

Is There a Postmodern Sociology?

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Why do we need the concept of 'postmodernity'? On the face of it, this concept is redundant. In so far as it purports to capture and articulate what is novel at the present stage of western history, it legitimizes itself in terms of a job which has been already performed by other, better established concepts — like those of the 'post-capitalist' or 'post-industrial' society. Concepts which have served the purpose well: they sharpened our attention to what is new and discontinuous, and offered a reference point for counter-arguments in favour of continuity.

Is, therefore, the advent of the 'postmodernity' idea an invitation to rehash or simply replay an old debate? Does it merely signify an all-too-natural fatigue, which a protracted and inconclusive debate must generate? Is it merely an attempt to inject new excitement into an increasingly tedious pastime (as Gordon Allport once said, we social scientists never solve problems; we only get bored with them)? If this is the case, then the idea of 'postmodernity' is hardly worth a second thought, and this is exactly what many a seasoned social scientist suggests.

Appearances are, however, misleading (and the advocates and the detractors of the idea of 'postmodernity' share the blame for confusion). The concept of 'postmodernity' may well capture and articulate a quite different sort of novelty than those the older, apparently similar concepts accommodated and theorized. It can legitimize its right to exist — its cognitive value — only if it does exactly this: if it generates a social-scientific discourse which theorizes different aspects of contemporary experience, or theorizes them in a different way.

I propose that the concept of 'postmodernity' has a value entirely of its own in so far as it purports to capture and articulate the novel experience of just one, but crucial social category of contemporary society: the intellectuals. Their novel experience — that is, their

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reassessment of their own position within society, their reorientation of the collectively performed function, and their new strategies.

Antonio Gramsci called the 'organic intellectuals' of a particular class the part of the educated elite which elaborated the self-identity of the class, the values instrumental to the defence and enhancement of its position within society, an ideology legitimizing its claims to autonomy and domination. One may argue to what extent Gramsci's (1971) 'organic intellectuals' did in fact answer this description; to what extent they were busy painting their own idealized portraits, rather than those of their ostensible sitters; to what extent the likenesses of all other classes represented (unknowingly, to be sure) the painters' cravings for conditions favourable and propitious for the kind of work the intellectuals had been best prepared, and willing, to do. In the discourse of 'postmodernity', however, the usual disguise is discarded. The participants of the discourse appear in the role of 'organic intellectuals' of the intellectuals themselves. The concept of 'postmodernity' makes sense in so far as it stands for this 'coming out' of the intellectuals.

The other way of putting it is to say that the concept of 'postmodernity' connotes the new self-awareness of the 'intellectuals' — this part of the educated elite which has specialized in elaborating principles, setting standards, formulating social tasks and criteria of their success or failure. Like painters, novelists, composers, and to a rapidly growing extent the scientists before them, such intellectuals have now come to focus their attention on their own skills, techniques and raw materials, which turn from tacitly present means into a conscious object of self-perfection and refinement and the true and sufficient subject-matter of intellectual work.

This implosion of intellectual vision, this 'falling upon oneself', may be seen as either a symptom of retreat and surrender, or a sign of maturation. Whatever the evaluation of the fact, it may be interpreted as a response to the growing sense of failure, inadequacy or irrealism of the traditional functions and ambitions, as sedimented in historical memory and institutionalized in the intellectual mode of existence. Yet it was this very sense of failure which rendered the ambitions and the functions visible.

'Postmodernity' proclaims the loss of something we were not aware of possessing until we have learned of the loss. This view of past 'modernity' which the 'postmodernity' discourse generates is made entirely out of the present-day anxiety and uneasiness, as a model of a universe in which such anxiety and uneasiness could not

arise (much like the view of 'community', of which Raymond Williams (1975) said that it 'always has been'). The concept of 'modernity' has today a quite different content from the one it had before the start of the 'postmodern' discourse; there is little point in asking whether it is true or distorted, or in objecting to the way it is handled inside the 'postmodern' debate. It is situated in that debate, it draws its meaning from it, and it makes sense only jointly with the other side of the opposition, the concept of 'postmodernity', as that negation without which the latter concept would be meaningless. The 'postmodern' discourse generates its own concept of 'modernity', made of the presence of all those things for the lack of which the concept of 'postmodernity' stands.

The anxiety which gave birth to the concept of 'postmodernity' and the related image of past 'modernity' is admittedly diffuse and ill-defined, but nevertheless quite real. It arises from the feeling that the kind of services the intellectuals have been historically best prepared to offer, and from which they derived their sense of social importance — are nowadays not easy to provide; and that the demand for such services is anyway much smaller than one would expect it to be. It is this feeling which leads to a 'status crisis'; a recognition that the reproduction of the status which the intellectuals got used to seeing as theirs by right, would now need a good deal of rethinking as well as the reorientation of habitual practices.

The services in question amount to the provision of an authoritative solution to the questions of cognitive truth, moral judgment and aesthetic taste. It goes without saying that the importance of such services is a reflection of the size and importance of the demand for them; with the latter receding, their *raison d'être* is eroded. In its turn, the demand in question draws its importance from the presence of social forces which need the authority of cognitive and normative judgments as the legitimation of their actual, or strived-for domination. There must be such forces; they must need such legitimation; and the intellectuals must retain the monopoly on its provision. The 'status crisis', or rather that vague feeling of anxiety for which it can serve as a plausible interpretation, can be made sense of if account is taken of the undermining of the conditions of intellectual status in, at least, three crucial respects.

First of all — the advanced erosion of that global structure of domination, which — at the time the modern intellectuals were born — supplied the 'evidence of reality' of which the self-

confidence of the West and its spokesmen has been built. Superiority of the West over the rest remained self-evident for almost three centuries. It was not, as it were, a matter of idle comparison. The era of modernity had been marked by an active superiority: part of the world constituted the rest as inferior — either as a crude, still unprocessed ‘raw material’ in need of cleaning and refinement, or a temporarily extant relic of the past. Whatever could not be brought up to the superior standards, was clearly destined for the existence of subordination. Western practices defined the rest as a pliable or malleable substance still to be given shape. This active superiority meant the right of the superior to proselytize, to design the suitable form of life for the others, to refuse to grant authority to the ways of life which did not fit that design.

Such superiority could remain self-evident as long as the denied authority showed no signs of reasserting itself, and the designs seemed irresistible. A historical domination could interpret itself as universal and absolute, as long as it could believe that the future would prove it such; the universality of the western mode (the absoluteness of western domination) seemed indeed merely a matter of time. The grounds for certainty and self-confidence could not be stronger. Human reality indeed seemed subject to unshakeable laws and stronger (‘progressive’) values looked set to supersede or eradicate the weaker (‘retrograde’, ignorant, superstitious) ones. It was this historically given certainty, grounded in the unchallenged superiority of forces aimed at universal domination, which had been articulated, from the perspective of the intellectual mode, as universality of the standards of truth, judgment and taste. The strategy such articulation legitimated was to supply the forces, bent on universal and active domination, with designs dictated by universal science, ethics and aesthetics.

The certitude of yesteryear is now at best ridiculed as naïvety, at worst castigated as ethnocentric. Nobody but the most rabid of the diehards believes today that the western mode of life, either the actual one or one idealized (‘utopianized’) in the intellectual mode, has more than a sporting chance of ever becoming universal. No social force is in sight (including those which, arguably, are today aiming at global domination) bent on making it universal. The search for the universal standards has suddenly become gratuitous; there is no credible ‘historical agent’ to which the findings could be addressed and entrusted. Impracticality erodes interest. The task of establishing universal standards of truth, morality, taste does not

seem that much important. Unsupported by will, it appears now misguided and unreal.

Secondly — even the localized powers, devoid of ecumenical ambitions, seem less receptive to the products of intellectual discourse. The time modern intellectuals were born was one of the great 'shake-up': everything solid melted into air, everything sacred was profaned . . . The newborn absolutist state did not face the task of wrenching power from old and jaded hands; it had to create an entirely new kind of social power, capable of carrying the burden of *societal* integration. The task involved the crushing of those mechanisms of social reproduction which had been based in communal traditions. Its performance took the form of a 'cultural crusade'; that is, practical destruction of communal bases of social power, and theoretical delegitimation of their authority. Faced with such tasks, the state badly needed 'legitimation' (this is the name given to intellectual discourse when considered from the vantage point of its power-oriented, political application).

Mais où sont les croisades d'autant? The present-day political domination can reproduce itself using means more efficient and less costly than 'legitimation'. Weber's 'legal-rational legitimation' — the point much too seldom made — is, in its essence, a declaration of the redundancy of legitimation. The modern state is effective without authority; or, rather, its effectivity depends to a large extent on rendering authority irrelevant. It does not matter any more, for the effectivity of state power, and for the reproduction of political domination in general, whether the social area under domination is culturally unified and uniform, and how idiosyncratic are the values, sectors of this area may uphold.

The weapon of legitimation has been replaced with two mutually complementary weapons: this of *seduction* and that of *repression*. Both need intellectually trained experts, and indeed both siphon off, accommodate and domesticate an ever growing section of educated elite. Neither has a need, or a room, for those 'hard-core' intellectuals whose expertise is 'legitimation', i.e. supplying proof that what is being done is universally correct and absolutely true, moral and beautiful.

Seduction is the paramount tool of integration (of the reproduction of domination) in a consumer society. It is made possible once the market succeeds in making the consumers dependent on itself. Market-dependency is achieved through the destruction of such skills (technical, social, psychological, existential) which do not entail the

use of marketable commodities; the more complete the destruction, the more necessary become new skills which point organically to market-supplied implements. Market-dependency is guaranteed and self-perpetuating once men and women, now consumers, cannot proceed with the business of life without tuning themselves to the logic of the market. Much debated 'needs creation' by the market means ultimately creation of the need of the market. New technical, social, psychological and existential skills of the consumers are such as to be practicable only in conjunction with marketable commodities; rationality comes to mean the ability to make right purchasing decisions, while the craving for certainty is gratified by conviction that the decisions made have been, indeed, right.

Repression stands for 'panoptical' power, best described by Foucault (1977). It employs surveillance, it is aimed at regimentation of the body, and is diffused (made invisible) in the numerous institutionalizations of knowledge-based expertise. Repression as a tool of domination-reproduction has not been abandoned with the advent of seduction. Its time is not over and the end of its usefulness is not in sight, however overpowering and effective seduction may become. It is the continuous, tangible presence of repression as a viable alternative which makes seduction unchallengeable. In addition, repression is indispensable to reach the areas seduction cannot, and is not meant to, reach: it remains the paramount tool of subordination of the considerable margin of society which cannot be absorbed by market dependency and hence, in market terms, consists of 'non-consumers'. Such 'non-consumers' are people reduced to the satisfaction of their elementary needs; people whose business of life does not transcend the horizon of survival. Goods serving the latter purpose are not, as a rule, attractive as potential merchandise; they serve the needs over which the market has no control and thus undermine, rather than boost, market dependency. Repression reforges the market unattractiveness of non-consumer existence into the unattractiveness of alternatives to market dependency.

Seduction and repression between them, make 'legitimation' redundant. The structure of domination can now be reproduced, ever more effectively, without recourse to legitimation; and thus without recourse to such intellectuals as make the legitimation discourse their speciality. Habermas's (1976) 'legitimation crisis' makes sense, in the final account, as the intellectual perception of 'crisis' caused by the ever more evident irrelevance of legitimation.

The growing irrelevance of legitimation has coincided with the growing freedom of intellectual debate. One suspects more than coincidence. It is indifference on the part of political power which makes freedom of intellectual work possible. Indifference, in its turn, arises from the lack of interest. Intellectual freedom is possible as political power has freed itself from its former dependence on legitimation. This is why freedom, coming as it does in a package-deal with irrelevance, is not received by the intellectuals with unqualified enthusiasm. All the more so as the past political patronage made a considerable part of intellectual work grow in a way which rendered it dependent on the continuation of such a patronage.

What, however, more than anything else prevents the intellectuals from rejoicing is the realization that the withdrawal of the government troops does not necessarily mean that the vacated territory will become now their uncontested domain. What the state has relinquished, is most likely to be taken over by the powers on which the intellectuals have even less hold than they ever enjoyed in their romance with politics.

The territory in question is that of culture. Culture is one area of social life which is defined (cut out) in such a way as to reassert the social function claimed by the intellectuals. One cannot even explain the meaning of the concept without reference to human 'incompleteness', to the need of teachers and, in general, of 'people in the know' to make up for this incompleteness, and to a vision of society as a continuous 'teach-in' session. The idea of culture, in other words, establishes knowledge in the role of power, and simultaneously supplies legitimation of such power. Culture connotes power of the educated elite and knowledge as power; it denotes institutionalized mechanisms of such power — science, education, arts.

Some of these mechanisms, or some areas of their application, remain relevant to the repressive functions of the state, or to the tasks resulting from the state role in the reproduction of consumer society (reproduction of conditions for the integration-through-seduction). As far as this is the case, the state acts as the protector-cum-censor, providing funds but reserving the right to decide on the tasks and the value of their results. The mixed role of the state rebounds in a mixed reaction of the educated elite. The calls for more state resources intermingle with the protests against bureaucratic interference. There is no shortage of the educated

willing to serve; neither is there a shortage of criticisms of servility.

Some other mechanisms, or some other areas of their application, do not have such relevance. They are, as a rule, 'underfunded', but otherwise suffer little political interference. They are free. Even the most iconoclastic of their products fail to arouse the intended wrath of the dominant classes and in most cases are received with devastating equanimity. Challenging the capitalist values stirs little commotion in as far as the capitalist domination does not depend on the acceptance of its values. And yet freedom *from* political interference does not result in freedom *for* intellectual creativity. A new protector-cum-censor fills the vacuum left by the withdrawal of the state: the market.

This is the third respect in which the intellectual status is perceived as undermined. Whatever their other ambitions, modern intellectuals always saw culture as their private property; they made it, they lived in it, they even gave it its name. Expropriation of this particular plot hurts most. Or has it been, in fact, an expropriation? Certainly intellectuals never controlled 'popular' consumption of cultural products. Once they felt firmly in the saddle, they saw themselves as members of the circle of 'culture consumers', which, in the sense they would have recognized, was probably significant, if small. It is only now that the circle of people eager to join the culture consumption game has grown to unheard of proportions — has become truly 'massive'. What hurts, therefore, is not so much an expropriation, but the fact that the intellectuals are not invited to stand at the helm of this breath-taking expansion. Instead, it is gallery owners, publishers, TV managers and other 'capitalists' or 'bureaucrats' who are in control. The idea has been wrested out of the intellectual heads and in a truly sorcerer's apprentice's manner, put to action in which the sages have no power.

In another sense, however, what has happened is truly an expropriation, and not just 'stealing the profits'. In the early modern era intellectual forces had been mobilized (or self-mobilized) for the gigantic job of conversion — the culture crusade which involved a thorough revamping or uprooting of the totality of heretofore autonomously reproduced forms of life. The project was geared to the growth of the modern absolutist state and its acute need of legitimation. For reasons mentioned before, this is not the case anymore. Native forms of life have not, however, returned to autonomous reproduction; there are others who manage it — agents of the market, this time, and not the academia. No wonder the old

gamekeepers view the new ones as poachers. Once bent on the annihilation of 'crude, superstitious, ignorant, bestial' folkways, they now bewail the enforced transformation of the 'true folk culture' into a 'mass' one. Mass culture debate has been the lament of expropriated gamekeepers.

The future does not promise improvement either; the strength of the market forces continues to grow, their appetite seems to grow even faster, and for an increasing sector of the educated élite the strategy 'if you cannot beat them, join them' gains in popularity. Even the areas of intellectual domain still left outside the reach of the market forces are now felt to be under threat. It was the intellectuals who impressed upon the once incredulous population the need for education and the value of information. Here as well their success turns into their downfall. The market is only too eager to satisfy the need and to supply the value. With the new DIY (electronic) technology to offer, the market will reap the rich crop of the popular belief that education is human duty and (any) information is useful. The market will thereby achieve what the intellectual educators struggled to attain in vain: it will turn the consumption of information into a pleasurable, entertaining pastime. Education will become just one of the many variants of self-amusement. It will reach the peak of its popularity and the bottom of its value as measured by original intellectual-made standards.

The three developments discussed above go some way, if not all the way, towards explaining this feeling of anxiety, out-of-placeness, loss of direction which, as I propose, constitutes the true referent of the concept of 'postmodernity'. As a rule, however, intellectuals tend to articulate their own societal situation and the problems it creates as a situation of the society at large, and its, systemic or social, problems. The way in which the passage from 'modernity' to 'postmodernity' has been articulated is not an exception. This time, however, those who articulate it do not hide as thoroughly as in the past behind the role of 'organic intellectuals' of other classes; and the fact that they act as 'organic intellectuals of themselves' is either evident or much easier to discover. Definitions of both 'modernity' and 'postmodernity' refer overtly to such features of respective social situations which have direct and crucial importance for the intellectual status, role and strategy.

The main feature ascribed to 'postmodernity' is thus the permanent and irreducible *pluralism* of cultures, communal traditions, ideologies, 'forms of life' or 'language games' (choice of items which

are 'plural' varies with theoretical allegiance); or the awareness and recognition of such pluralism. Things which are plural in the post-modern world cannot be arranged in an evolutionary time-sequence, seen as each other's inferior or superior stages; neither can they be classified as 'right' or 'wrong' solutions to common problems. No knowledge can be assessed outside the context of culture, tradition, language game etc. which makes it possible and endows it with meaning. Hence no criteria of validation are available which could be themselves justified 'out of context'. Without universal standards, the problem of the postmodern world is not how to globalize superior culture, but how to secure communication and mutual understanding between cultures.

Seen from this 'later' perspective, 'modernity' seems in retrospect a time when pluralism was not yet a foregone conclusion; or a time when the ineradicability of pluralism was not duly recognized. Hence the substitution of one, 'supra-communal', standard of truth, judgment and taste for the diversity of local, and therefore inferior, standards, could be contemplated and strived for as a viable prospect. Relativism of knowledge could be perceived as a nuisance, and as a temporary one at that. Means could be sought — in theory and in practice — to exorcize the ghost of relativism once and for all. The end to parochialism of human opinions and ways of life was nigh. This could be a chance — once real, then lost. Or this could be an illusion from the start. In the first case, postmodernity means the failure of modernity. In the second case, it means a step forward. In both cases, it means opening our eyes to the futility of modern dreams of universalism.

The reader will note that I am defining 'modernity' from the perspective of the experience of 'postmodernity', and not vice versa; all attempts to pretend that we proceed in the opposite direction mislead us into believing that what we confront in the current debate is an articulation of the logic of 'historical process', rather than re-evaluation of the past (complete with the imputation of a 'telos' of which the past, in as long as it remained the present, was not aware). If the concept of 'postmodernity' has no other value, it has at least this one: it supplies a new, and external, vantage point, from which some aspects of that world which came into being in the aftermath of Enlightenment and the Capitalist Revolution (aspect not visible, or allotted secondary importance, when observed from inside the unfinished process) acquire saliency and can be turned into a pivotal issue of the discourse.

The reader will note also that I am trying to define both concepts of the opposition in such a way as to make their mutual distinction independent of the 'existential' issue: whether it is the 'actual conditions' which differ, or their perception. It is my view that the pair of concepts under discussion is important first and foremost (perhaps even solely) in the context of the self-awareness of the intellectuals, and in relation to the way the intellectuals perceive their social location, task and strategy. This does not detract from the significance of the concepts. On the contrary, as far as the plight of 'western culture' goes, the way the two concepts are defined here presents them as arguably the most seminal of oppositions articulated in order to capture the tendency of social change in our times.

The change of mood, intellectual climate, self-understanding etc. implied by that vague, but real, anxiety the proposition of the 'advent of postmodernity' attempts to capture, has indeed far-reaching consequences for the strategy of intellectual work in general — and sociology and social philosophy in particular. It does have a powerful impact even on 'traditional' ways of conducting the business of social study. There is no necessity whatsoever for the old procedures to be rescinded or to grind to a halt. One can easily declare the whole idea of 'postmodernity' a sham, obituaries of 'modernity' premature, the need to reorient one's programme non-existent — and stubbornly go where one went before and where one's ancestors wanted to go. One can say that finding the firm and unshakeable standards of true knowledge, true interpretation, defensible morality, genuine art etc. is still a valid, and the major, task. There is nothing to stop one from doing just that. In the vast realm of the academy there is ample room for all sorts of specialized pursuits, and the way such pursuits have been historically institutionalized renders them virtually immune to pressures untranslatable into the variables of their own inner systems; such pursuits have their own momentum; their dynamics subject to internal logic only, they produce what they are capable of producing, rather than what is required or asked of them; showing their own, internally administered measures of success as their legitimation, they may go on reproducing themselves indefinitely. This is particularly true regarding pursuits of a pronouncedly philosophical nature; they require no outside supply of resources except the salaries of their perpetrators, and are therefore less vulnerable to the dire consequences of the withdrawal of social recognition.

Even with their self-reproduction secure, however, traditional

forms of philosophizing confront today challenges which must rebound in their concerns. They are pressed now to legitimize their declared purpose — something which used to be taken (at least since Descartes) by and large for granted. For well-nigh three centuries relativism was the *malin génie* of European philosophy, and anybody suspected of not fortifying his doctrine against it tightly enough was brought to book and forced to defend himself against the charges the horrifying nature of which no one put in doubt. Now the tables have been turned — and the seekers of universal standards are asked to prove the criminal nature of relativism; it is they now who are pressed to justify their hatred of relativism, and clear themselves of the charges of dogmatism, ethnocentrism, intellectual imperialism or whatever else their work may seem to imply when gazed upon from the relativist positions.

Less philosophical, more empirically inclined varieties of traditional social studies are even less fortunate. Modern empirical sociology developed in response to the demand of the modern state aiming at the 'total administration' of society. With capital engaging the rest of the society in their roles of labour, and the state responsible for the task of 're-commodifying' both capital and labour, and thus ensuring the continuation of such an engagement — the state needed a huge apparatus of 'social management' and a huge supply of expert social-management knowledge. Methods and skills of empirical sociology were geared to this demand and to the opportunities stemming from it. The social-managerial tasks were large-scale, and so were the funds allotted to their performance. Sociology specialized therefore in developing the skills of use in mass, statistical research; in collecting information about 'massive trends' and administrative measures likely to redirect, intensify or constrain such trends. Once institutionalized, the skills at the disposal of empirical sociologists have defined the kind of research they are capable of designing and conducting. Whatever else this kind of research is, it invariably requires huge funds — and thus a rich bureaucratic institution wishing to provide them. Progressive disengagement of capital from labour, falling significance of the 're-commodification' task, gradual substitution of 'seduction' for 'repression' as the paramount weapon of social integration, shifting of the responsibility for integration from the state bureaucracy to the market — all this spells trouble for traditional empirical research, as state bureaucracies lose interest in financing it.

The widely debated 'crisis of (empirical) sociology' is, therefore,

genuine. Empirical sociology faces today the choice between seeking a new social application of its skills or seeking new skills. Interests of state bureaucracy are likely to taper to the management of 'law and order', i.e. a task aimed selectively at the part of the population which cannot be regulated by the mechanism of seduction. And there are private bureaucracies, in charge of the seduction management, who may or may not need the skill of empirical sociology, depending on the extent in which the latter are able, and willing, to reorient and readjust their professional know-how to the new, as yet not fully fathomed, demand.

To sum up: if the radical manifestos proclaiming the end of sociology and social philosophy 'as we know them' seem unfounded — equally unconvincing are the pretensions that nothing of importance has happened and that there is nothing to stop 'business as usual'. The form acquired by sociology and social philosophy in the course of what is now, retrospectively, described as 'modernity' is indeed experiencing at the moment an unprecedented challenge. While in no way doomed, it must adjust itself to new conditions in order to self-reproduce.

I will turn now to those actual, or likely, developments in sociology which do admit (overtly or implicitly) the novelty of the situation and the need for a radical reorientation of the tasks and the strategies of social study.

One development is already much in evidence. Its direction is clearly shown by the consistently expanding assimilation of Heideggerian, Wittgensteinian, Gadamerian and other 'hermeneutical' themes and inspirations. This development points in the direction of sociology as, above all, the skill of interpretation. Whatever articulable experience there is which may become the object of social study — it is embedded in its own 'life-world', 'communal tradition', 'positive ideology', 'form of life', 'language game'. The names for that 'something' in which the experience is embedded are many and different, but what truly counts are not names but the inherent pluralism of that 'something' which all the names emphasize more than anything else. Thus there are *many* 'life-worlds', *many* 'traditions' and *many* 'language-games'. No external point of view is conceivable to reduce this variety. The only reasonable cognitive strategy is therefore one best expressed in Geertz's (1973) idea of 'thick description': recovery of the meaning of the alien experience through fathoming the tradition (form of life, life-world etc.) which constitutes it, and then translating it, with

as little damage as possible, into a form assimilable by one's own tradition (form of life, life-world etc.). Rather than proselytizing, which would be the task of a cross-cultural encounter in the context of 'orthodox' social science, it is the expected 'enrichment' of one's own tradition, through incorporating other, heretofore inaccessible, experiences, which is the meaning bestowed upon the exercise by the project of 'interpreting sociology'.

As interpreters, sociologists are no more concerned with ascertaining the 'truth' of the experience they interpret — and thus the principle of 'ethnomethodological indifference' may well turn from the shocking heresy it once was into a new orthodoxy. The only concern which distinguishes sociologists-turned-interpreters as professionals is the correctness of interpretation; it is here that their professional credentials as experts (i.e. holders of skills inaccessible to lay and untrained public) are re-established. Assuming that the world is irreducibly pluralist, rendering the messages mutually communicable is its major problem. Expertise in the rules of correct interpretation is what it needs most. It is badly needed even by such powers that are not any more bent on total domination and do not entertain universalistic ambitions; they still need this expertise for their sheer survival. Potential uses are clear; the users, so far, less so — but one may hope they can be found.

As all positions, this one has also its radical extreme. The admission of pluralism does not have to result in the interest in interpretation and translation, or for that matter in any 'social' services sociology may offer. Release from the often burdensome social duty sociology had to carry in the era of modernity may be seen by some with relief — as the advent of true freedom of intellectual pursuits. It is, indeed, an advent of freedom — though freedom coupled with irrelevance: freedom *from* cumbersome and obtrusive interference on the part of powers that be, won at the price of resigning the freedom to influence their actions and their results. If what sociology does does not matter, it can do whatever it likes. This is a tempting possibility: to immerse oneself fully in one's own specialized discourse inside which one feels comfortably at home, to savour the subtleties of distinction and discretion such discourse demands and renders possible, to take the very disinterestedness of one's pursuits for the sign of their supreme value, to take pride in keeping alive, against the odds, a precious endeavour for which the rest, the polluted or corrupted part of the world, has (temporarily — one would add, seeking the comfort of hope) no use. It is one's

own community, tradition, form of life etc. which commands first loyalty; however small, it provides the only site wherein the intrinsic value of the discourse can be tended to, cultivated — and enjoyed. After all, the recognition of futility of universal standards, brought along by postmodernity, allows that self-centred concerns treat lightly everything outside criticism. There is nothing to stop one from coming as close as possible to the sociological equivalent of *l'art pour l'art* (the cynic would comment: nothing, but the next round of education cuts).

The two postmodern strategies for sociology and social philosophy, discussed so far, are — each in its own way — internally consistent and viable. Looked at from inside, they both seem invulnerable. Given their institutional entrenchment, they have a sensible chance of survival and of virtually infinite self-reproduction (again, barring the circumstances referred to by the cynic). Whatever critique of these strategies may be contemplated, it may only come from the outside, and thus cut little ice with the insiders.

Such a critique would have to admit its allegiance to ends the insiders are not obliged to share. It would have to cite an understanding of the role of sociology the insiders have every reason to reject, and no reason to embrace. In particular, such a critique would have to declare its own value preference, remarkable above all for the supreme position allotted to the *social relevance* of sociological discourse.

The critique under consideration may be launched in other words only from the intention to preserve the hopes and ambitions of modernity in the age of postmodernity. The hopes and ambitions in question refer to the possibility of a reason-led improvement of the human condition; an improvement measured in the last instance by the degree of human emancipation. For better or worse, modernity was about increasing the volume of human autonomy, but not autonomy which, for the absence of solidarity, results in loneliness; and about increasing the intensity of human solidarity, but not solidarity which, for the absence of autonomy, results in oppression. The alternative strategy for a postmodern sociology would have to take as its assumption that the two-pronged ambition of modernity is still a viable possibility, and one certainly worth promoting.

What makes a strategy which refuses to renounce its modern ('pre-postmodern'?) commitments a 'postmodern' one, is the bluntness with which its premises are recognized as assumptions; in a

truly 'postmodern' vein, such a strategy refers to values rather than laws; to assumptions instead of foundations; to purposes, and not to 'groundings'. And it is determined to do without the comfort it once derived from the belief that 'history was on its side', and that the inevitability of its ultimate success had been guaranteed beforehand by inexorable laws of nature (a pleonasm: 'nature' *is* inexorable laws).

Otherwise, there is no sharp break in continuity. There is a significant shift of emphasis, though. The 'meliorative' strategy of social science as formed historically during the era of modernity had two edges. One was pressed against the totalistic ambitions of the modern state; the state, in possession of enough resources and good will to impress a design of a better society upon imperfect reality, was to be supplied with reliable knowledge of the laws directing human conduct and effective skills required to elicit a conduct conforming to the modern ambitions. The other was pressed against the very humans modernity was bent on emancipating. Men and women were to be offered reliable knowledge of the way their society works, so that their life-business may be conducted in a conscious and rational way, and the casual chains making their actions simultaneously effective and constrained become visible — and hence, in principle, amenable to control. To put the same in a different way: the 'meliorative' strategy under discussion was productive of two types of knowledge. One was aimed at rationalization of the state (more generally: societal) power; the other — at rationalization of individual conduct.

Depending on the time and the location, either one or the other of the two types of knowledge was held in the focus of sociological discourse. But both were present at all times and could not but be co-present — due to the ineradicable ambiguity of ways in which any information on social reality can be employed. This ambiguity explains why the relations between social science and the powers that be were at best those of hate-love, and why even during the timespans of wholehearted cooperation there was always more than a trace of mistrust in the state's attitude toward sociological discourse; not without reason, men of politics suspected that such a discourse may well undermine with one hand the self-same hierarchical order it helps to build with the other.

Inside the postmodern version of the old strategy, however, the balance between the two types of knowledge is likely to shift. One circumstance which makes such a shift likely has been already

mentioned: the drying up of the state interest in all but the most narrowly circumscribed sociological expertise; no grand designs, no cultural crusades, no demand for legitimizing visions, and no need for models of centrally administered rational society. Yet the effect of this factor, in itself formidable, has been still exacerbated by the gradual erosion of hope that the failure of the rational society to materialize might be due to the weaknesses of the present administrators of the social process, and that an alternative 'historical agent' may still put things right. More bluntly, the faith in a historical agent waiting in the wings to take over and to complete the promise of modernity using the levers of political state — this faith has all but vanished. The first of the two types of knowledge the modern sociological discourse used to turn out is, therefore, without an evident addressee — actual or potential. It may be still used: there are, after all, quite a few powerful bureaucracies which could do with some good advice on how to make the humans behave differently and more to their liking. And they will surely find experts eager to offer such advice. We did discuss such a possibility in the context of strategies which refuse to admit that 'postmodernity' means new situation and calls for rethinking and readjustment of traditional tasks and strategies. For the strategy aimed at the preservation of modern hopes and ambitions under the new conditions of postmodernity, the question *who* uses the administrative knowledge and for what *purpose* is not, however, irrelevant. It would recognize such knowledge as useful only if in the hands of a genuine or putative, yet rationalizing agent. From the vantage point of the political power all this reasoning is redundant anyway. Having lost their interest in its own practical application of sociological knowledge, the state will inevitably tend to identify the totality of sociological discourse with the second of its traditional edges, and thus regard it as an unambiguously subversive force; as a problem, rather than a solution.

The expected state attitude is certain to act as a self-fulfilling prophecy; rolling back the resources and facilities the production of the first type of knowledge cannot do without, it will push the sociological discourse even further toward the second type. It will only, as it were, reinforce a tendency set in motion by other factors. Among the latter, one should count an inevitable consequence of the growing disenchantment with the societal administration as the carrier of emancipation: the shifting of attention to the kind of knowledge which may be used by human individuals in their efforts

to enlarge the sphere of autonomy and solidarity. This looks more and more like the last chance of emancipation.

So far, we have discussed the 'push' factors. There is, however, a powerful 'pull' factor behind the shift: a recognition that the task of providing men and women with that 'sociological imagination' for which C.W. Mills (1959) appealed years ago, has never been so important as it is now, under conditions of postmodernity. Emancipation of capital from labour makes possible the emancipation of the state from legitimation; and that may mean in the long run a gradual erosion of democratic institutions and the substance of democratic politics (reproduction of legitimation having been the political democracy major historical function). Unlike the task of reproducing members of society as producers, their reproduction as consumers does not necessarily enlarge the political state and hence does not imply the need to reproduce them as citizens. The 'systemic' need for political democracy is thereby eroded, and the political agency of men and women as citizens cannot count for its reproduction on the centripetal effects of the self-legitimizing concerns of the state. The other factors which could sponsor such reproduction look also increasingly doubtful in view of the tendency to shift political conflicts into the non-political and democratically unaccountable sphere of the market, and the drift toward the substitution of 'needs creation' for 'normative regulation' as the paramount methods of systemic reproduction (except for the part of the society the market is unable or unwilling to assimilate). If those tendencies have been correctly spotted, knowledge which provides the individuals with an accurate understanding of the way society works may not be a weapon powerful enough to outweigh their consequences; but it surely looks like the best bet men and women can still make.

Which leads us into an area not at all unfamiliar; some would say traditional. The third of the conceivable strategies of sociology under the postmodern condition would focus on the very thing on which the sociological discourse did focus throughout its history: on making the opaque transparent, on exposing the ties linking visible biographies to invisible societal processes, on understanding what makes society tick, in order to make it tick, if possible, in a more 'emancipating' way. Only it is a new and different society from the one which triggered off the sociological discourse. Hence 'focusing on the same' means focusing on new problems and new tasks.

I suggest that a sociology bent on the continuation of modern

concerns under postmodern conditions would be distinguished not by new procedures and purposes of sociological work, as other postmodern strategies suggest — but by a new *object* of investigation. As far as this strategy is concerned, what matters is that the society (its object) has changed; it does not necessarily admit that its own earlier pursuits were misguided and wasted, and that the crucial novelty in the situation is the dismissal of the old ways of doing sociology and ‘discovery’ of new ways of doing it. Thus to describe a sociology pursuing the strategy under discussion one would speak, say, of a ‘post-full-employment’ sociology, or a ‘sociology of the consumer society’, rather than of a ‘post-Wittgensteinian’ or ‘post-Gadamerian’ sociology. In other words, this strategy points toward a sociology of postmodernity, rather than a postmodern sociology.

There is a number of specifically ‘postmodern’ phenomena which await sociological study. There is a process of an accelerating emancipation of capital from labour; instead of engaging the rest of society in the role of producers, capital tends to engage them in the role of consumers. This means in its turn that the task of reproducing the capital-dominated society does not consist, as before, in the ‘re-commodification of labour’, and that the non-producers of today are not a ‘reserve army of labour’, to be tended to and groomed for the return to the labour market. This crucial fact of their life is still concealed in their own consciousness, in the consciousness of their political tutors, and of the sociologists who study them, by a historical memory of society which is no more and will not return. The new poor are not socially, culturally or systemically an equivalent of the old poor; the present ‘depression’, manifested in the massive and stable unemployment, is not a later day edition of the 1930s (one hears about the poor losing their jobs, but one does not hear of the rich jumping out of their windows). ‘The two nations’ society, mark two, cannot be truly understood by squeezing it into the model of mark one.

‘The two nations, mark two’ society is constituted by the opposition between ‘seduction’ and ‘repression’ as means of social control, integration and the reproduction of domination. The first is grounded in ‘market dependency’: replacement of old life skills by the new ones which cannot be effectively employed without the mediation of the market; in the shifting of disaffection and conflict from the area of political struggle to the area of commodities and entertainment; in the appropriate redirecting of the needs for

rationality and security; and in the growing comprehensiveness of the market-centred world, so that it can accommodate the totality of life business, making the other aspects of systemic context invisible and subjectively irrelevant. The second is grounded in a normative regulation pushed to the extreme, penetration of the 'private' sphere to an ever growing degree, disempowering of the objects of normative regulation as autonomous agents. It is important to know how these two means of social control combine and support each other; and the effects their duality is likely to have on the tendency of political power, democratic institutions and citizenship.

One may guess — pending further research — that while control-through-repression destroys autonomy and solidarity, control-through-seduction generates marketable means serving the pursuit (if not the attainment) of both, and thus effectively displaces the pressures such a pursuit exerts from the political sphere, at the same time redeploying them in the reproduction of capital domination. Thus the opposite alternatives which determine the horizon and the trajectory of life strategies in the postmodern society neutralize the possible threat to systemic reproduction which might emanate from the unsatisfied ambitions of autonomy and solidarity.

Those alternatives, therefore, need to be explored by any sociology wishing seriously to come to grips with the phenomenon of postmodernity. Conscious of the postmodern condition it explores, such a sociology would not pretend that its preoccupations, however skilfully pursued, would offer it the centrality in the 'historical process' to which it once aspired. On the contrary, the problematics sketched above is likely to annoy rather than entice the managers of law and order; it will appear incomprehensible to the seduced, and alluring yet nebulous to the repressed. A sociology determined to tread this path would have to brace itself for the uneasy plight of unpopularity. Yet the alternative is irrelevance. This seems to be the choice sociology is facing in the era of postmodernity.

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