameworks, a postmodern work of art is moreover open to a multiplicity of interpretations which are bound to stop short of reaching the ‘authoritative’ status, and thus to remain inconclusive. The selfsame polyvalence which in the times of modernity was resented as an irritant, as evidence of the

imperfection of extant theory and a challenge, turns now into the art's defining and permanent feature. In this, as in its previously discussed traits, the postmodern art points to something else than itself and conveys information about a non-artistic reality. Even its ostentatious and exuberant autonomy contains information about the world of which it is a part.

Postmodern culture

The world of which the postmodern art is most immediately a part is, of course, the world of culture. Culture which has the postmodern art as its constituent, shares with it the attributes of pluralism, absence of universally binding authority, levelling up of hierarchies, interpretive polyvalence. It is, as Baudrillard has argued,⁸ culture of excess. It is characterized by the overabundance of meanings, coupled with (or made all the more salient by) the scarcity of adjudicating authorities. Like postmodern art, it is in constant change, yet devoid of distinctive line of development. Its elements appear both under-determined and inconsequential. It is, one may say, a culture of over-production and waste. With it, that tragedy of culture which Georg Simmel (only now beginning to be understood, and acknowledged, as the sole 'postmodern' thinker among the founding fathers of sociology) anticipated almost a century ago, has reached its completion; the body of objectively available cultural products are well in excess of the assimilating capacity of any member of society. To the individual, culture appears as a pool of constantly moving, unconnected fragments. The old expression 'cultural scene' implied a scenario, a plot, a dénouement, inter-twining of roles, a director. None of these can be sensibly implied under conditions of postmodern culture (which for that reason Baudrillard dubbed obscene).

Most students of contemporary culture agree on the unique role of the media as the principal vehicle of culture production and distribution. It has been assumed (since Marshall McLuhan's memorable phrase 'media are the message' was first uttered) that whatever the explicit message of the media (i.e., that aspect of the message which can be verbalized as a series of falsifiable assertions about the ostensible topic of discourse) – the most powerful influence on the shape of contemporary culture is exerted by the way and the form in which the message is conveyed. Thus the most

consequential impact of the centrality of media in cultural reproduction appears to consist in the general tendency to construct the world as an assembly of images which are neither causally determined nor leave a lasting trace once they vanish, of happenings, of mutually unconnected and self-enclosed episodes, events grounded solely in elusive and protean motivation of the actors; and the massive invalidation of memory (except the peculiar, programatically chaotic and random, form of rotamemory deployed in trivial pursuits) – the very faculty on which the construction of changeable reality as development must rest.

Focusing on television, as – arguably – the most representative and influential of contemporary cultural media, Martin Esslin observed: '[w]hatever else it might present to its viewers, television as such displays the basic characteristics of the dramatic mode of communication – and thought, for drama is also a method of thinking, of experiencing the world and reasoning about it.' The 'dramatic mode of communication' Esslin had in mind is distinguished by a number of traits, all strikingly reminiscent of the characteristics we have noted before in contemporary art. To begin with, '[r]eal events happen only once and are irreversible and unrepeatable; drama looks like a real event but can be repeated at will.'⁹ Thus the News are sandwiched between two pieces of dramatized (and overtly fiction) stories, with which they share presentation of events as eminently repeatable; as happenings which may be seen (re-enacted?) over and over again, in fast and slow motion, from this angle or that. Existing only as images shown and seen, or better still video-recorded and then re-enacted at the time and in the circumstances of one's choice – the events are non-inevitable, inconclusive, revokable, until further notice (one can say that Judas's request 'can we start again, please?' in *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, could be made only in the Age of the Television). The world split into a multitude of mini-dramas has no clear-cut cohesiveness or direction. This world itself is soft – one in which time can be easily reversed, so that the episodes which fill it can be re-arranged in any order of succession (and are subject to no order but that of haphazard succession). As all consequences such episodes may have are eminently temporary and redeemable, such a world must and can do without standards, moral standards including. Morality, as it were, is a functional prerequisite of a world with an in-built finality and irreversibility of choices. Postmodern culture does not know of such a world.

Some recent studies imply that contemporary media do more

than to present the 'real world' as drama. They make the world into drama, as they shape its actual course after the pattern of drama-like events. It has been suggested that with the co-operation of television, the 'real world' has already become to a large extent a staged spectacle. In most strategic sites of the 'real world' events happen because of their potential fitness to be televised (politicians and terrorist alike play for television, hoping to elevate private actions into public events, biography into history). In the words of Benjamim Barber, '[i]t is difficult to imagine the Kennedy generation, the '60s, Watergate, the Woodstock generation, or even the Moral Majority, in the absence of national television'.¹⁰ Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz suggest that the provision of television's own, original events slowly takes precedence over the mere reproduction of events, or the mere offer of access to events which would have taken place anyway in the absence of the viewer. Such media events 'are not descriptive of the state of affairs, but symbolically instrumental in bringing that state of affairs about'.¹¹ The overall effect is the growing lack of clarity as to the meaning and the boundaries of 'real history'. Baudrillard asserts¹² that it is not any more the case that the television supplants reality with images, distorts it or lies about it; it is not even the case that the television stands between the viewer and his/her life, moulds the fashion in which life is lived or interprets its meaning (or, rather, substitutes its repetition for hermeneutics). For Baudrillard, society itself is now made to the measure of television: history is nothing but spectacle. History is a debauchery of signs; an endless play of simulation, drama and grotesque political minuet, an immoral promiscuity of all forms. One can speak no more of the distortion of reality: there is nothing left to measure the image against. This is soft, disjointed, insubstantial reality. One of which Sartre's Roquentin said that 'everything is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness, and dies by chance'.

In the halcyon days of modern self-confidence and optimism, Matthew Arnold wrote: 'Culture indefatigably tries, not to make what each raw person may like, the rule by which he fashions himself; but to draw ever nearer to a sense of what is indeed beautiful, graceful, and becoming, and to get the raw person to like that'.¹³ Arnold knew – and knew it beyond reasonable doubt – what is 'indeed' beautiful and becoming; equally well he knew which person is 'raw', and why. In his world, culture was an image of order and perfection standing ahead and above the world of

practice, and hereby reducing it to 'mere reality'. Culture was, above all, a confident effort to lift reality to the level of such image.

In contrast, one can read George Steiner's essays entitled 'In a Post-Culture'¹⁴ as an insight into the world from which Arnold's confidence is all but gone. Not to know what we know today, Steiner says, was Arnold's, or Voltaire's privilege: it was their ignorance which gave them confidence. We know what they did not: that humanities do not humanize. From the heights of what legitimately passed at the time for the peak of civilization, it seemed obvious that there was a pre-ordained 'congruence between the cultivation of the individual mind and a melioration of the commanding qualities of life'. This does not seem obvious at all to us. Worse still, we would find it very difficult to make a case for something being a 'melioration', as we do not believe in the axiom of progress, have lost the technique of forward dreaming, ceased to be animated by the ontological utopia, and – with all that – lost the ability to tell the better from the worse. Our time is marked by the end to the hierarchic value structure and the rejection of all the 'binary cuts which represented the domination of the cultural over the natural code', like the cuts between the West and the rest, learned and untutored, upper and lower strata. The superiority of Western culture (cultures?) seems neither self-evident nor assured as a prospect. We have lost the confident centre, without which, in Steiner's view, there is no culture. Culture, Steiner insists, must be self-consciously elitist and have the nerve to evaluate. With these two faculties in dispute or under attack, the future of our civilization is 'almost unforeseeable'. One can say that Steiner agrees with Arnold that the choice is between culture or anarchy; unlike Arnold however, he believes that the choice has been already made – and not in the way Arnold expected, and Steiner would see as indispensable for the survival of cultural mode as such.

One can interpret Steiner's view in the following way: the concept of postmodern culture is a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron. Culture is about hierarchy, discernment and evaluation; postmodernity, on the contrary, is about flattening of hierarchies, absence of discretion, and equivalence. Postmodernity, in other words, is a post-cultural condition. One needs not necessarily to agree with Steiner in his tying the phenomenon of culture down to its radical Enlightenment-born meaning, to accept that the postmodern setting does invalidate many an essential constituent

of the cultural discourse. Central precepts of that discourse, like dominant culture, or cultural hegemony, seem to have lost much of their meaning, or (as far as their missionary, crusading stance is concerned) run out of energy. The contemporary world is, rather, a site where cultures (this plural form is itself a postmodern symptom!) coexist aside each other resisting ordering along axiological or temporal axes. Rather than appearing as a transitory stage in the as-yet-unfinished process of civilizing, their coexistence seems to be a permanent feature of the world, with no authority in sight aspiring to an ecumenical, universal role. Like the postmodern art – postmodern culture seems doomed to remain disorderly, to wit plural, rhizomically growing, devoid of direction.

Postmodern world-view

It is this new cultural experience, briefly sketched in the preceding section, which has been distilled in the postmodern view of the world as a self-constituting and self-propelling process, determined by nothing but its own momentum, subject to no overall plan – of the ‘movement toward the Second Coming’, ‘universalization of human condition’, ‘rationalization of human action’, or ‘civilization of human interaction’ type. Postmodernity is marked by a view of the human world as irreducibly and irrevocably pluralistic, split into a multitude of sovereign units and sites of authority, with no horizontal or vertical order, either in actuality or in potency.

To put it in a different way, the post-modern world-view entails the dissipation of objectivity. The element most conspicuously absent is a reference to the supra-communal, ‘extraterritorial’ grounds of truth and meaning. Instead, the postmodern perspective reveals the world as composed of an indefinite number of meaning-generating agencies, all relatively self-sustained and autonomous, all subject to their own respective logics and armed with their own facilities of truth-validation. Their relative superiority may be argued solely, if at all, in pragmatic and overtly self-referential mode, with no claim made to supra-communal authority. As the postmodern perspective, like its predecessor, has been developed within the Western world, acceptance of plurality of sovereignties means first and foremost the surrender of the (diachronically and synchronically) dominant position of the West. What has been throughout the modern era assumed to be the most

accomplished, most advanced, pattern-setting formation of global social development (indeed as the only formation of universal significance) – has been now reduced to a mere one among the many status. Its historicity has been extended from the admission of a fixed beginning to the anticipation of an impending end. And its once universalistic claims have been supplanted by the acceptance of a parochial significance and a purely local (both spatially and temporally) validity.

The above-mentioned 'dissipation of objectivity' does not end here, however. Dissolution of the universal authority on the global, ecumenical scale is paralleled by a similar tendency in the intra-societal space. If the modern world-view theorized (both reflected and legitimized) the unificatory tendencies and uniformizing ambitions of the state-societies, the postmodern view shifts the focus upon the (admittedly underdefined) agency of community. More precisely, the focus shifts to communities; the most seminal distinction of the new framework of perception and analysis is precisely its plurality. If the concept of society was a device to 'erase' the 'outside' and reduce it at best to the status of environment (i.e., the 'goal-achievement' territory, and object, but not a subject of action), the concept of community as it appears in the postmodern discourse derives its essential meaning from the co-presence of other communities, all seen as agencies. The space in which the processes of meaning-generation and truth-validation are now set is not just confined in comparison with the setting distinctive of the modern world-view (one which, so to speak, filled the whole analytical space up to the horizon) – but also differs in quality. The old setting derived its solidity from the presence of mutually reinforcing, coordinated and overlapping agencies of integration. Even when not referred to explicitly, the totalizing impact of economic systemness, body politic, unified law, dominant value-cluster or ideology was tacitly assumed (indeed, it served as the very pre-condition of the possibility of discourse) and thus remained throughout the concealed, yet omnipotent guarantee of the authority of truth and meaning. The new, communal spaces (which bring instead into focus partiality, absence of autarky, and disunity) are grounded in their activities only, and so expose the absence of synchronization between the truth-and-meaning oriented action and other dimensions of social existence. Hence the endemic difficulties which the communal settings face in the course of their self-constitution. Indeed, the boundary-drawing seems to be now the paramount theoretical

task, while the maintenance of spatial limits and divisions of authority projects itself as the most formidable among the practical issues.

François Lyotard (the person more than anybody else responsible for giving the new world-view its name, though also for obscuring, rather than clarifying, its sociological sense) has presented the communalization of truth and meaning as a by-product of the slow erosion of the dominance once enjoyed by science over the whole field of (legitimate) knowledge; this erosion being in its turn an effect of the gradual disintegration of science into the ever increasing number of separate, only formally interlinked discourses, and thus of the gradual collapse of the original prescriptive function. The vacated realm, now a no-man's land, has been filled by a multitude of discourses which can command only as much authority as they are able to generate themselves. What has happened, in Lyotard's words, is the "atomization" of the social into flexible networks of language games'.¹⁵ Glossing over the changes in the power structure and its imputed tendency, Lyotard prefers to refer the observed atomization to technological transformation, to new departures in information processing, which he holds directly responsible for the fact that 'communication component is becoming more prominent day by day, both as a reality and as an issue'.¹⁶ It is presumably this salience which leads to the constitution of social units which are grounded solely in language. The trouble with a communication-based morphology of the social is that it tends to be as fluid and processual as the communication itself. It lacks the comfort of clearly drawn, mutually agreed and effectively defended boundaries. The network is inherently flexible. Language games are burdened with an unenviable task of constituting the presence to be legitimized, rather than concerning themselves simply with the legitimizing of a presence already secured by other means. '[T]he limits are themselves the stakes and provisional results of language strategies'.¹⁷

Similarly, the socio-political phenomenon of the erosion of authority with ecumenical potential and pretention has been reduced in Lyotard to its linguistic-philosophical dimension: 'The grand narrative has lost its credibility'.¹⁸ Having lost its discursive unity, science ceased to be such a grand narrative. It has been dethroned and demoted to a collection of language games none of which enjoys a privileged status or wields power to adjudicate in other games. Drawing on Wittgenstein's metaphor of language as

a maze of little streets surrounded by solitary islands of orderly and planned suburbs, Lyotard questions the centredness of the emerging conurbation. But he also points to the autarky of the suburban sub-centres – they do not need to communicate with other suburbs, or for that matter with the ‘old city’ in the centre, to maintain a reasonably complete life. Visits between suburbs are rare, and no resident of the city has visited them all:

[N]obody speaks all of those languages, they have no universal metalanguage, the project of the system-subject is a failure, the goal of emancipation has nothing to do with science, we are all stuck in the positivism of this or that discipline of learning, the learned scholars have turned into scientists, the diminished tasks of research have become compartmentalized and no one can master them all. . . That is what the postmodern world is all about. Most people have lost nostalgia for the lost narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity. What saves them from it is their knowledge that legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction.¹⁹

In Lyotard’s rendering, therefore, the advent of postmodernity is related to the dissipation of just one hierarchy: that of the language games. What has been left unexplored, is the possibility that the collapse of this particular hierarchy might have been a manifestation (or a corollary) of a wider crisis, which involves many hierarchies which (jointly) supported the supreme adjudicating authority complete with the self-confidence it could and did inspire. A possibility, in other words, that the novel freedom and independence of language games is in itself an outcome of the decoupling of communicative sphere from the structure of political and economic domination; and that such a ‘decoupling’ is in its turn the result of the decomposition of the hierarchy of systemic functions – in particular, of the erosion of the domination of economy over politics and the domain of ideas. It is possible that because of such erosion culture has become systemically irrelevant, shifting instead into the realm of the social (as distinct from systemic) integration. Emancipation of culture from its previously performed systemic function made its disassembling into an aggregate of language games affordable. Emancipated from the co-responsibility for the reproduction of systemic domination, culture can joyously abandon that proselytising, missionary fervour which

marked the times of utopias and cultural crusades. Systematically irrelevant culture can do without a postmodern equivalent of, say, Weber's ideal type of rational behaviour, or Marx's project of universal emancipation – which in the preceding era were assigned the right to evaluate all varieties of social action and classify them as so many deviations from the unstoppably rising norm.

Postmodern sociology

At the threshold of postmodernity, sociology arrived in the form aptly called by Anthony Giddens the orthodox consensus. This form was constituted by the widely shared strategy of rational analysis of society, understood as a nation-state; such a society, it was agreed, was subject to the processes of continuing rationalisation, not necessarily free from contradictions and upsets (or, indeed, temporary retreats), yet sufficiently dominant to offer a safe frame against which information about social reality could be plotted. Constantly lurking behind the scene in the orthodox vision of social reality was the powerful image of the social system – this synonym of an ordered, structured space of interaction, in which probable actions had been, so to speak, pre-selected by the mechanisms of domination or value-sharing. It was a 'principally coordinated' space (in Talcott Parsons' rendition of Weber's imagery); one inside which the cultural, the political and the economic levels of supra-individual organisation were all resonant with each other and functionally complementary. In memorable Parsons' phrase, sociology was best understood as an on-going effort to solve the 'Hobbesian problem': the mystery of non-randomness, regularity of behaviour of essentially free and voluntary subjects. The orthodox consensus focused accordingly on mechanisms which trimmed or eliminated the randomness and multidirectionality of human action and thus imposed coordination upon otherwise centrifugal forces; order upon chaos.

The first victim of advancing postmodernity was the invisibly present, tacitly assumed spectre of the system, the source and the guarantee of the meaningfulness of sociological project and, in particular, of the orthodox consensus. The immediate outcome was a widespread feeling of unease and erosion of confidence. Well before the exact nature of postmodern change was articulated, the signs had appeared of growing disaffection with the way the

business of sociology had been conducted in the era of orthodox consensus. Symbols of that era (Parsons' structural functionalism above all) came increasingly under attack, often for reasons only tenuously connected with the character of sensed change. Truly at stake was the overall de-legitimation of the orthodox consensus, rather than the ostensible topic of the assault; replacement of specific theoretical assumptions or strategic principles. As T.H. Marshall wrote on a different occasion, sociologists knew what they were running from; they did not know yet where to.

At the time the rebellion started, there was little awareness of the link between the new spirit of theoretical and strategic restlessness and the changing social reality. The call to revise the practice of sociology was expressed in universalistic terms. It was not supposed that the orthodox consensus had outlived its usefulness and hence was ripe for reform; instead, the consensus was proclaimed wrong from the start; a sad case of error, of self-deception, or ideological surrender. Paradoxically (though not unexpectedly) the effort to discredit the modern view of the social world needed the thoroughly modern understanding of truth for self-validation. Without necessarily saying this in so many words, the rebels aimed at the substitution of the new consensus for the old (they often spoke of the search for a 'new paradigm'). In reality, their efforts led to the constitution of what one would best call a postmodern sociology (as distinct from the sociology of postmodernity).

Postmodern sociology received its original boost from Garfinkel's techniques conceived to expose the endemic fragility and brittleness of social reality, its 'merely' conversational and conventional groundings, its negotiability, perpetual use and irreparable underdetermination. Soon it adopted Alfred Schutz as its spiritual ancestor, with his contemplation of the marvel of social action and its self-propelling capacity, with his debunking of 'because-of' explanations as hidden 'in-order-to' motives, with his dissolution of systemic order into a plethora of multiple realities and universes of meaning. Shortly afterwards it turned to Wittgenstein and Gadamer for philosophical inspiration and the certificate of academic respectability. From Wittgenstein, the idea of language games was borrowed and skillfully adapted to justify the elimination of all 'tougher'; extra-conversational constituents of social reality. From Gadamer came the vision of the life-world as a communally produced and traditionally validated assembly of meanings, and the courage to abandon the search for universal, supra-local,

‘objective’ (i.e., referring to none of the communally confined experiences) truth.

It was a postmodern world which lent animus and momentum to postmodern sociology; the latter reflects the former much in the same way the collage of the postmodern art ‘realistically represents’ (in the ‘conceptual sense of realism’²⁰) randomly assembled experience of postmodern life. And yet the postmodern sociology is distinguished by avoiding confrontation with postmodernity as a certain form of social reality, as a new departure set apart by new attributes. Postmodern sociology denies its kinship with a specific stage in history of social life. In a curious way, this sociology which took impetus from dissatisfaction with visions born of universalistic aspiration of the Western, capitalist form of life, conceives of itself in universalistic, extemporal and exspatial, terms. It prefers to see its attainment as rectification of blunder, discovery of truth, finding of right direction, rather than as a self-adaptation to the transformed object of study. The attributes of social reality, made salient by the fading hopes of missionary culture and brought into relief by postmodern world-view, the postmodern sociology promoted to the status of perpetual, (though heretofore overlooked) essences of social life in general.

One may say that the postmodern sociology does not have the concept of postmodernity. One suspects that it would find it difficult to generate and legitimate such a concept without radically transforming itself. It is precisely because it is so well adapted to postmodern cultural setting – that postmodern sociology (its tendency to argue non-universality of truth in universalistic terms notwithstanding) cannot conceive of itself as an event in history. Indeed, it is singularly unfit to conceptualise the twin phenomena of the logic of historical succession and of the social embeddedness of ideas.

Postmodern sociology has responded to postmodern condition through mimesis; it informs of that condition obliquely, in a coded way: through the isomorphism of its own structure, through commutation (Hjelmslev) between its structure and the structure of that extra-sociological reality of which it is a part. One can say that postmodern sociology is a signifier, with postmodern condition as its signified. One can obtain a valid insight into the postmodern condition through the analysis of practices of postmodern sociology. For the discursive knowledge of postmodernity as a type of social reality with a place in history and social space, one needs however to turn to other sociological responses.

I suggest that the postmodern sociology can be best understood as a mimetic representation of the postmodern condition. But it can also be seen as a pragmatic response to this condition. Description of the social world is in it inextricably interwoven with praxeological choices. Indeed, the acceptance of communal sovereignty over meaning-production and truth-validation casts the sociologist, with no need of further argument, into the role of the interpreter,²¹ of the semiotic broker with a function to facilitate communication between communities and traditions. A postmodern sociologist is one who, securely embedded in his own, 'native' tradition, penetrates deeply into successive layers of meanings upheld by the relatively alien tradition to be investigated. The process of penetration is simultaneously that of translation. In the person of the sociologist, two or more traditions are brought into communicative contact – and thus open up to each other their respective contents which otherwise would remain opaque. The postmodern sociologist aims at 'giving voice' to cultures which without his help would remain numb or stay inaudible to the partner in communication. The postmodern sociologist operates at the interface between 'language games' or 'forms of life'. His mediating activity is hoped to enrich both sides of the interface. The popularity of Clifford Geertz's strategic injunction of the 'thick description' (one which sums up anthropological practices distinguished by constituting their objects as culturally alien and thus in need of de-coding and translation) among contemporary sociologists is to a large extent due to its resonance with the postmodern world-view and the corresponding strategy of the postmodern sociology. A typical exposition of such strategy, like that of Susan Heckman,²² promotes Karl Mannheim's style sociology of knowledge to the paradigm of total sociology (with, of course, the replacement of Mannheim's negative concept of ideology, as a distorting force and an enemy of truth, with the positive concept of ideology, or – better still – with the concept of communal tradition or linguistic community, as the sole framework, propagator and condition of truth).

Sociology of postmodernity

Both basic types of crisis theories – current alternatives to the postmodern sociology – can be found wanting. The culture-and-personality type of crisis theory collapses manifestations of postmodernity with allegedly autonomous (i.e. subjected to its

own logic, unrelated to that of the system as a whole, cultural dynamics); it leaves the central question of the validity of the orthodox sociological model, historically geared to the 'classical' modernity, out of discussion. The system-in-crisis type of theory avoids such limitation and faces the central issue of sociological theory point-blank. And yet, having given priority to the theoretical redemption of the orthodox model, it finds itself bound to reduce the significance of the manifestations of postmodernity to that of the clinical symptoms, and the 'postmodernity' itself to that of a pathological aberration.

In this section, I propose to consider the possibility that the so-called postmodern phenomena combine into a cohesive aggregate of aspects of a new type of society, which differs from the orthodox model sufficiently to require a model of its own. In other words, I propose to consider whether postmodernity is a fully-fledged, comprehensive and viable type of social system; and whether – in consequence – the treatment of postmodern phenomena as dysfunctional, degenerative or otherwise threatening to the survival of society, is justified by anything but the pressure of historical memory, or an unwillingness to part with a theoretical model which served its purpose so well in the past.

The suggestion I propose to consider is the following: in the present-day society, consumer conduct (consumer freedom geared to the consumer market) moves steadily into the position of, simultaneously, the cognitive and moral focus of life, integrative bond of the society, and the focus of systemic management. In other words, it moves into the selfsame position which in the past – during the 'modern' phase of capitalist society – was occupied by work in the form of wage labour. This means that in our time the individuals are engaged (morally by society, functionally by the social system) first and foremost as consumers rather than as producers.

Throughout the first (modern) part of its history, capitalism was characterised by the central position occupied by work simultaneously on the individual, social and systematic levels. Indeed, work served as the link holding together individual motivation, social integration and systemic reproduction; as the major institution responsible for their mutual congruence and coordination. It is from the central place that work is being gradually, though with an increasing speed, dislodged – as Claus Offe aptly demonstrated. And yet the room from which work is evicted has not remained vacant. Consumer freedom has moved in – first perhaps as a

squatter, but more and more as a legitimate resident. It now takes over the crucial role of the link which fastens together the life-worlds of the individual agents and purposeful rationality of the system. The assumption of such a role by consumer freedom seems to be the final outcome of the long process of displacement of the early-capitalist conflict focused on the issue of control, right to management and to self-manage, from the productive to the distributive sphere; that displacement generated those 'ever rising expectations' which have become the basis for both the feasibility and inevitability of the selfsame rising consumerism which came to be identified with capitalist economy. It was this process which lay at the foundation of the 'decentring' of work inside the life-world of the individual. The substitution of consumer freedom for work as the hub, around which the life-world rotates, may well change the heretofore antagonistic relation between pleasure and reality principles (assumed by Freud to be extemporal). Indeed, the very opposition between the two may be all but neutralised.

In its present consumer phase, the capitalist system deploys the pleasure principle for its own perpetuation. Producers moved by the pleasure principle would spell disaster to a profit-guided economy. Equally, if not more disastrous, would be consumers who are not moved by the same principle. Having won the struggle for control over production, and made its ascendancy in that sphere secure, capitalism can now afford the free reign of the pleasure principle in the realm of consumption – and it needs it more than anything else. As a matter of fact, the conquest of production remains secure precisely because a safe (and beneficial) outlet has been found for the potentially troublesome drive to pleasure.

For the consumer, reality is not the enemy of pleasure. The tragic moment has been removed from the insatiable drive to enjoyment. Reality, as the consumer experiences it, is a pursuit of pleasure. Freedom is about the choice between greater and lesser satisfactions, and rationality is about choosing the first over the second. For the consumer system, a spending-happy consumer is a necessity; for the individual consumer, spending is a duty – perhaps the most important of duties. There is a pressure to spend: on the social level, the pressure of symbolic rivalry, of the needs of self-construction through acquisition (mostly in commodity form) of distinction and difference,²³ of the search for social approval through life-style and symbolic membership; on the systemic level, the pressure of merchandising companies, big and small, who

between themselves monopolise the definition of good life, of the needs whose satisfaction good life requires, and the ways of satisfying them. These pressures, however – unlike the social and systemic pressures generated by the production-oriented system – are not entering life-experience in the form of oppression. The surrender they demand promises mostly joy; not just the joy of surrendering to ‘something greater than myself’ (the quality which Emile Durkheim, somewhat prematurely, imputed to social conformity in his own, still largely pre-consumer, society, and postulated as a universal attribute of all conformity, in any type of society) – but a straightforward sensual joy of tasty eating, pleasant smelling, soothing or enticing drinking, relaxing driving, or the joy of being surrounded with smart, glittering, eye-caressing objects. With such duties, one hardly needs rights. Seduction, as Pierre Bourdieu intimated, may now take the place of repression as the paramount vehicle of systemic control and social integration.

From this re-arrangement, capitalism emerges strengthened. Excessive strain generated by the power contest has been channelled away from the central power structure and onto a safer ground, where tensions can be unloaded without adversely affecting the administration of power resources; if anything, the tension contributes now to its greater effectivity. Deployment of energy released by free individuals engaged in symbolic rivalry lifts demand for the products of capitalist industry to ever higher levels, and effectively emancipates consumption from all natural limits set by the confined capacity of material or basic needs – those which require goods solely as utility values. Last but not least, with consumption firmly established as the focus, and the playground, for individual freedom, the future of capitalism looks more secure than ever. Social control becomes easier and considerably less costly. Expensive panoptical methods of control, pregnant as they are with dissent, may be disposed of, or replaced by less ambivalent and more efficient methods of seduction (or, rather, the deployment of panoptical method may be limited to a minority of the population; to those categories which for whatever reason cannot be integrated through the consumer market). The crucial task of soliciting behaviour functionally indispensable for the capitalist economic system, may be now entrusted to the consumer market and its unquestionable attractions. Reproduction of the capitalist system is therefore achieved through individual freedom (in the form of consumer freedom, to be precise), and not through its suppression. Instead of being counted on the side of

systemic overheads, the whole operation 'social control' may now be entered on the side of systemic assets.²⁴

The consequence, most important for the emergence of the postmodern condition, has been the reestablishment of the essential mechanisms of systemic reproduction and social integration on entirely new grounds. Simultaneously, the old mechanisms have been either abandoned or devalued. To secure its reproduction, the capitalist system in its consumer phase does not need (or needs only marginally) such traditional mechanisms as consensus-aimed political legitimation, ideological domination, uniformity of norms promoted by cultural hegemony. Culture in general lost its relevance to the survival and perpetuation of the system. Or, rather, it contributes now to such survival through its heterogeneity and fissiparousness, rather than the levelling impact of civilising crusades. Once the consumer choice has been entrenched as the point in which systemic reproduction, social integration and individual life-world are co-ordinated and harmonised – cultural variety, heterogeneity of styles and differentiation of belief-systems have become conditions of its success.

Contrary to the anguished forebodings of the 'mass culture' critics of the 1950s, the market proved to be the arch-enemy of uniformity. The market thrives on variety; so does consumer freedom, and with it – security of the system. The market has nothing to gain from those things the rigid and repressive social system of 'classical' capitalism promoted: strict and universal rules, unambiguous criteria of truth, morality and beauty, indivisible authority of judgement. But if the market does not need these things, neither does the system. The powers-to-be lost, so to speak, all interest in universally binding standards; in the result, the standards lost the selfsame power-basis which used to give them credibility and sustained their never-ending pursuit as a worthwhile and attractive enterprise. To the authority of judgement disavowed by political powers, market forces offer the only alternative support. Cultural authorities turn themselves into market forces, become commodities, compete with other commodities, legitimise their value through the selling capacity they attain. Their habitual appeals to ex-territorial standards of judgement sound increasingly shallow and lose their cogency and attraction.

I suggest, in other words, that the phenomena described collectively as 'postmodernity' are not symptoms of systemic deficiency of disease; neither are they a temporary aberration with

a life-span limited by the time required to re-build the structures of cultural authority. I suggest instead that postmodernity (or whatever other name will be eventually chosen to take hold of the phenomena it denotes) is an aspect of a fully-fledged, viable social system which has come to replace the 'classical' modern, capitalist society and thus needs to be theorised according to its own logic.

Like all attempts to reveal the inner logic in the already-accomplished-reality, the above analysis emphasised the system-ness of postmodern society: the accuracy with which individual life-world, social cohesiveness and systemic capacity for reproduction fit and assist each other. Consumption emerged from the analysis as the 'last frontier' of our society, its dynamic, constantly changing part; indeed, as the very aspect of the system which generates its own criteria of forward movement and thus can be viewed as in progress. It also appeared to play the role of an effective lightning-rod, easily absorbing excessive energy which could otherwise burn the more delicate connections of the system, and of an expedient safety-valve which re-directs disaffections, tensions and conflicts, continually turned out by the political and the social subsystems, into the sphere where they can be symbolically played out – and defused. All in all, the system appeared to be in good health, rather than in crisis. At any rate, it seemed to be capable of solving its problems and reproducing itself no less than other known systems could, and systems in general are theoretically expected to.

Let me add that the particular way of problem-solving, conflict-resolution and social integration characteristic of the postmodern system tends to be further strengthened by the downright unattractiveness of what seems to be, from the perspective determined by the system itself, its only alternative. The system has successfully squeezed out all alternatives to itself but one: repression, verging on disenfranchisement, emerged as the only realistic possibility other than consumer freedom. The only choice not discredited by the system as utopian or otherwise unworkable, is one between consumer freedom, and unfreedom; between consumer freedom, and the dictatorship over needs (Feher, Heller, and Marcuse's memorable phrase) – the latter practised on a limited scale towards the residue of flawed consumers inside a society organised around the commodity market, or on a global scale by a society unwilling, or incapable of providing allurements of the fully developed consumerism.

Final remarks

This paper has been intended as a brief and preliminary inventory of topics to be researched and theoretical tasks to be undertaken; the topics and the tasks which the socio-cultural transformations, loosely aggregated in the emerging model of postmodernity, have put in front of sociology (that scholarly discipline which originated, and developed until recently, as an attempt to grasp the logic of modernity). The paper lists questions and problems, while offering few solutions. It is not even a career report. Much more modestly, it intends to be an invitation to a debate.

The few positive ideas this paper does offer can be summed up in the following way:

1. Postmodern phenomena, most commonly confined in their description to the cultural, or even merely the artistic level, can be viewed in fact as surface symptoms of a much deeper transformation of the social world – brought about by the logic of modern development, yet in a number of vital respects discontinuous with it.

2. These deeper transformations ought to be sought in the spheres of systemic reproduction, social integration, and the structure of the life-world, as well as in the novel way in which these three spheres are linked and coordinated.

3. Proper analysis of the postmodern condition brings us, therefore, back into the orthodox area of sociological investigation (though the area itself is now structured in an un-orthodox way). This means that rather than seeking a new form of a postmodern sociology (a sociology attuned in its style, as ‘an intellectual genre’, to the cultural climate of postmodernity), sociologists should be engaged in developing a sociology of postmodernity (i.e. deploying the strategy of systemic, rational discourse to the task of constructing a theoretical model of postmodern society as a system in its own right, rather than a distorted form, or an aberration, of another system).

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